

Sermon by Jessica Stevenson  
Sunday August 1, 2021  
Where To Find Unity in Today's World

I wonder how many of you remember your own baptisms? For many members of the church, baptisms take place when you are a baby. It is a commitment that your parents make and that the church congregation supports to help you grow up surrounded by the love of God in the church community.

My baptism was a bit different. I was about 7 when I got baptised at Trinity Streetsville Anglican church. I remember feeling just a bit out of place waiting for "my turn", since everyone else getting baptised was a baby. But it all worked out, and everyone was very excited for me. This baptism was my "initiation" into the family of Christ. As a teenager, my family joined the United Church, and I decided to re-affirm my faith in front of my church as a way of recommitting myself to this new church community. But while I had changed denominations, I had not changed my belief in the one spirit, the one God, in Christ. This promise to my faith and the one returned to me from the body of Christ in the form of the congregation unified me with all others around the world who had also made this commitment to God.

Let's look at the scripture passage for this morning. It states that we are urged to live a life worthy of the calling we have received. I'm not sure about yourselves, but I often struggle when the topic of a calling comes up in the bible. And boy, it sure does come up often.

As a young adult, I'm struggling with more practical things, like which university program to accept, we expect high school students to decide what where they want to go to school, and therefore what they will do with the rest of their lives! I'm moving in a couple of weeks to go to school in London in September, so I'm far more concerned with packing than I am with my calling at this very moment.

But, here we are, this always present idea that God is indeed calling all of us, that God has a plan for us. The good news is that God's call on our life isn't a once and done type thing. It is especially wonderful that callings can and do change. You may find your calling early in life, or perhaps you find your calling later in life. What is important is that we listen for God in our lives. This can be easier said than done. Sometimes the call of God frightens us, sometimes we chose to push it away, thinking you are too busy right now or that you do not have the skills necessary to follow God's call. Luckily, the bible provides lots of examples of things we are called to do, and they can easily be implemented in our daily lives.

In Proverbs, we are called to speak up for others in need and defend their rights. This can look like supporting Indigenous peoples or speaking up for the LGGBTQ community when they are threatened. In Micah, my favourite quote from the bible says to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Mercy can be shown to one person and can change the course of a day of even a life. On the small scale, as we all enjoy the re-opening of many restaurants and activities it is scary for some and stressful for others. We can show mercy by being understanding to our servers or understanding if people do not feel comfortable gathering in groups. Finally in Peter we are told to use the gifts we have received to serve others and be faithful stewards of God's grace.

What could this look like in your life? While there are many more examples of being called in the bible, these passages share a common theme of serving others, speaking up and out for those in need, and being a living example of Christ in the world. And while it sometimes seems like there are unsurmountable obstacles in the way of this, the good news is that we can lean on each other, unified in our commitment to following Christ. Somehow it feels less daunting when we know that we're doing it in community, all of us who follow Christ together.

This unity is what makes this passage different from some of the other calls to action that we have heard about. We are asked to make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit. In this we are reminded that there is one God, one baptism, and we are here to build up the body of Christ. Can we take it a step further, can we find unity among everyone? Unity among the different denominations and expressions of church? What about those who do not believe in Christ at all? This unity is not about perfection, but a challenge to do and be better. It is truly exciting what can come together when unity is found. For example, I currently serve on the governing board of the Canadian Council of churches. This is a broad and inclusive ecumenical body that was founded in the 1940's working towards answering this call to unity. On the board there are representatives representing 26-member churches. There are Anglicans, Catholics, Baptists, members of the Salvation Army, the Quakers and Eastern Orthodox just to name a few. While there are sometimes disagreements, all of us are called together by our belief in the one God, one baptism and one body.

Together, these different denominations work on topics related to justice and peace, faith and life sciences, interfaith relations, intercultural leadership and learning as well as global ecumenical relations. I am excited to be a part of this work and love how deeply each member of the board cares for God's wider creation, with a deep desire to make things better.

This is a great example of the unity called for by the spirit between Christian denominations, how can we find this unity outside of this community? While the scripture that we read refers to believers of Christ, unity across the world and across all religions should truly be goal. No matter how we experience or worship God, all humanity is tied closely together, in struggle and success. It is without unity that climate change will get worse, the pandemic will not end and countries in the midst of strife will continue to suffer. I want to make it clear that unity is not uniformity that is being called for. Being together to work towards similar goals does not mean that we all have to be the same. In fact, the world would be a pretty boring place if that happened. It is in fact our diversity, our differences between us, such as heritage, religion, languages and skills that is a strength of unity. These differences have been given to each of us according to the measure of the gift of Christ. We can think of Paul's letter to the church at Rome, in Romans 12:4-8 where he says that while we are members of the same body, we don't have the same function.

That is indeed important for the passage this morning. If we return to the end of the passage, it names that some of us are apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some shepherds and teachers. This explicitly states that our differences are what bring us together to fulfil the mission of Christ and to bring unity to all. It is interesting to note that these are the roles of leaders within the church.

As we approach September, which is often seen as a “new year”, as students go back to school, church activities resume, and especially this year as we hope the pandemic will allow for in-person activities and events once again, this is a unique opportunity for us to reflect on our call from God. What gifts and skills has God given us? How can we use them in our church community and the wider community? I know that the past 18 months has been especially challenging for many of us, and you may not feel quite ready to say yes to God right now. That’s OK too, God will ask again, will nudge again and will help you feel ready.

Trust that we need you – we need your gifts, for it is only together, working together as God’s people that we can truly share the love and grace of God in the world.