

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Colossians 1:11-20

SERMON TITLE: All Things Holding Together

Have you noticed? No matter how hard we try to keep things together--no matter how sincere our desire for peace--things just keep coming apart. Death is the most obvious culprit. Death always brings separation. But even in life, conflict and division seem to stalk the human race. It doesn't take much to split us up into factions, to splinter us into rival groups, to inflame tribal passions, to pull us apart, to fragment us and alienate us from each other.

It's certainly true in the world. Check out the headlines: Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Myanmar, Darfur, Lebanon, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, and this is not an exhaustive list by any means!

Even the United States is a divided nation. We always have been. But here of late, the divisions seemed to have festered. For example, do you remember the 2000 presidential election --the one with the contested vote count in Florida, the hanging chads, the court challenges and all the rest? Well, several days after the election, an editorial in the *Indianapolis Star* made this observation: *The political divisions in America are deep and at times bitter. Partisan antics, aimed more at stirring trouble than solving problems, are rampant in Washington....If the deep splits along class, gender, geographical and racial lines continue, they ultimately will hurt both parties and the nation.* (Editorial, *Indianapolis Star*, November 9, 2000.) Well, in my estimation, things haven't changed much in the last seven years, 9/11 notwithstanding.

And its not just our nation, we know brokenness in our own individual lives. Have you ever been through a divorce, lost a job, been alienated from your parents or your children, been at odds with a neighbor, a co-worker or an employer? Have you ever lost someone that you loved? Have you ever been divided within yourself--torn between one thing or another?

So isn't it true? No matter how hard we try to keep things together--no matter how

sincere our desire for peace--things just keep coming apart. And in the language of Colossians, this is a manifestation of the power of darkness.

But, thanks be to God, there's more to the story than this. There is another, more powerful force at work in the creation to bring things together and hold things together for the sake of life and peace. How do we know? Well, for starters, we have the words of that ancient Christian hymn: *Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

Did you get that last part? God intends for the creation to hold together in Christ. But the creation is not yet complete. The power of darkness still pulls things apart that God intends to keep together. But God will not be thwarted! In Christ, *God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.* In other words, there is nothing pulled apart--even violently--that God can not bring back together again through forgiveness and reconciliation. Even death itself has been overcome. So where do we find redemption and peace for ourselves and for the entire cosmos? In Christ.

Now get this: Anytime we see someone working through Christ-like means to bring things together for peace, we are witnessing the power of Christ at work, even if the peacemaker is not a Christian. That very impetus for peace has its source in Christ.

But having said this, it's the church's vocation among all God's created things to be a visible demonstration of the power of Christ at work to bring all things together in peace. Christ is the head of the body, the church. We take our direction from him. And we know what that direction is, don't we? It's peace! And besides, all of us who are in Christ have been rescued

from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. Shouldn't our lives therefore show it? And doesn't the world and our nation, our neighbors and our enemies need to see the church practicing what we preach?

But we do struggle, don't we? When it comes to holding things together and practicing reconciliation and forgiveness, we're often not much different from the world. We still get broken up and torn apart in our personal relationships. And Lord knows, we do have knock-down, drag-out fights in the church. I've seen Christians go to war with one another over what color to paint the trim of the church. And we're split up into so many different groups! Garrison Keillor tells the story of a small Minnesota town near Lake Wobegon that has had so many church splits that one church in town is just Bob and Bob's wife--and they meet on their front porch.

For us Protestants especially, when we get upset about something in the church, we tend to forget about Christ holding all things together. We just pick up and leave--we go somewhere else--no reconciliation--no forgiveness--we just go--and the church is divided yet again. This church has experienced some of that in its history. Most every church has.

But Christ doesn't give up on us--and every now and then the church does come close to practicing what it preaches. For example, during World War II, Adolf Hitler commanded all religious groups in Germany to unite, not in response to Christ, but so that he could more effectively control them. This caused a split among the Brethren churches, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who resisted faced harsh persecution, many died in concentration camps.

When the war was over, an intense bitterness continued to divide the groups. There was much tension. But finally they decided enough was enough. Leaders from each group met at a

quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came together.

Francis Schaeffer, who told of this incident, asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. They confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to the power of Christ, and peace came upon them as a fruit of the Spirit. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred. (*Our Daily Bread*, October 4, 1992)

This is what happens when people yield to the reign of Christ. Things are brought together through reconciliation and forgiveness--and things are held together in peace. May it be so for us.