

What unites people from all walks of life and from different places? Head to an airport and you'll find people united around common circumstances. There's an understanding shared between people coming together to conquer and overcome the snags of travel, especially air travel. Standing in line waiting to drop off luggage. Standing in security lines and get to their gates. Standing in line waiting to get on the plane.

Postponed, delayed, or canceled flights unites people really fast. Our return flight from Wisconsin was supposed to leave Milwaukee Friday evening at 7:15. At 6:45 news slowly started getting around our scheduled departure time had jumped to 10:20, only to be readjusted quickly back to 8:20. Our trouble was the connection to Oklahoma City would leave before we would arrive to be on it. Another couple, a set of friends, and another man were all in the same situation. The airline's solution ended up being to drive to Chicago, stay overnight, and leave Saturday morning. Eight strangers piled into a stretch limousine with all our luggage crammed in the trunk, front seat, and under our legs. Eight people who didn't know each other two hours before suddenly had two hours getting really close.

Our Christian congregation sometimes feels like the same thing. People who wouldn't normally know each other, might not cross paths, and who may not even get along otherwise suddenly are all thrown together. Get along. Make decisions. Do God's work. Nothing easy about that. Over the next couple of weeks we're going to take a look at ourselves, our fellowship, our nurturing, our life together as a Christian congregation. We'll use what God says from the Apostle Paul's letters. It's there we'll find out why we can say we're unified, why we have fellowship, and why we're...

One in Christ

I can remember plenty of flights that went smoothly. Timing just right to get to the airport, sail through security, and land safely at my destination. But what also sticks out are the travels that didn't go well. Problems arising the moment the bags were packed and going downhill from there. The Apostle Paul had plenty of good memories of the Christians in Corinth. How those believers responded to the gospel, how they treated each other, and wanted to reach out to others. But he also had to deal with some painful thoughts about them too. Problems in Corinth that needed addressing like one man allowed to stay in the congregation even though he had taken another woman as his wife, and she was his father's wife. Divisions among the congregation over which leader to follow. Problems with lawsuits among believers. And their infatuation with wisdom and special gifts of the Holy Spirit. These weighed on Paul as he wrote.

So did Paul start right in like an angry father yelling at his kids? "You guys have to get this cleaned up. Work on this. You people need to be better." Not at all. **"To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."** This was the church of God and these were God's people. They were sanctified in Christ, called out of the unbelieving world into a new life in Christ. They were holy. Not holy to come. Not holy if they worked on it. Already holy, perfect, because God called them holy in Christ. They had God's grace and God's peace through Christ. In a word they were one in Christ.

Currently our membership stands at 155 souls. 155 different people with different lifestyles and different likes and dislikes. Together we're bound to experience bumps, sometimes big ones. Not everyone agreed with closing the school like we did two years ago. Not everyone agreed the floor of the entryway needed redoing one year ago. There isn't complete agreement with letting the programs we do use our building like the homeschooling coop or Y summer daycamp. Likely some want worship to include more contemporary songs. Others might think we're already changing things too much in worship. At any given moment we could take a poll on just about anything and there would be 155 different opinions.

That weighs on me. And I know it weighs on many of you too. We fear the simple decision that pulls apart and causes division. We might worry that doing a particular outreach event or inreach event might not have complete unanimous support. Spending money might please some while others want to be more cautious. Even fellowship activities that one person thinks are fun might be seen by others as intrusive or unnecessary. I spend a great deal of time and thought wondering how to make us more united. The leadership wonders what can be done to allow us to enjoy time with each other and have fun together. The big question, the big obstacle, seems to be how can we be more one?

I will not stand here and tell you that you need to get things cleaned up. That you guys need to work on this and be better. Let's instead listen to God speak. **"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."** Grace and peace, to you! God's grace for you. God's peace in you. **"To those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."** You are the church of God and you are God's people. You are sanctified in Christ. Called out to new life in Christ. Not later, not at some point if only you are good enough. Right now. God loves you. God declared you holy. God forgave your sins in Christ. New life, a holy life, a life right now in Christ.

Each of you has this relationship with God because of Christ individually. But what you have individually you also have collectively. Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Jesus gave his life for each one of you to make you his own. But he didn't want you to remain separate, establishing house churches of your own. He called you to live and come together. He called you together so you might call on the name of the Lord as a group of believers. And here you are. Forgiven saints right now in Christ. Coming together you're your problems and fears, your hope and faith. Each week receiving again the comfort and assurance of love from God. Hearing it together as one. Confessing truths to each other as one. Helping each other and deepening bonds formed in Christ as one. Bonds deeper than family, common experience, or anything in this world. Bonded as one in Christ.

Being cramped together in that limo for two hours with six strangers initially didn't sound like fun. But actually it was better to not be going through it alone. Knowing others were experiencing the same discomfort, same displacement, same unfortunate circumstances made it easier somehow. And there were plenty of reasons for thanksgiving as we started to get to know each other. It was actually interesting, learning more about them and them learning more about us. At the end of two hours I was thankful to have gone through it all with them.

The Apostle Paul was writing to Corinthians who weren't complete strangers. Not to him and not to each other. He was thankful for them. **"I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus."** Paul was thankful, not for what they did or what he did, but what God did. Thankful for God's grace in Christ. They weren't going it alone. Christ and God's grace made them one. This is what they shared. God's grace brought amazing blessings. **"For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge."** They already valued speaking and knowledge. They were blessed by God and through Christ their knowledge was heightened. They gained access to knowledge unbelievers only dreamed of knowing. Eternal life, the way to heaven, knowledge of God. These were only a part of how they were enriched. The Corinthians didn't lack any spiritual gift either. Gifts God gave to all believers he gave to them. Wisdom, faith, love, virtue, devotion, patience, and endurance. God showered them all on them. But so great was God he gave them extraordinary gifts as well. And everything God gave them came with a promise. **"He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."** They could count on God completely to keep them strong in the faith until the very end. Whatever happened God would keep them one in Christ.

I consider God's grace to you. It's reason to give thanks. God has called you, redeemed you, and made you his own. I thank God each of you knows and believes this truth. And I thank God for the gifts of his grace beyond that. You have been enriched. This building, property, the people who serve. All God enriching you. Gifts you have and use so that you lack nothing. Encouragers, listeners, and doers are all here. People who pray regularly. People who give abundantly. People who love to plan and people who love to carry out plans. All these gifts, their varieties, all from God's grace in Christ. And sealing it all is the promise God will keep. God brought you to faith; God will keep you in faith. His promise is guaranteed in Christ. Guaranteed in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Guaranteed in the record of Christ in the Scriptures. Christ forgave your sins, lifted you to new life, and promises you heaven. This you all share the same. You are one in Christ.

Leaving the hotel lobby to go to our rooms Friday night we said goodbye to each other. Even after two hours though, no one exchanged emails or friend requested anyone on Facebook. I don't think anyone will be calling to just chat ever again. Two hours closely confined and we still weren't one. You and me and us, we are one. A group of believers, God's family, the church. We can't walk away from each other and never talk again or get together. We do more than exchange emails. We know each other. If we don't, we learn. We listen. We want to help with the hurt. We want to encourage with love. We want to grow as a family. We want to laugh, cry, and love. To do so we listen to God's call. He calls us in Christ. We go back to his grace. God loved us and saved us in Christ. God makes us one in Christ.