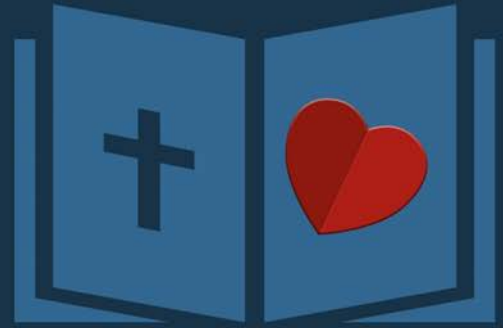


# ADULT FORMATION *Word into Life*



## **Unity across Diversity**

**Christ Church Christiana Hundred**

**Sermon by the Rev. Michael B. E. Kurth – January 26, 2025**

**1 Corinthians 12:12-31**

Unity across diversity.

Sometimes, a sermon theme arises throughout a week, and keeps rising over and over and over again, to the point you can't ignore it. That was my experience this week on the theme of unity across diversity.

It began on Monday, when I went to an interfaith prayer breakfast in Dover, Delaware. Over three hundred religious leaders gathered with newly elected officials to pray in ways true to our tradition for prosperity for the people and resources of our state. I was lucky to offer a blessing, alongside ministers from the Islamic Society of Delaware, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, United Methodist, Hindu, Cherokee, Roman Catholic, Non-denominational, Baha'i, Sikh and Jewish faith. It was extraordinary to see so many people, from so many faiths, from every corner of this state, come together. Though we prayed in different ways, the very act of prayer itself was our common language that brought us together.

Throughout the week, Christians observed a week of prayer for Christian unity, marked by the feast of The Confession of St. Peter on January 18 and the Conversion of St. Paul on January 25. The two saints often seen as fathers of the catholic and Protestant traditions, traditions often in fracture with each other, together for one week in united prayer.

It's fitting that we hear from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, a letter that defines Christian unity to this day.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians addresses Christ followers in jeopardy. Community members challenged the boundaries set by leaders. Behavior at assembly was like a worship war of power grabs. Members brought lawsuits against each other. Big questions threatened to rupture the community: What happens at worship? How do we share meals together? Should Christians marry? What happens when we die?

Paul writes to unite the community, to answer these questions, and move forward as followers of Jesus Christ. He shares the metaphor we heard earlier today: that the members of the church are like individual parts of the body, diverse and unique; yet we all need each other to thrive. Together, we are whole; we are one in Christ, the church.

Each member of the church, like each part of the body, is unique and important. The body needs its feet, its hands, its fingers, eyes, and ears, all working together to fully thrive. And though the feet may feel no need for the hands, they do need each other, just as the eyes need the ears. We need each other.

Paul tells the Christians in Corinth: you are all important, whether you are rich or poor, of high status or low, new to the community or a founding member, weak in faith or strong. Not only are you important to the community, but we need you. We need you in your diversity, if the church is to thrive. Every member is important to the body's well-being.

Yet Paul believes that some parts of the body deserve more attention than others. He writes that “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor,” for “God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior members, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer. If one is honored, all rejoice with it.”<sup>1</sup> Unity across diversity. Unity forged when those who are strong clothe with honor those who are weak.

Paul wants Christians to care for each other, especially those most in need. That's how we find unity across diversity. “We cannot truly be united if we leave the most vulnerable behind.”<sup>2</sup> It's why, here at Christ Church, we have an Outreach Committee that connects church members with our neighbors in need and allocates funds to worthy causes; it's why we have a grief group that helps us walk the journey of grieving together and a parish life ministry to help us celebrate in joyful community.

Paul's letter has become the bedrock for Christian teaching to this day. In our ever-diverse world, “differences we might imagine—of race, gender, political persuasion, sexual orientation, economic status—fall to the wayside in baptism,”<sup>3</sup> when we are welcomed into Christ's body, the church. We become one in Christ and remain fundamentally who God created us to be. We do not hide or deny who we are; rather we flourish as the people God has made us, in spite of our unique differences. Each part of the body needs the other to thrive, and some of us need more attention than others. Unity across diversity.

Political tension and fracture have caused many to wonder if unity is possible in our diverse national life.

I have never received as many comments about a sermon as I received this week following Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde's sermon in Tuesday's prayer service at the National Cathedral.<sup>4</sup>

In her sermon, Bishop Budde shared what she believes are the foundations of unity: honoring the inherent dignity of every human being, honesty, and humility. She then added a fourth pillar of mercy, and spoke directly to President Trump and Vice President Vance, and asked them to show mercy to people who are scared in this country. Many circles praised her comments; others derided and objected.

My sermon today is not about her comments, nor is it about the commentary that followed. Whether her sermon made you glad or dismayed, I'd be happy to talk with you this week.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 12:22-26

<sup>2</sup> <https://stbarts.org/notes-and-news/unity-and-the-most-vulnerable/>

<sup>3</sup> Episcopal Beliefs and Practices, page 227

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwwaEuDeqM8>

What I will say is this: I sincerely believe unity is possible for us, today, in this diverse and divided world. I saw it on Monday at the interfaith prayer breakfast. I will continue to seek those moments in the days, weeks, and months to come.

Unity begins with God's work in us, transforming us in the likeness of Christ. For us today, here at Christ Church, unity comes from our recognition that despite our differences, we are all members of one body: the body of Christ, the Church. Every person in this room—you are an important member of the body of Christ.

Members of the body of Christ are called to be like Jesus in the world, to acts of healing and generosity and mercy, especially to those in need. Today's gospel tells us that Jesus understood his ministry to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, give sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free.<sup>5</sup> His teachings still challenge us today—just as they challenged Paul and the people of Corinth.

What a blessing we have, as Christians, that our savior Jesus Christ, upholds us across our diversity and differences. God desires unity for all people and has put into action a plan to gather a diverse people to himself.<sup>6</sup> That plan begins and ends in Jesus Christ. Yet we have an opportunity now, in this precious life, to practice the unity and kingdom-building that we seek to know fully at the last day.

Unity across diversity is possible. To achieve unity, we must recognize that we need each other, especially those weaker members we think less honorable, whom Paul says to “clothe with great honor.”<sup>7</sup> Lifting up the weaker members will call for sacrifice from those who are strong. Paul's challenge to the people in Corinth becomes a challenge to us today.

We must ask ourselves: How can we care for one another—especially the weakest among us? How do we build relationship with each other, to suffer and rejoice together as one? What sacrifice can we make to help build a vision of God's peaceable kingdom here on earth?

AMEN.

### Questions:

1. What word or phrase in this sermon stands out for you?
2. What are some examples of unity you have seen in recent times, at a national, local, or peer-to-peer level?
3. Where is a place that you experience great diversity but also genuine unity? What do those people or places have in common?
4. Christians—whether we agree or disagree—are many members in one body, Jesus Christ, the head. What is a moment you felt united together at Christ Church?
5. Christians are called to show care to the world, especially to those in great need. Who are people in need in our current moment? How did Christ care for similar people in his ministry, and how does he invite us to care for them today?
6. What is this sermon calling you to be or to do?

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:18, cf Isaiah 61:1-2

<sup>6</sup> <https://x.com/esaumccauley/status/1882898190908981651>

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor 12:23