

## September 10

Jesus values and preaches unity. Not interchangeability; not uniformity, not even commonality. Unity. It is worth taking a moment to dig into this notion a bit.

Interchangeability is exact reproduction, like shirt collar buttons: every maker's shirt with collar buttons in that product line has identical buttons. Jesus does not regard people as interchangeable, nor does he treat them as such. Each sick person he heals, for example, gets individual recognition. Lives matter, especially those on the margins or beneath the feet of the rest of the world.

Uniformity is likeness—in many walks of life—military service to take an obvious example everyone wears the same basic thing for example, (some distinguishing elements added, perhaps, which stand out precisely because they are on a uniform). Jesus does not require this of anyone: come as you are.

Commonality is a shared thing—like red hair—which may or may not be all the same hue, be worn the same way, be found in the same places, be used the same way.

Now I understand that there is a certain “Venn diagram” quality to these terms—you remember those overlapping circle diagrams in which however many circles there are some part of each overlaps with all the others. To a certain degree, interchangeability, uniformity, and commonality do overlap.

Unity is more elusive. We have to look more closely and think harder about this sort of connection between things or people. The clothing article we mentioned above, (a shirt) need not have buttons or even sleeves. All it has in common with other garments we call shirts is that when used for its intended purpose, it covers the human torso—more or less. What our button down collar garment shares with any other torso covering items is hard to pin down more specifically than I have said. Cashmere sweaters, bikini tops, and chain link hauberks are unified in their torso covering purpose, and that's about it. Still, we recognize what they are, even if they have no feature in common.

Unity is more of a matter of function or purpose. To take an extreme example, steak knives, band saw blades, and axes don't look alike, aren't ordinarily

interchangeable, you don't often see them anywhere near each other, they don't work the same way. Yet there is a bond, a unity, among them: they cut things.

Jesus' call to discipleship involves unifying one's life and relationships—in all their uniqueness—with what Jesus Jesus taught and did. In the axe, steak knife, band saw blade illustration above, the “situation” each item may be found in typically will be entirely different from the others. Dinner tables, workshops, and forests are quite unlike each other, and the tools are used quite differently, but there is common purpose that they have in their proper setting.

I don't mean to belabor this point, but I do want to help us all get clearer about what congregational life is built on and takes its purpose from. I do this first to show how I understand the gospel reading from Matthew for last Sunday concerning how to address a dispute or conflict between people in a congregation. I believe Jesus' aim is to present a pattern for resolving conflict that does not depend on who is louder, more powerful, etc.

My second purpose is to underscore again for us in the present time that, as the beloved hymn (#550) puts it:

“Jesus calls us o'er the tumult  
of our life's wide, restless sea;  
day by day his clear voice soundeth,  
saying, “Christian, follow me.”

Our purpose, our source of unity, is to listen to Jesus, as we are, where we are, when he calls.

We are in the middle of troubled and troubling times. Things are fraught with peril and our path forward isn't entirely clear, in our own lives, in our nation. But the way we are expected to go forward, the manner in which we are to proceed, is provided to us by Jesus: imitation of his disposition and approach to life and by attending to his voice. This is how the church operates at its best, in humble pursuit of faithful discernment of what God would have us do. This is the aim of your vestry and search committee, your various ministry committees and parish staff as the new program year begins. I hope it is the lodestar for you in your own lives as these times unfold.

One of my favorite collects is the prayer for the fourth Sunday of Easter. My hope is that it will offer you the comfort and encouragement and promise it gives to me in these hard, sad, and sometimes frightening days:

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people:  
Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name,  
and follow where he leads;  
who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever.  
Amen.

God's peace and joy.