

What is the glue?

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

January 18, 2009

A data entry worker, a copier salesman, a physician, a cosmetologist, a construction worker ...

What is the glue?

A German-born naturalized citizen, an African-American from California, a Danish-American, a native Colombian ...

What is the glue?

A shy teen, a singing and shouting mayor, a hard-core traditionalist, an arm waver and amen-sayer, a red hymnal booster, a lover of Christian rock ...

What is the glue?

A church musician with ties to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a church musician with ties to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, a custodian rooted in the non-denominational evangelical movement, a youth minister rooted in an ecumenical/alternative church movement, a senior minister rooted in, well, in all kinds of different churches!

What is the glue?

A veteran of the second world war, an army nurse, a peace activist, a conscientious objector ...

What is the glue?

Methodists and Baptists and Roman Catholics and Lutherans and Presbyterians and Greek Orthodox and Congregationalists, all on this one street!

What is the glue?

A mainline church in the American midwest, an Episcopal church in Port au Prince, a pentecostal church in Sao Paulo, an Orthodox church in Kiev, a Chinese home church ...

What is the glue?

Activist Christians promoting the sanctity of marriage and a strong defense and the protection of fetal life, activist Christians promoting justice for the poor and equality for women and protection of the environment, Christians concerned with preparing for the next life and the new earth and saving souls, Christians concerned with transforming this life and this earth, with saving bodies and souls ...

What is the glue?

You and you and you and you and you!

What is the glue?

What is the glue? That sermon title came to me several weeks ago when I was driving somewhere, to church or home from church. I was thinking about our church and about all the different personalities that make up our congregation. And I was thinking about the many, many different Christian churches and all the differences in style and substance among them. What holds us together? What keeps us together? What, if anything, gives us a common identity, a common purpose? What is the glue?

What is the glue?

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races ...

The Holy Spirit binds us together. The Holy Spirit is the binder. The Holy Spirit is the glue.

Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts. In the same way, all of us have been baptized into the one body by the same Spirit, and we have all been given the one Spirit to drink ...

We are baptized into one body. We drink from one Spirit. The Spirit makes us one.

Then why don't we look and act like we are one? Why don't we see congregations filled with worshippers of all ages, tongues and races? Why don't Christians acknowledge in each other the presence of the one Spirit that binds us together and feeds our souls and motivates our mission, instead of competing with each other and denouncing each other?

Is it a failure of vision? Is a church bringing together people of all ages, tongues, and races not really something we desire? It doesn't matter what we want! This is the kind of church God intends and this is the kind of church the Spirit creates! We have no say in it!

Is it a moral failure? That's what Martin Luther King, Jr. suggests:

No individual can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he can live alone is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one. The challenge that we face today is to make it one in terms of brotherhood ...

Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.

He is right. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. We are tied together in a single garment of destiny. But is it a failure to make an ethical commitment to brotherhood that is keeping us from fully fulfilling our destiny?

Not exactly, because brotherhood, oneness, is not something we create. We don't do it. We can't do it. It is something God's Spirit does.

To me, that makes a crucial difference in the way we think about the oneness of the people of God. We don't do it! The Holy Spirit does it! It's not about building bridges, but about crossing over the bridges that are already there. We don't have to try to make unity among believers, we just have to live the unity that is already a reality. So what is required of us is not so much ethical commitment, but spiritual courage, courage that allows us to live in this new reality, rather than resist it.

Of the many, many spiritually powerful and emotionally moving experiences I enjoyed during our mission trip last May to the city of New Orleans, one of the most powerful and most moving for me was Sunday morning worship at St. Matthew United Church of Christ. We worshipped that morning as one congregation: native New Orleanians and visitors from Iowa, members of St. Matthew UCC, a white congregation with congregational roots, and members of Central UCC, a black congregation with E&R roots.

What was it that brought those two congregations together? What was it that brought us all together? A hurricane! Katrina brought us together! But what bound us together that morning and made us one? What made us one worshipping congregation? The Holy Spirit!

I will never forget communion that morning -- the image of all of us, members and guests, black and white, young and old, standing in line, walking forward to receive the bread and wine of communion from the hands, as it may be, of a middle-aged white

pastor or an older black deacon, a young black man studying for the ministry, or an elegant, gracious African-American woman, together sharing Christ's body, together celebrating our oneness, together being one.

That's why I was troubled by the comment of a new friend, a young black woman, with whom I sang that morning in the church choir. She was a member of Central UCC, worshipping now at St. Matthew UCC because their own church building had been ruined by the storm. But she talked about the day they could "go home."

Go home? Of course! Of course, we want to go home! Of course, we all want to go home! But what about this? What about this new home? To leave our homes behind, to embrace a new home of God's intention, a new home of God's creation, that takes spiritual courage!

"Abram, leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home, and go to a new land, a new home, that I am going to show you!" That takes courage!

It took courage for the people of Israel to follow Moses out of Egypt. Their courage often failed and they longed to return to Egypt, to the land of slavery, because it was the one home they knew, the one home that seemed safe and certain, at least in comparison to a new land they knew nothing about.

It will take courage for us ... to leave this home behind, to venture forward and outward toward the new home, the new land, the new church to which God calls us ... a home, a land, a church where people of all ages and tongues and races are bound together by God's Spirit, bound in an eternal covenant to live and act and be as one. We don't have to make that church. The Holy Spirit already has. We just have to be ready to embrace it, to live in it. We just have to have the courage to welcome it and not resist it!

And when we do, they will see. They will see what God's Spirit can do, just as I saw in that church sanctuary in the city of New Orleans what God's Spirit is doing! God's Holy Spirit is the glue that holds us together and makes us one!