

3. United We Stand
United in Christian Service
Matthew 4:23-24

Sometimes you learn some of life's most important lessons in strange places. I learned one on the bench of a baseball dugout. I was a boy playing on a Little League team that was coached by a man who had managed professional teams. He was a tough old bird, a strict disciplinarian. I was having a pretty good season at the plate that year. Some of us on the team were having a competition to see who could have the best batting average. One night I got my third hit of the game. When I got back to the dugout I made the mistake of letting this manager hear me tell another player what that brought my batting average to. He glared at me like I was something he had just found stuck to the bottom of his shoe. He said, "Son, the only numbers any of us, including you, should care about are those." And he pointed to the score board.

We won the pennant that year. It was in large part because the coach kept us focused on what was really important. What was really important was that we win games. The way to win games was to put aside our own agendas and play together as a team.

This is the last of a three part sermon series entitled, "United We Stand." I've talked about being united in heart with those who share our belief in the essentials of the faith, which are John 3:16 and the Great Commandments. Last week I talked about being united in the fellowship of the church, which makes us stronger both as a church and as individuals if our fellowship is a healthy one.

This morning I will close by talking about being united in our commitment to Christ.

The church exists for one reason, and that is to carry on the work of Christ. And Christ came into the world for one purpose: To make the love of God known to the world. Everything Christ did, from teaching and preaching, to healing and casting out demons, to forgiving sinners and fellowshiping with outcasts, to dying on the cross was for one purpose: to enable us to understand that God loves us all and wants us to love one another.

The purpose of the church is to share the love of God through our words and through our deeds. When we are united in that one purpose, we become an unstoppable force.

Churches are either flashlights or laser beams. If we are not united, we are like a flashlight. Flashlights are interesting things. They can cast just enough light to keep you out of trouble, but not enough to do much good. They are not very powerful. Has anyone ever done surgery under a flashlight? Has anyone ever gotten a sunburn from the light of a flashlight?

Compare a flashlight to a laser beam. In a way, a laser beam is nothing more than a powerful flashlight. The difference between a flashlight and a laser is that the rays of a flashlight are scattered in a wide, unfocused beam. In a laser all the light is focused on one tiny spot, and the waves of the beam of light move in synchronization, so that as little

of the energy of the light is lost. The result is a beam of light many, many times more powerful than the chaotic and unfocused light from a flashlight.

When we, as members of the church, are focused on a single purpose and working together in harmony, we are a laser beam. If not, we are a flashlight.

We get into trouble when we try to replace God's agenda for the church with our own agenda, when we care more about getting our own batting averages up than with winning the game.

Paul hits the nail on the head in 1 Corinthians 13 when he describes what love is like and what it is not like: Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Love means putting aside what we want for the sake of the mission of Christ in the church. When we do that, wonderful things happen.

UM Army is an example of that. In 1965 Faulk Landrum organized the youth of this church to do what was called work weeks--a week set aside for the purpose of showing the love of God to people by providing free home repairs to those who couldn't afford to have the work done which they desperately needed. The kids gave up a week of their summer vacations, knowing they would be doing hard work and getting nothing back but the satisfaction of serving Christ by serving people. As a result people were helped, the kids discovered that serving Christ was a joy, and they grew closer to each other. Joy and fellowship are almost always by-products of joining together to do something everyone believes in and doing it well.

In 1979 the youth of Chapelwood joined the youth of two others churches for a work week. They named their team the UM Army. This year 4,000 UM Army campers from 200 churches will help 1,500 families in 50 different communities. We will have two groups of campers going out from our church. That's 29 years of service, involving thousands of youth, helping thousands of families, all because those first youth put aside their own agendas to spend a week serving people in the name of Christ.

Just think of all that unfocused energy being focused, all those people working together in harmony. The cause of Christ has been elevated. Christ's mission has taken a giant step forward. And the church has been the church.

Our Nothing But Nets program is another example. As United Methodists we have united behind the goal of eradicating malaria from Africa. We are working together with the National Basketball Association and the Bill Gates Foundation. I never thought I would say the words the United Methodist Church, the National Basketball Association and Bill Gates in the same sentence. But we are united in a common cause. Because we are working together, many, many thousands of lives will be saved.

That being a laser beam, not a flashlight.

We are continuing in the tradition of the church reaching out to the world in the name of Christ. Within the United States, the United Methodist Church has 122 United Methodist colleges and schools with 250,000 students. There are 90 United Methodist hospitals in America. There are 61 children's homes. There are over one hundred retirement homes. There are thousands of mission projects. And that says nothing about our work overseas. And, of course, the work of the United Methodist Church is only a small part of the work of the whole Church.

The world would be a very different place without the many millions of Christians throughout the world who are working together to share the love of God in the name of Jesus Christ.

We are a laser beam cutting through the forces of evil at work in the world.

However, there is obviously much more to be done. Let us stay united and focused. At some point you gave your life to Christ. You said that Christ will come first in your life, that you will dedicate your life to serving Christ. It's easy to lose that sense of commitment. It's easy to focus on getting our own batting averages up, rather than winning the game. When we do, the mission of Christ suffers. And when the work of Christ suffers, people suffer.

We have to rededicate ourselves daily to Christ and to Christ's mission, both as individuals and as the church.

United we stand in the battle against the forces of evil. When we are focused on what is really important, we are the most powerful force in the world.

Dr. Wesley Welborn
Senior Pastor