

Blessed Be the Tie that Binds
Matthew 18:20, Colossians 3:12-17
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La Verne Church of the Brethren
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It is amazing to me how much time we human beings put into how we dress. It isn't unusual for me to change my clothes three or four times in the morning before I finally feel settled. There is a reason for that. It is what people notice first about us. Pre-pandemic, when I would stand at the door after worship and greet people, I often got comments about what I was wearing. A couple years ago, I even had someone tell me one time, "You should never wear that dress again, it makes you look pregnant." Ouch. Mark Twain said, "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society."

So, it is no wonder that when the Apostle Paul was instructing the Colossians about how to lead a godly life, he talked about how to dress for success. "When you get up in the morning and you look at the choices of what you have to put on that day choose compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience," Paul says. "But don't stop there, tie the scarf of love around the outfit. It is what binds the whole look together. Trust me on this." It is like Paul was doing the show "Queer Eye for the Christian Church."

But Paul's message isn't just for the first century beginnings of the Christian church. It turns out that this kind of fashion statement has passed the test of time. It is true that how we choose to clothe ourselves as followers of Christ is absolutely key to the way forward.

In 2007, while other districts in the Church of the Brethren were fighting with each other over human sexuality, this district that we are in, voted unanimously to instead bind ourselves to one another in love. At the invitation of our leadership, members of our district who represented the theological spectrum, were invited to come together and create a unity statement. I want to read it to you:

Recognizing we are a living peace church, and that God is constantly revealing, we commit to humble ourselves, and to engage in the tension of community necessary for new birth. Not focusing on our differences, but in the spirit of love and acceptance, we choose to focus on Christ. We purpose to remain open, as we listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit, working in love to mutually support and encourage our various ministries.

I believe that this decision to work together in spite of our differences showed the best of what it means to be Brethren – believing in another way of living, with a focus on continuing the work of Jesus...peacefully, simply, together. Through our words, but more importantly, through our commitment to bind ourselves together in love we

witnessed to what it means to be Christ in the world. Our hope was that we would serve as an example to the other districts in our denomination about what it means to clothe yourselves *with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience*. But that didn't happen. We even had some in our denomination say that our decision to create this unity statement was unwise and perhaps dangerous.

Four years later, Districts were instructed to create a policy to deal with congregations who disagreed with the decisions of Annual Conference or District Conference. As other districts created statements about how to discipline their congregations who were in disagreement, this district wrote a paper that reaffirmed the decision we had already made together:

The Unity Statement provides a vision for our district which recognizes that all are welcome at the table. We seek to be faithful to this call, even in times of differences, acknowledging that we do not seek uniformity, but conversation with one another as we seek the mind of Christ.

I know that there are those who find talk about the denomination to be tiresome. Can't we just focus on the local church? Forgive me. Please know that I have no desire to explore denominational politics and differences in this sermon. It is 2020. It has been a hell of a year so far. We have just walked through the most contentious election of my lifetime. We are weary of division and polarization. I am telling you this story because for me it is a model for the way forward. At the very time when we were being encouraged to draw lines in the sand...to decide who is right and who is wrong...who is in and who is out...in this district we chose to dress for success. We unanimously bound the whole outfit together in love.

And here is the amazing part. Our Unity Statement hasn't been just a statement. We have all been part of organizations that create statements and as soon as they are voted on no one can tell you the gist of the statement anymore. You know what I'm talking about, right? It sounded good at the time, but no one really remembers what we said. The Unity Statement of this district wasn't really a statement. I think it would be more accurate to say it was an agreement. We voted unanimously to choose to wear love for each other, focus on Christ and continue our different ministries.

And that is exactly how it has lived out here. Whether it is the women's retreat or the Pastor/Spouse Retreat or the different organizational committees, people choose to act in love. When we hit a difficult spot someone will say, "Remember we have a Unity Statement." That phrase reminds us of our commitment to be bound together in love.

This model is important to remember as a church and as individuals. The holiday season is around the corner and we about to gather with friends and family, in person or by Zoom, with whom we don't agree about religion or politics or justice issues. What would those gatherings look like if we agreed that we will wear love for each other? How would these gatherings be different if we agreed to choose unity over uniformity? I know that you are wondering if I have lost my mind. Imagine what it would take for you

to covenant as a family be a place of unity in the ever-widening gap of division in our country. Could your extended family do that? What would be the ground rules that would encompass that agreement?

I don't think it means that we have to agree not to talk about anything that matters to us. I know that is the way many of us get through the holidays. But avoiding the big things is not the path of love and it won't change the landscape of our lives, our families or our beloved country.

The Apostle Paul told us what other pieces of clothing we should wear -- compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. I would add -- curiosity and civility. We have a core of people in our church that gather once a month to role play how to have a difficult conversation about racism. These good souls are gathering to do that work in order to build their own muscles for those all-important conversations. Opportunities to have these conversations are happening all around us...at work, at school and around our Thanksgiving tables.

This group encourages each other to have these conversations from a place of patience, compassion, curiosity, kindness and humility. We are invited to respond to the person out of love, while not letting go of what we believe is true and right and just. Because matching someone's vitriolic words is never successful. Trying to find out why another person believes as he or she does can create new doors. Sharing our stories can be transformational. It is hard work and sometimes we fail. But if you are like me, you learn more from your failures than your successes. So this small group of people commits to another month of strengthening training because we know it is one way to continue the work of Jesus in the world today...we have to show up in curiosity and love and try again and again and again.

Our churches, our families, our nation is in great need of us choosing unity over uniformity, curiosity over religious certainty, humility over judgment, civility over vitriol, and love over winning. It is imperative that we dress for success and bind it all together with love. Amen.