

**SERMON**  
**Peter and Paul, Apostles**  
**June 29, 2008**

Acts 12:1-11  
Psalm 87:1-3, 5-7  
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18  
John 21:15-19

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy demanded that Linus change TV channels. She threatened him with her fist if he didn't. "What makes you think that you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus.

"These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing, but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold." "Which channel do you want?" asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

Unity is strength. We hear it time and time again. "United we stand, divided we fall" is a familiar phrase that gets quoted a lot. It sounds like something that came out of the mouth of President Abraham Lincoln. And perhaps it did.

However, it originated centuries before. It is attributed to Aesop, a Greek slave and fable author, sometime between 620 – 560 BC. Imagine that. You see, this idea of unity is not a new concept. During World War II, Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so that he could control them. Among the Christians, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who did not faced harsh persecution. In almost every family of those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp. The Lutheran Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was one of them.

When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups. There was a lot of tension. Finally, they decided that the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining their own heart in light of Christ's commands. Then they came together.

Francis Schaeffer, who told of the incident, asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. "We were just one." As they confessed their hostility and bitterness to God, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and slowly dissolved their hatred.

You see, when love prevails among believers, especially in times of strong disagreement, it presents to the world an indisputable mark of a true follower of Jesus Christ.

Today, we remember the apostleship of Peter and Paul, martyrs of the Church. Thus the red paraments that symbolize the blood shed for the sake of the Gospel. But why today – June 29th, you might ask.

Well, this date is the anniversary of a day somewhere around the year 258 where under the Valerian persecution, what were believed to be the remains of the two apostles were both moved temporarily to prevent them from falling into the hands of the persecutors. Thus, June 29th is designated the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

Peter and Paul. Perhaps we could call them the "apostolic odd couple." Peter was a simple, uneducated fisherman. Paul was a Pharisee highly trained in the Rabbinic tradition. Peter was called directly by Jesus and followed him throughout his ministry.

According to the Biblical record, Paul never met Jesus, but rather was called in a supernatural way by the risen Jesus on his way to Damascus. Peter was referred to as “the rock”, and given the “keys to the Kingdom.” Paul was a visionary sent out into far lands. Peter was probably the one who would say, “well, let’s make sure that we are doing things properly and in good order.”

Paul, would probably say, “Time is short, let’s go for it.” Not thinking in political terms, we could say that Peter was the Conservative, and Paul was the Liberal.

There was a lot that they did not agree on. It all came to a head when they could not agree on who could become a Christian, and what was the process. Peter insisted that Gentiles – non-Jews, could not be Christians since they were considered to be unclean.

Peter thought that if Gentiles were to be Christians, they must first be circumcised and follow the Jewish law. Now as a man, I can say this would not be a very good evangelism strategy. Can you see some guy saying “I have to do what, if I want to be a Christian!!!”

Paul, on the other hand said that Gentile Christians would not be required to first convert to Judaism before they could be accepted into the community of Jesus’ followers.

This became such an issue, that they all got together at what is known as the Jerusalem Council. They finally agreed that Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews. So Paul traveled into predominately Gentile regions and became know as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Peter, on the other hand, stayed in predominately Jewish communities and became know as the Apostle to the Jews.

Indeed Peter and Paul could hardly be more different. However, they were totally united with a common purpose – that was, to share the wonderful news of God’s love through the person of Jesus Christ. And they both gave their lives for doing so.

Traditional beliefs hold that Paul, being a Roman citizen would have probably been beheaded with a sword, for it was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen. Peter, on the other hand was probably crucified. The story is told that he did not feel worthy to die the same way as his Lord, so he was crucified upside down.

St Augustine writes: “Both apostles share the same feast day, for these two were one; and even though they suffered on different days, they were as one. Peter went first, and Paul followed. And so we celebrate this day made holy for us by the apostles’ blood. Let us embrace what they believed, their life, their labors, their sufferings, their preaching, and their confession of faith.”

In our Gospel story today, Jesus invites Simon Peter to declare his love for him three times. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Peter denied Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. Jesus commissions him to feed his sheep and predicts that he will die as a martyr for God.

Jesus says; “But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around and take you where you do not wish to go.” This sounds like an image of crucifixion to me. And then Jesus says; “Follow me; Follow me.” And Peter did!

Again we hear that just because we follow Jesus doesn’t mean that our lives will be free of pain and suffering. I would guess that all of you here this morning can attest to that.

The other day I watched a movie called “Choices of the Heart.” It starred Melissa Gilbert – remember her from “Little House on the Prairie?” Gilbert played the role of a Catholic lay missionary named Jean Donovan who was serving with three nuns in El Salvador in the early 1980’s.

The movie is based on a true story in which Donovan, along with the three nuns were repeatedly raped and then murdered by Salvadoran soldiers. The women were killed because they were associated with the Catholic liberation theology exemplified by Archbishop Oscar Romero who was also murdered. In fact, Jean Donovan served as one of his pallbearers.

At that time, El Salvador's ruling party was enjoying massive aid packages, not to mention weapons and military training from the United States both under the Carter and Reagan administrations. After the murders, there was a massive cover-up by both San Salvador and Washington claiming that the murders were justified in the name of holding the line against Communism.

By 1980, the Salvadoran military was increasingly convinced that every poor rural civilian was a potential guerrilla, and should be "cleaned up." Tens of thousands of peasants were killed. Even though the religious activists like Jean Donovan condemned any use of violence in their struggle for justice, it didn't make much difference. Like Peter, the call to follow Jesus cost Jean Donovan her life.

And then we also heard the words of Paul in his second letter to Timothy. "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

He goes on to say; "But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it."

You see, for Paul, all credit was given to Jesus. And because of this, he would not be discouraged. No matter what his circumstances, Paul was content because he knew that God was leading and guiding him. He was sick and God did not heal him. He was shipwrecked and almost died. He was tortured. He was imprisoned many times.

Yet he did not hold God accountable. All he said was "your grace is sufficient. Your grace is sufficient."

And that is where I would like to close this morning. Like Peter and Paul, when we choose to follow Jesus, there are few guarantees. There is no guarantee that our lives will be any better than anyone else's. There is no guarantee that we will not lose jobs, experience broken relationships, know the agony of death and disease.

But we are guaranteed that God's grace is sufficient. And as Paul writes; "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever." Peter and Paul – unity amidst diversity. This is the calling of the Church.

Today, the faithful are quick to label themselves either as conservatives or liberals. Conservatives, who often identify with the institutional authority of Peter, wage war against liberals.

And liberals, who identify with the inclusive charismatic vision of Paul, wage war against conservatives.

By combining the feasts of the apostles Peter and Paul, the church is inviting all of her children to look beyond the conservative-liberal divide and discover a deeper level of unity in Christ. The church of Christ needs the rock of Peter's institutional leadership as well as the vitality of Paul's inclusive charismatic vision.

Christian unity, like the unity of Peter and Paul, is not a unity in uniformity, but a unity in diversity. Today, we are reminded that some will prefer the style of Peter and others that of Paul. But it need not divide us. For we are all one in Christ Jesus, children of the one and only living God.

Peter and Paul – conquering all human frailty, shed their blood for the sake of the church. Today, as we share in the body and blood of our Lord, we give them thanks. For in doing so, we stand in the historic tradition of all those who have gone before us in offering their very lives so that we might hear the good news of love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Amen,

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

## CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Do any of you know what a "martyr" is? A martyr is someone who is killed because of what they believe.

Millions of people over hundreds of years have died simply because they were followers of Jesus

Today, we are especially remembering two of them. They were both very important followers of Jesus. Their names were Peter and Paul. Have you heard of them?

They wrote some of the books in the Bible. And if it wasn't for them, there might not be a church

They loved Jesus very much, and Jesus told them to go to everybody and tell them how much God loves them.

It was very dangerous for them, but they knew that it was so important to tell people this good news.

We are very lucky in the country that we live in. It's not dangerous for us to tell people about Jesus. Would you be scared about telling one of our friends about Jesus?

Isn't that great! That means that we can tell all of the people we want about Jesus and how much he loves us.

Let us pray...O Lord, thank you for sending Jesus to us to love us and care for us. Help us to be excited about telling others about Jesus. Amen.