

A Sermon On [1 Corinthians 12:16-26](#): Unity In The Midst Of Division (A Post-Election Reflection)

by The Rev. Chuck Currie
November 7, 2010

Delivered at [Forest Grove United Church of Christ](#)
Forest Grove, Oregon

Good morning. As always, I am happy to be in Forest Grove. This is a special congregation. Too many churches exclude people when they should be welcoming, demand rigid adherence to dogma when we should embrace that faith isn't always about finding answers but rather about living the questions, and too many churches ignore the pressing needs of the community with which we are confronted every day. Forest Grove United Church of Christ is not perfect, mind you, but you intentionally make the effort to live out the teachings of Jesus in tangible ways that promote the common good. For that, you have rightfully become a role model for others in the area.

Like many of you, I am troubled today by the divisions we face nationwide and in local communities. These divisions seem deep and at times unsolvable. The recent election cycle that just ended, thankfully, offered further evidence of this. As a pastor, I believe that the ministry of Jesus was in part one of reconciliation and so part of the mission of the church is to bring reconciliation to a broken and hurting world. I say that like the work should be easy but recognize the task before us is paved with difficulties and that while we are called to be a people of reconciliation we are also called to be a people of justice and sometimes those two missions are contradictory.

Last week, preaching at Lincoln City United Church of Christ, I lamented the state of political campaigns today. These days I rarely watch television but Liz and both like a comedy called Modern Family and while watching the other week a campaign spot ran for a Congressional race. By the end, all I knew was that one candidate was pure evil and the other candidate the second coming of George Washington. In fact, I was pretty sure by the time the spot ended that we needed to lock the doors before the evil candidate came to eat our children.

Valerie Elverton Dixon, who has taught at two UCC-related seminaries, [wrote for The Washington Post's "On Faith" blog](#) that things had gotten so bad that if Jesus were running today for public office he'd be the subject of attack ads and she went on to imagine what such ads might look like:

A shot of the World Trade Center towers falling.

Voiceover: 9/11. The nation suffers the worst attack on its soil in history. But Jesus says that we ought to love the people who did this. He says: "do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who misuse and persecute you."

(Matthew 5:44) Love al Qaeda? Do good to the people who attacked us? This is no plan to keep us safe. Jesus. Soft on defense. Wrong for America.

On guilt by association:

Scene: Nighttime on a city corner where prostitutes and drug dealers are doing business. Cut to Jesus having dinner with the same people.

Voice: People are known by the company they keep. Jesus is friend to prostitutes, drug dealers, tax collectors. Is this the kind of man we want in the United States Senate? Jesus. He's just not one of us.

Dr. Russ Dondero, a professor emeritus at Pacific University (and my advisor when I was a student there), would - if given the opportunity - remind us that campaigns have been a source of division in American history more often than they have ever been a source of reconciliation. But Dr. Dondero would also be the first to tell you that with the 24-hour news cycle, blogs, twitter and social networking the challenges to civility are particularly profound in this moment of history.

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, professor of theology at UCC-related Chicago Theological Seminary and a senior fellow at the Center for American progress, reflecting on the totality of this moment of history in which we live wrote in her new book [Dreaming of Eden](#) that: "A good case can be made that Americans have become morally stupid in the last decade." As an example, she lifts up the debate over whether or not torture is morally permissible. "The fact that there has even been a 'debate' about torture illustrates" our moral stupidity, she writes. "Everybody used to know that it was wrong to torture people."

Take a look at the political issues being debated today and you'll recognize that they are all linked with understandings of religion.

Abortion. Climate change. Poverty. Gay marriage. Health care. Taxes. Just to name a few. The United Church of Christ and other mainline Christians have all spoken on these issues. The National Council of Churches has spoken on many of these same issues. But our theological arguments for public policy solutions to address these and other issues are fundamentally different from the theological arguments made by the Southern Baptist Convention, for example. We are left polarized.

The day before the election a group of ecumenical leaders meet with President Obama at the White House. Afterwards, the National Council of Churches [released a statement that read in part:](#)

"Regardless of the outcome of tomorrow's election, our faithful witness is needed now more than ever," said Rev. Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the National Council of Churches. "We cannot stand by while people of goodwill are baselessly attacked for their faith, their political beliefs, or their identity. We have no reason to fear or demonize those who are different from ourselves. Today, tomorrow, and into this next Congress, our country needs to come together and reclaim our values of justice and equality."

Dr. Kinnamon was one of my professors at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis and I've learned over the years that 1) he's much smarter than me 2) he's nearly always right. That makes debating with him quite hard. We've not talked since his visit to the White House but I know his theology is rooted in realism and that he would also say that what he argued - coming together - is easier said than done.

When I first read his remarks I was reminded of a class on War and Peace that I took from him in which he mentioned that the Quakers had once released what they termed "A Modest Proposal for Peace."

Their proposal: Christians shouldn't killed other Christians. Whenever people hear that objections are raised. Christians shouldn't kill Muslims, or Jews, Hindus, atheists or anyone for that matter.

The Quakers response: "That's why we call it a modest proposal."

If Christians could just act civilized toward one another it would be a major step toward progress.

All of this brings us back to this morning's reading from 1 Corinthians Let's circle around and hear it again but this time I want to share [a modern translation from Eugene Petterson](#) and to provide a little more context I'll start with vs. 12 instead of 16. Listen carefully. Maybe even close your eyes and relax as you listen to these words:

12b. Your body has many parts - limbs, organs, cells - but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. 13 By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain - his Spirit - where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves - labels like

Jew or Greek, slave or free - are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive. 14 I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. 15 If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? 16 If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? 17 If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? 18 As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it. 19 But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. 20 What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own. 21 Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, "Get lost; I don't need you"? Or, Head telling Foot, "You're fired; your job has been phased out"? 22 As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way - the "lower" the part, the more basic, and therefore necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. 23 When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons. 24 If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair? 25 The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, 26 the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.

Paul is telling the church that individualism doesn't exist. Michael Kinnamon is fond of putting it this way: "Individual Christian is an oxymoron. It's like saying Quaker hit man or military intelligence." We cannot, Paul would tell us today, live apart from one another in division and despair. We need one another - regardless of faith, regardless of race, regardless of income, or politics, or gender, or orientation. Our destiny is a common one and so we are forced to find ways to come together as impossible as that task might seem.

In small but important ways we have models to draw from. Families live with these divisions all the time but manage to thrive. I live in a family filled with progressive mainline Christians, Unitarians, conservative evangelicals, and even atheists. Yet I don't think any of us could imagine saying to another "I have no need of you." In fact, the opposite is true. I draw strength out of the love we have for one another no matter our differences.

Here in Washington County we witness religious communities as diverse as Forest Grove United Church of Christ, a progressive community of faith if there ever was one, working side by side on issues related to homelessness with the evangelical Luis Palau Association.

In the coming months and years there will be difficult debates over important moral issues. Where possible, we should seek to find common ground. As Christians, we are also called to seek justice so there will times where we will need to lift our voice in support of or in opposition against different ideas - political, social, or religious.

What I want to leave you with is a modest proposal: Let love guide our work, politics and relationships with one another and with God. Too often we - and by "we" I mean progressive Christians who often hold progressive political beliefs - are as shrill and divisive and those we would consider to be on the "other side" of issues important to us.

It is perfectly ok to point out differences and to hold strong opinions but we should never be in the business of dehumanizing those we disagree with. I've been guilty of this behavior before. Have you?

Remember that political commercial that I mentioned where by the end I was afraid the candidate in question might come and eat my children if given the opportunity? It was aired by a progressive democrat running against a conservative republican. In the end, I didn't trust either candidate.

In Matthew 5 we read as Jesus says:

38 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." 39But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

Jesus is not telling us not to engage in debate but to act out of love and not anger. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leads us to all be toothless and blind, goes the old saying.

We should speak with passion but not with hatred. We should challenge injustice but not with malice.

Dr. King said: "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant."

Difficult times are ahead. Let us respond to them with the love of Christ, with humility and always pressing forward with the belief that the church's mission is to help build up God's Kingdom of justice.

Amen.

(c) The Rev. Charles S. Currie, Jr., M.Div.
P.O. Box 18023
Portland, Oregon 97218
<http://www.chuckcurrie.com/>
503-208-6521

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/).