

"Stand Together or Fall Apart"

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:3-10

May God the Father, who has carried us safely through another church year, continue in the new church year to sustain, protect, preserve and bless each of you in the one true faith, and in true Christian harmony, in Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Clever sayings sometimes inadvertently and almost inappropriately lighten what is actually a serious situation. It was Benjamin Franklin for example who, during the American struggle for independence, said, "*We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.*" Another is: "*If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.*" Again, both are true, but they somehow seem to almost mask the danger to which they refer. Franklin referred to the fact that, had the Revolution failed, the British government would almost certainly have hanged all of the men for treason who we today celebrate as our country's Founding Fathers. The other – as near as anyone can tell – was first used by a US Senate Chaplain named Peter Marshall in reference to the need for morality among our country's leaders.

This morning we combine the two: "*Christians must stand together, or we will fall apart*" and we use it in reference to a topic that we often do – but must not – take lightly: agreement and harmony in the Christian Church.

The problem that we seek to address this morning is that Christians tend to downplay both the danger of divisions among like-minded Christians and the incredible strength and solidarity that God longs to give to us through the gifts of fellowship and Christian harmony. It is, in fact, profoundly foolish to take for granted the gift of *community* that our God gives us in the fellowship of a Christian congregation.

As we pause for a moment on this first Sunday of the Church Year to take stock of what is really important, it is altogether fitting and right that we come to terms with the fact that the fellowship of like-minded Christians here on this earth is one of God's greatest gifts to mankind. It is meant by our God to serve as a source of mutual encouragement, growth, and comfort. As any creature in the wild is much more vulnerable when it walks alone, so also every single Christian is more vulnerable to the devil's attacks whenever we separate ourselves from the communion of like-minded believers. This morning then we examine

the value of Christian fellowship, and the danger of abusing or despising this great gift. The text that will guide and instruct us this morning is found in Paul's First Letter to the Church in Corinth, the First Chapter:

ESV 1 Corinthians 1:3-10 *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ ¶ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge-- ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you-- ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. ¹⁰ ¶ I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.*

So far the inspired Word of God. This is our only infallible guide, our only sure anchor in this evil world where we must live out our days. Mindful that our only true comfort and lasting joy can be found in these words, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!**" Amen.

When you hear or read verses 4-8 in our text for this morning – which also serve as the opening or introduction of Paul's First Letter to the Congregation in Corinth – what sort of picture do you draw in your minds of that group? In other words, if you knew nothing else about the congregation in Corinth, other than what Paul wrote in these opening verses, what sort of congregation would you envision?

Wouldn't you picture a relatively problem-free group that was serving as a model congregation for the rest of the Christian world? Paul describes them as a group that was "**enriched by God in all speech and all knowledge**"; a congregation that was "**not lacking in any spiritual gift**" and that was "**waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" Quite a resume.

Yet what do we know about that Corinthian congregation at the time Paul wrote this letter? They were, for starters, permitting gross immorality to exist in their midst. The celebration of the Lord's Supper had so deteriorated among them that there was actually

drunkenness at their celebrations. Their worship services were chaotic, to say the least – to the point that visitors must have wondered just what kind of religion was being practiced there. Members would shout out some ecstatic utterance in a foreign tongue, and no one would have the faintest idea what he or she was talking about.

All these things, and more, were taking place in Corinth, and yet given all of these problems what was the first dilemma that Paul addressed in this letter? He addressed the divisions that had arisen in the congregation.

Think about that for a moment. In Corinth they were getting drunk during what they called Holy Communion. One member was living in sin with his step-mother. Their services were chaos. Yet of all those problems, the Holy Spirit through Paul first addressed the problems of division in the congregation.

This ought to teach us something about the importance of that which we tend to take for granted among us. It ought to teach us therefore to place a much higher value on that which God obviously views as precious, and thereby to be encouraged to safeguard this gift in our own church family.

While we're tossing out famous sayings, there's another expression you've all heard repeatedly: *"We don't know what we've got until it's gone."* Obviously there is a reason this is a popular expression. I could almost therefore wish that each of us could be without this precious gift for a time so that we would learn both to value it and to protect it at all costs. In fact some of you have intimated in the past that you have lived through times when you were part of a fractured church body, or were separated altogether from a local church family, and that the experience greatly enhanced your appreciation for true Christian fellowship.

We are not talking here about binding ourselves together despite doctrinal differences. Far from it. Nor are we talking about simply overlooking obvious sin or impenitence in our fellowship for the sake of a false display of unity. We are talking about like-minded Christians living and working together in harmony.

We know, for example, that Paul is not advocating the sweeping of problems under the rug, since later in this same letter he commands excommunication for the man who had sinfully taken up with his married stepmother. We know that Paul was not promoting a toleration of false teaching from what we read in this very text: ***"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the***

same mind and the same judgment." The harmony Paul was promoting was to be based on doctrinal agreement.

What then exactly was the problem in Corinth? The problem was that like-minded Christians (those who *were* in doctrinal agreement and who had *not* given themselves over to sin) were dividing themselves into warring factions in the congregation. Paul described the situation in the verses immediately following our text: ***"For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"*** (1 Corinthians 1:11-13) Though there was evidently no true difference in what the members believed and taught, discord had caused artificial divisions in the congregation.

What was the natural consequence? The result was that individuals in this group of Christians were robbing each other, and therefore also robbing their God. They were depriving one another not only of the peace and harmony that membership in that congregation should have afforded them; they were robbing each other of the various gifts that God had given to the individual members for the benefit of all. That, you will recall, is why God gives gifts to human beings in the first place – so that those gifts and talents can be used to the benefit of the members of God's Church. ***"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them."*** (Romans 12:6) Here's why that is such a problem. The Church itself is described in the Bible as a living body. As in any body, not every part has the same function – nor can every part fulfill each function. A hand cannot see, nor can an eye walk. So also in every divided congregation the beautiful, precious gifts that God has showered on the various members are withheld from some or all. Those gifts of God are, in effect, wasted in the worst case; underutilized in the best.

Nor is that by any means the sum total of the problem. When a congregation is fractured, each member is left in a more vulnerable position, and it is here that the sermon theme has specific application: *Stand together or fall apart.* Sadly enough, even brute beasts know and accept this basic truth of survival. That's why in the wild you will always find herds and flocks and schools and coveys. Even animals know that there is strength and protection in numbers.

The application should be obvious to us, but for some reason it isn't always. While even the fiercest animals in the wild would not for a moment consider striking out on his own, Christians often do just that. Why? The most obvious and most common problem is that we fail to recognize the fact that we are quite literally surrounded by a most dreadful and most powerful enemy. Sinful pride (lack of Christian humility) blinds us both to the sin of splinter groups and to the danger of factions within the church family. Sinful human beings tend to be easily slighted or angered, and the inevitable result is division and discord. Souls are endangered and even destroyed in the process, and often over something as inconsequential as the color of paint in the church sanctuary or the type of music used to praise our God.

Are we in danger of such things here? Of course we are – as is every single Christian congregation. What is the solution? The answer is found in our text. Did you happen to notice, for example, that Jesus Christ was mentioned seven times in these few verses? Among those references to our Savior is the fact that we ***"are called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."*** Jesus is not only the basis for our fellowship, he is also the reason we are to spare no effort in preserving this unity among us. No human being can long survive when he is separated from the body of Christ.

The fact is not only that there is no other savior and no other path to the Father and life eternal but through faith in Jesus Christ, it is also true that there is no other way to preserve any Christian fellowship apart from Christ crucified. In fact when we look to Jesus Christ and the self-sacrificing forgiveness he won for us on Calvary's cross, the sinful pride that tends to tear a congregation apart gives way instantly to a spirit of forgiveness and charity. It is not the new man within us that seeks division and discord; nor is it the Holy Spirit living in us who is willing to sacrifice unity on the altar of human pride. It is sin, warring in our own hearts, and Satan himself, who creates and promotes such sins.

In this congregation we have heretofore been blessed with harmony that is rare indeed in this day and age. Yet this gift of harmony that we have been given is as fragile as it is precious. Any single individual (and any group of individuals) has the terrible power to fracture the precious unity that God has given us. It is therefore the responsibility of every single Christian not only to put on humility and charity, but to guard his tongue and to measure his actions. Maintaining true Christian unity requires the concerted effort of every single member of the Body of Christ. While one human being alone can damage or destroy it, the tireless efforts of all are required to maintain it.

God grant then that as we begin another Church year that we learn to reevaluate and to treasure the gifts of Christian harmony and fellowship and to safeguard them tirelessly, all while we build each other up as we wait for our Lord to return, and to take us home. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 64:1-9** Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence-- ² as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³ When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴ From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him. ⁵ You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? ⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷ There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities. ⁸ But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹ Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people.

^{ESV} **Mark 13:33-37** Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning-- ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The First Sunday in Advent – December 3, 2017

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – Church Choir

"10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. *(Brown Hymnal)*

The Scripture Lessons: *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

The Epistle Lesson: (Isaiah 64:1-9) Mankind was not in need of an enabler to show us how to earn God's love. We have no power to do such things. We needed a Savior. In our Old Testament lesson the Holy Spirit through the pen of the Prophet Isaiah describes our desperate condition and our need for divine rescue. Note especially the humble character of these words. Man comes to God always and only as an empty-handed beggar, bringing nothing but our sin.

Psalm 24 (Supplement page 25) *(Brown Hymnal)*

The New Testament Lesson: (Mark 13:33-37) As we begin another church year, we are again reminded to watch for our Lord's return. Our godless society, together with our own sinful flesh, combine to distract us, causing us to forget that our Lord Jesus will not only return, but will do so suddenly. Our Gospel lesson serves as a timely reminder, yet reminders benefit little if we do not both hear and act on them.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed *(Brown Hymnal page 15)*

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 73 *(Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)*

"Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"

The Sermon – 1 Corinthians 1:3-10 *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

"Stand Together or Fall Apart"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 95 *(Stanzas 1-5) (Red Hymnal)*

"Savior of the Nations, Come"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 73 *(Stanza 5) (Red Hymnal)*

"Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (47) Ave (40) Wed (30) October Mortgage Balance (\$21,490)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Wednesday	-5:45 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Advent Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Pastor Nathan Pfeiffer is considering the call to Immanuel of Mankato, MN. ILC is accepting nominations for the office of ILC president. Following his recent heart attack, Pastor David Reim continues his recovery and is gradually returning to fulltime kingdom work.

Church Christmas Party – Thanks to all who worked to make our Annual Christmas party such an enjoyable event.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is asked to meet briefly during the fellowship hour this morning.

Copy Machine Update – The Council has been investigating options for the replacement of our aging copy machine. On Friday we were informed of the availability of a demo machine that would fit our needs at a substantially reduced price (purchase or monthly lease). Since this offer is set to expire prior to our Annual Meeting, a special Voters Meeting may need to be called for next Sunday. Information to follow.

Advent Services – Our midweek Advent Services continue this Wednesday and next. All are encouraged to take this special time to clear away the seasonal distractions and to be in the Word.

Annual Voters' Meeting – The Annual Voters' meeting will, God willing, be held on December 17 – two weeks from today. The Women's Fellowship is also scheduled to meet at that time. As is our custom, a fellowship meal is planned for the regular fellowship hour.