

Among the finest bloopers ever to appear in church bulletins or newsletters are the following:

"The cost for attending the Fasting and Prayer conference includes meals."

For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

Low Self Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 PM. Please use back door.

The eighth-graders will be presenting Shakespeare's Hamlet in the Church basement Friday at 7 PM.

The Congregation is invited to attend this tragedy.

"Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Don't forget your husbands."

And the one that I offer as the counterpoint to this sermon about unity: The church will host an evening of fine dining, superb entertainment, and gracious hostility.

Over recent weeks our worship and preaching focus has been on what it means for us to be the Church of Jesus Christ here at Oakland living out of and expressing our vision and mission given expression by WORDS – Worship, Outreach, Relationships, Discipleship and Support. Today we continue this journey, as we engage with the urgent call to unity that we heard in the verses we read in Ephesians Chapter 4.

In this Chapter we hear an appeal to unity that is extremely extended, passionate and urgent. We are to lead lives worthy of our calling – God's call upon our lives; we are to bear with one another with all humility and gentleness and love, we are to make every effort, every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. As Christ's body, we are to be united in Christ, for the work to which Christ calls us and as an expression of the unity that exists within the One God, the One Lord, joined by One Baptism.

This morning I want to invite all of us to hear this call for unity, not that this congregation is currently engaged in a huge division or argument but because it is vital to the health of every church that unity is maintained and embodied even as we recognize the wide variety of ideas, opinions, and emphases that exist within any group of people.

As I worked on the preparation for this sermon I started to identify various ways in which I wanted to talk about Unity - Unity in Action, Unity in Creativity, Unity as an expression of the life of God, and that Unity is not uniformity.... And that is when I settled on the notion of likening the Church to a circus – particularly the Cirque du Soleil. Maybe you have been wondering if your new pastor feels at home, well maybe this is the answer, the start of my second month and I am already calling our church a circus!

I am hoping that either first hand or on television most of us have some awareness of Cirque du Soleil – the modern version of the circus – no animals, no clowns – stylish design, extensive use of music and images, elaborate colors and costumes, lots of movement, intricate dance, incredible acrobatics, all-action – jumping, bending, flipping, flying, throwing, catching – all to tell a story, to celebrate a theme.

As the Church we are always the Church du Soleil – the Church of the Son, S.O.N., the Church of the Son of God, the Church of Jesus Christ.

As the Church du Soleil we are called to Unity in Action – to tell our story, to express who we know God to be requires us to take action – to work and worship, to share and serve, to teach and tutor, to pray and plant, to cook and counsel. Knowing who God is, aware of God's love for the world, requires that we comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. This requires that all elements of the life of our church, all areas of mission and ministry, are encouraged by the prayers and participation of the church, given the resources to excel. Just this past week there was a great example of Unity in Action

in the life of our church as we responded to the needs of Lynne Shoener's family following Lynne's death. Prayers, cards, notes, flowers, food, time, effort, intelligence, effort, words of comfort, hugs, musical gifts were all offered to a grieving family – through Unity in Action we expressed who we are as the Body of Christ. Unity in action like this is also seen in every element of the life and ministry of our church – in VBS that begins today, in the programs with and for our youth, in one anothering visits and Deacon care.

Unity in Action is seen not only in what we do together but in how we do what we do. Now I know this will likely not be a big surprise but I have never performed in the circus, I don't own a leotard, I have never turned back flips on a stage and never swung from a trapeze but my instinct tells me that in the acrobatics and gymnastics of the Cirque du Soleil each performer in each movement and action must adjust to the needs of their fellow performers in order that the whole can be at its finest. Each performer must be able and willing to bend just a little more, to move just a fraction less, to reach or stretch just a little further adjusting to the speed and movement of others. In the same way we in the Church must always be flexible and adaptable, seeking to align what we do in partnership with and with due care for those with whom we work and worship. Rather than be stiff or rigid, rather than claim our own space, we always need to be able to give a little, to make space for a new person or a new way of doing things, able to embrace and welcome and support new programs, new insights, new opportunities, and new possibilities. This unity in action is required as we seek to minister to the needs of the people around us, and the needs of the contemporary world. Such unity in action alone can make us fully faithful.

As the Church du Soleil we are called to Unity in Creativity. Within this congregation there is an enormous treasure store of amazing people with amazing gifts. My sense is that you already know this but maybe the challenge we have is to fully discover all the very best ways in which all these amazing gifts can be unlocked in the service of God in this place. As we glance around the Sanctuary this morning we can see those using their musical gifts to lead us in our worship, those who prepare the worship space, who decorate with flowers, who spread the Communion elements, who greet us and welcome us, who design brochures and bulletins, posters and flyers, who fold the Oakleaf, who prepare interesting lessons for Sunday School, who plant gardens, remind us to recycle, mentor our youth, care for our children, visit the sick, serve those in need. All of this creativity, all of these gifts are vital to the ministry of Christ through Oakland Church. But you know, there are many, many other gifts present in this congregation, which can further enhance our shared ministry – gifts of faith and friendship, gifts of imagination and inspiration, gifts of making things and fixing things, gifts of art and design, gifts for accounting and budgeting, gifts for pastoring and proclaiming, gifts of experience and exuberance.

Now is always the time to be encouraging one another in the use of our creativity – so do not hide away, don't say maybe I should wait until I am asked, don't imagine that just because you are new to the church that your gift is not needed – instead step forward, so we can fully engage as a church, applying all that we are and have, expressing our Unity in creativity, serving God together as the Body of Christ.

As the Church du Soleil we are called to Unity as an expression of the life of God. Each show performed by the Cirque du Soleil has one central theme and all the elements of the performance are intended to tell this single story, the music, the costumes, the mood, the lighting, the props, the action.

So in the Church du Soleil we have a story to tell, a message to share, a theme to celebrate – that God loves the world, that God is the Creator and Sustainer of this amazing universe, that God calls and commands us to live in a way that will reflect and share the love that God has for all. The Church exists not for itself, not because a group of people either today or at some time in the past decided let's create a church – rather the Church exists because this as the result of God's choosing and plan and purpose.

I would think that my final point has already been well made as we have described how all of us are asked to share our own gifts, working in a flexible partnership together, expressing the life of God but I state it very simply, in the Church du Soleil we are called to a Unity that is not uniformity, for indeed we are all unique, different people, and there is no one way to do or be a Christian in this church, but working from our unity in the crucified and risen Jesus we offer our diversity not our uniformity to God, and for God's purposes in the world.

Our sense of the call to unity and active participation and partnership that we see described in this passage of Scripture is and ought to be heightened today as we see the Lord's Table spread before us. The gifts of bread and wine that await us speak to us, call us, invite us, to become one as Christ is One, that only in partnership and unity can we truly be the Body of Christ. You see there is everything at stake when it comes to the unity of the Church. It is not enough to think that we can serve Christ better the more we are united in love, faith and purpose. In other areas of life we know that a united team or group achieves more, but when it comes to Church there is something higher and deeper at stake – failure to live in unity is not just a limitation to our effectiveness though disunity certainly limits effectiveness, more importantly disunity robs us entirely of our identity as the Church, as the Body of Christ, disunity means we cease in effect to be the Church.

Today, in response to these words of Scripture, and this proclamation of God's Word and these gifts of God for the people of God I am convinced that all of you, all of you, have something more, better, different to be and do and become. Y'all - I am convinced that this is God's word to us and for us today, so look inside, look around, look in, look up, look out – in unity, God needs you for God's work in and through our church..... Amen.