

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

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During this Easter season we are focusing on the resurrection of Jesus as fostering UNITY.

We all need unity – unity of mind, of will, of purpose.

Unity is oneness.

It is speaking with one voice

- committing with one heart and mind
- acting with one will
- joining together in common life

When we have unity of faith and purpose

We experience less stress,

are more productive,

and are less likely to be depressed.

The scripture readings during this Easter season tell how the resurrection of Jesus unified his followers,

and they point us to how we also can live in unity as the people of God.

In our first message in this series, we learned how Jesus draws people together through forgiveness,

and how we are unified by forgiving one another and living in peace.

Last Sunday, we learned how Jesus people are united in his agape love

– given through his sacrifice on the cross and in the resurrection

And which we receive each week through the word of God and the Lord's Supper.

When we experience the agape love of Jesus for us,

we are united with all those whom Jesus loves.

We belong together.

We are made part of the family of God through baptism into his name.

Jesus draws us into the unity of his love and transforms us into the community of those who share his love,

bringing others to life.

Which brings us to today's theme: UNITY IN
DISCIPLESHIP

In biblical usage, a disciple is a student – someone who learns from someone else, called a master.

Often a master will have a group of disciples, training all of them together.

This fosters unity, since they are learning from the same master and have the same goal: **to imitate the master,**

to live their lives in such a way that people cannot distinguish the disciple from the master.

We see this in painting, when a student of Rembrandt, for example, fools the observer into thinking a painting is from the great master himself.

The goal of discipleship is imitation of the master.

Disciples are instructed by information and by training.

So, disciples are people who put into practice what someone else teaches.

This “putting into practice” is called “following”.

When we follow instructions, we put into practice what the instructions say to do.

Likewise, a disciple puts into practice, or imitates, what the master says to do or shows them to do.

The Bible tells us that Tabitha was a disciple of Jesus.

In following Jesus, she was devoted to good works and acts of mercy.

The writer of Acts doesn't have to spell out what such works are – they are what Jesus always taught and did:

- Feeding the hungry
- Clothing the naked
- Visiting the sick and imprisoned
- Caring for the poor
- Comforting the broken-hearted
- Providing hospitality

In short – bringing people to life.

Tabitha was especially known for sewing clothing for those in need.

She had died, and the apostle Peter was sent for.

Peter's discipleship –his imitation of Jesus -- was marked by prayer, preaching, and healing.

He prayed, and then spoke to Tabitha in ways he had seen Jesus do with Lazarus, and the widow's son, and the centurion's daughter.

Peter imitated Jesus and said "Tabitha, get up."

And hearing the voice of Jesus speaking through Peter, she opened her eyes and got up.

The goal of discipleship is imitation of the master,

And the goal of Christian discipleship is imitating Jesus bringing people to life.

The next thing Peter did is also part of this discipleship

– for it is not enough as individuals to imitate the Master,

it is important for the whole community to see what has been accomplished.

So Peter called the saints and widows together and showed Tabitha to be alive.

Saints is the Bible's Word for those who follow Jesus.

As Peter's discipleship in raising Tabitha from the dead became public, many were unified in faith in Jesus.

It is through UNITY IN DISCIPLESHIP that the early church increased.

Jesus used the image of shepherding to describe discipleship.

The sheep are the disciples – they rely on the Shepherd for life.

They learn to know his voice.

They listen for his voice

They follow his voice, because it leads them to green grass and still waters and safely home again.

As Jesus' disciples, we follow him not only to our next meal, but to eternal life.

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So to speak of the church is to speak of the community of people who recognize Jesus' voice among all other voices and who find their greatest joy in imitating Jesus as their Master.

This is the UNITY OF DISCIPLESHIP – joining together with others who imitate Jesus.

There are plenty of other voices, other ways of being.

Here are a few common examples:

“above all else, Look out for # 1”

“Punch the other guy before he punches you”

“It’s ok as long as you don’t get caught”

“It’s always someone else’s fault”

“The point of life is to get rich”

The voice of Jesus our Master and Shepherd says,

- “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.”
 - “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.
 - "So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.
- But, thank God, that though you once were slaves of sin, you became obedient from your hearts to that form of teaching in which you have been instructed,

We know how distinct the voice of the Lord Jesus is and recognize it as the voice we follow and the Master we imitate.

We seek unity with those who listen for the same voice and imitate the same Master.

This is where we belong

– this is the Shepherd to whom we belong

– the life we seek from God.

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It is important to remember that discipleship is always practiced with others.

It is a team effort – not an individual achievement.

The Bible speaks of Peter doing this or that and Paul doing this or that, but they were always accompanied and assisted by other disciples.

They never acted alone or on their own behalf.

We cannot be disciples of Jesus by ourselves.

Our relationship with the Master includes our relationships with other disciples and with those outside the faith.

In imitating Jesus the Master,

disciples **love** one another as Jesus loved us

– serving one another with our very lives.

We seek the **UNITY OF DISCIPLESHIP** that binds us together in following Jesus.

We support one another, encourage one another and build each other up in imitating Jesus.

This **UNITY of DISCIPLESHIP** bears witness to those outside the faith:

- that Jesus lives
- That his love is greater than any other.
- That his life is worth more than all the world's riches.
- That his promises are worthy of our trust and hope.
- That he is indeed the Messiah of God who comes to save all creation.

It may seem too great a thing to aspire to such unity of discipleship, for who can perfectly imitate Jesus?

Here we must again listen for the voice of our Shepherd and Master himself.

we listen for our dear Lord who says *“fear not! Peace be with you”*

As I have loved you so you will love one another. They will know you are my disciples because of the love you have for one another.

The UNITY OF DISCIPLESHIP is lived in the UNITY OF PEACE through forgiveness and in the UNITY OF the LOVE OF JESUS which we share.

It is not perfection that matters,

but God’s grace toward us in Jesus

and our trust in him that risks everything for what he offers.

This is what Jesus means when he says *“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.”*

Jesus claimed each of you as his disciples in Baptism and has taught you and shown you his love for you.

Together, we follow him – we imitate him

– and we show those who do not yet believe

what more there is for those who know Jesus.

For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!