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Sermon 7.19.2018
GYPC

United in The Spirit
John 14:15-17

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”

(Prayer)

(Smack the podium or stomp)

“Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?”

That's how it started. I was in high school at the time and attending a once a month bible study at lunch time, located just off of campus. Every Bible study a group of parents would bring in a speaker in give an inspirational speech, or cover some topic. This particular day, they had brought in a missionary from Eastern African. “Do you believe in the holy spirit?” We were a room full of awkward uncomfortable white kids, we had clue how to respond.

“I said do you believe in the holy Spirit? Say it with me” he said

“I believe in the holy spirit”

“Say it louder, like you actually mean it.”

“I believe in the holy spirit”

“Louder”

“I believe in the holy spirit”

“Louder!”

So we yelled “I believe in the holy Spirit!”

“Yes” he said in a quite voice, “but do you know the holy Spirit.”

Do you know the Holy Spirit?... Do we know the Holy Spirit?

You see I believe our church has a problem. We have a serious problem. We have hundreds, if not thousands, if not millions of people sitting in our churches, serving in our churches, maybe even leading our churches, who may believe in the Holy Spirit, but who don't know the Holy Spirit. They are perfectly content telling you that the Holy Spirit exists, they're happy to acknowledge to tell you the Holy Spirit is part on the Trinity. But the moment you ask do you know the Holy Spirit? They don't have an answer. And so I ask, Do you have a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit? Are you filled with the Holy Spirit, in a way where you aren't afraid, where you aren't ashamed, where you are willing to put yourself out there to be used by God, whenever, wherever, for whatever God might have in store for you, because you're fueled by the Spirit, and there's a fire burning down inside you.

You see, I believe our church has a problem. And it's not that we need more issues, or more soap boxes, or more hot topics, or more highly charged debates, or more sides to take, or more sub-denominations where everyone agrees with us. But... But what we need is more Spirit, More people in touch with and on fire for the Spirit. What we need is a generation of believers to rise up as Spirit filled leaders, Amen.

As we spend time together this week, our theme is “United We Go” And each day we will be focusing on one of these words. This morning we are focusing on the word, united. And as I thought and

prayed on this word, united, I began to realize that for us a followers of Jesus, it is remarkably easy to misunderstand the word united. And so, what I want to do this morning is take some time to talk about not just what exactly we are united in but how to be united. You see the thing is there are so many things today that you can get behind or stand against. You pick the issue, you can find people people passionately behind either side. And I really struggle with this, I really do. Not because I'm convinced one side is right, or because I believe my opinion on any issue is somehow more important than any of yall's, or even because I think we all have to agree, which I don't, but because such a divisive way of doing life together simply isn't biblical. We can't take this (hold up Bible) and find a place where God speaks to us and says, oh hey check out this spot where everyone was at each other's throats, I was so pumped they were at each other's throats, that was my plan all along(sarcastic tone)! The word shows us plenty of times where people are divided and it never turns out good. But whats more, when God speaks to us about unity, he does so in terms of being united around something. And that thing, that core to be united around, is not some issue or topic, but rather it is the Spirit as we see in Ephesians 4. We are called to be united in and around and through a single thing which is the Spirit...the Spirit! And anything we think we are united in that doesn't first and foremost contain the spirit isn't unity at all. In all honesty, it's just us finding a group of people we all agree with. And so as we zone in on this word and this concept of being united, what I want us to do for just a moment, because I know we all have causes that we are behind that we think are the most important things in the entire world, is to just let them go for a few minutes and really dig into this concept of being united existing first and foremost with the Spirit. So that when we talk about this word, United, today and hopefully for the rest of this week, we aren't thinking about the issues we stand for but the Triune God, specifically the Spirit.

I love how Jesus puts in John's gospel, which was our reading for today, "If you love me..." Which I pretty sure all of us here can agree we love Jesus, "you will keep my commandments..." Ok that's actually crazy hard to do, but we love Jesus and so we're gonna do our best and try. "And I will ask the Father and *he will...*" Not he might. Not he'll think about. Not if you're lucky. Not if your chosen. But HE WILL. "give you another Advocate (or the Spirit), to be with you forever."

What we have to do, is realize God's wants to be united with us and we should want to be united with God as much as he wants to be united with us. And the way we are united with God is not by picking some platform, or some issue, but by choosing to be united with he Spirit, because the way God unites with us is through the Spirit. God's like I'll show you unity! You love me? You're keeping my commandments? Good, boom, whammy, Spirit, one person of the Triune God, living, dwelling within you. And the Spirits camping out inside us, getting comfortable and we're like ummm how long you gonna be here, a day? A week? A month? And Jesus is like, ummm how about forever! You know that's why I said in John 14 to be with you forever! You see we don't understand this concept of unity of being united. God does! And so when God talks about being united, God's not talking periods of time, God's talking forever.

The challenge for us is there are a lot of us who have lost our connection to the Spirit, not because it left us but because we lost our understanding of the Spirit. We made the Spirit an optional device rather than an essential member of the triune God. And so we chase after other things to be united be-

hind. And we try so hard to get united around concepts, or causes, or church culture. And the problem is those are all things, they are all for better or for worse some reflection of the world's brokenness and our feeble human attempts to try a change it. And God's up there looking down and in here looking out and shouting at us exactly what Jesus already told us, vs 17 "This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you." You can have the best intentions in the world but that's not going to work, you are trying to unite yourselves around something other than me. What I want you to unite yourself in first and foremost is me, the world's not going to understand it, it's not going to make any sense to the world, because the world doesn't understand. But you understand, you know truth, you know me, I'm with you forever, I am with you and I am in you. Unite yourself to me! Because the truth is anything we do apart from the Spirit is going to fail because we weren't designed to do anything apart from the Spirit. Let me say that again, anything we do apart from the Spirit is going to fail because we weren't designed to do anything apart from the Spirit.

So I ask the question what if we changed all that? What if right here, right now we all said, I want to be united with the Spirit. God's already trying to unite with me and I want to be united first and foremost with the Spirit. I want to get back to being in touch with the Spirit not in some weird of there it is, it randomly showed up kind of way. Not in I believe in the Spirit, because I've been told my whole life it exists and I like this Jesus fella and he told me about it. But because I know the Spirit. I know the Spirit of God has made it's home in me, and is with me, and abides in me. What would happen.

What could happen?

I look at our church, especially our church in America and Europe, where the numbers are on the decline, and I say what would happen if we made our priority to be united with the Spirit. What would happen if a new generation of young Methodist rose up as a Spirit filled generation? If our cry was simply, God I want to know your Spirit, I want your Spirit! What amazing transformation might God work through you and through us. Where we said, this isn't just gonna be about this issue or that issue but this is going to be about one thing above all others things. This is going to be about uniting with the Spirit of the Almighty, with the Spirit of the living God. Because we worship and follow a God who doesn't just reshape lives but can reshape the world.

In Ezekiel 36 God looks upon his people and says, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone." There are some of us here who have hearts of stone. There is a generation out there who have hearts of stone. And God looks upon us and says that's not what I want, that's not what I had in mind. Let me give you a new heart, a new Spirit, my Spirit. And what do we see in the next chapter, but the very Spirit of God, the very Spirit that God gives us to dwell in us, enter a valley of bones and raise those bones to new life. I believe that there is a revival coming that may have already begun, I believe God wants to see his church grow and flourish and reach new people. But I also believe the only way that's going to happen is when we fully give ourselves over and say God I want to be united with you, I want to know your Spirit, I want to lay everything aside and do whatever your asking me to do. You have given me a Spirit of truth, of power, of resurrection and I want to be united with the Spirit in absolutely everything I do. Whatever you want God I am yours.

I think the Spirit moves and works in powerful ways, so I want to share with you the story of Revive House Church, which is a network of house churches that we have planted in the northern Virginia area outside of Washington DC. And to understand where that story really starts you need to go back to the early fall of 2016. When my wife and I began a very simple prayer about what God was calling us to do. About if God was calling us to remain at the current church we were serving or if God was calling us to ask for a new appointment, for the Bishop to appoint us to a different church. And so we began this short and simple prayer, we just started praying daily, "Lord shape our hearts to your will." "Lord shape our hearts to your will. Now fast forward a few months to late January early February of 2017. The time came and in the midst of that prayer we said we think we should stay at the current church we are at. And the church we were serving said we want you to stay and so we thought it was over but nevertheless we continued to pray, Lord shape our hearts to your will. Lord shape our hearts to your will. Then a few week we sit down with my district superintendent and he says well there is a small possibility that you're not going to stay. The next day I receive a phone call from him and he says I'm pretty sure you aren't going to stay, the day after that he says its really looking like you aren't going to stay and then the day after that he calls again and says I can almost guarantee you at this point you are not going to stay. And so in the midst of this week from going all the way from staying, to practically promising we are moving, we just continue this simple prayer, Lord shape our hearts to your will. And so once we find out we are moving church and leaving the church we were currently serving, we are then offered a choice of whether or not we wanted to plant and start a new church or move into a church that already existed. And so we continued our prayer, "Lord shape our hearts to your will, Lord shape our hearts to your will." And opportunity to plant came up for a large church outside of DC, that wanted to start a new campus and so we continued to pray, "Lord shape

our hearts to your will.” And we went up to spend time with the lead pastor of that church. And we were honestly just going up because we wanted to be polite and nice, but really we were just looking for a reason and an opportunity to say no. And on the way back from that meeting we just continued our prayer, Lord shape our hearts to your will. Well after we said that prayer and continued to pray for weeks we realized that not only were we not supposed to tell that pastor no, but that was actually where God was calling us to be. So we took this opportunity to plant a new church and we were told it was in a growing area and that there was space available and the idea was we were going to plant a church in basically the way we plant 99% of churches in suburban America which is find a school, buy a church that fits into a trailer, find a group of people to set it up every Sunday and boom, you have a pop-up church. And so we began down that path and in the midst of that work there was something in my spirit, something in my heart that was saying this isn't right, this isn't what I'm asking you to do. So we continued this prayer “Lord shape our hearts to your will, Lord shape our hearts to your will.” And then in September of 2017, I was laying in bed getting ready to fall asleep and all of sudden I felt the Spirit speak in this moment, and the Spirit says “why cant you just start a church in your house, why don't you just start a church in your house?” And I just sat there with that and I didn't have anything to say, I didn't have any good reason not to. So I thought well what about if we start a church in our house but our house could only hold so many people? And so I thought, well I guess when that happens we would just start a church in another house and then another church in another house and then one after that and one after that. And we'll never ever ever ever have a building, we'll just only exist in homes and so I wrestled with this all night. And I just kept thinking about it. I thought about the people we had gotten to know and the people we had spent time sitting down with and talking to. And we had said what are you looking for, what are you longing for. And

I thought about all the people who had told us they were craving real relationships and they were craving a sense of community. How all the people around them and in their neighborhoods were putting up walls, or fences, or masks around their lives. Who were constantly feeling this pressure and living in a way where they were pretending that life was all good even when it wasn't. How people were longing for a space to be genuine, to genuinely care for each other. And I thought about how God's greatest commandment to us is to love God and to love our neighbors and how when are only interactions and participation in the church is to sit in a pew all facing the same direction, like how are we possibly able to love our neighbors much less the people sitting around us. And so I said what if we did church in homes, what if we did church in the way the Spirit was speaking to us and instructing us. Right, and then the challenge was to test this idea and to confirm it. And so I started sharing the idea with my friends and everyone I shared it with was like wow, I love that idea. And then I call one of my friends, who now is a pastor in South Carolina. I know there are people here from South Carolina, woo hoo. And he says to me, well first of all that's not a new idea, that's actually a really old idea. Because that's how they did church in the book of Acts that's how the church started. And we were like, Oh yeah, so maybe God's saying let's do church how we did it in Acts, that may be a smart idea. And then the challenge was to say how do I get this large bureaucratic structure that is the United Methodist Church, the very church I have chosen to serve within, how do I convince them to do something that at that time no other United Methodist Church in America was doing that we were aware of. And so we started praying, "Lord, your spirit is doing something here and doors need to be opened." And so I started having meetings, and there is me in my t-shirt and everyone else in their suits and ties, who sit in cabinet positions and on the Bishop's cabinet. And the whole meeting their expressions are completely blank and so you're just waiting to hear the answer no, and then all

of the sudden they light up, and say this is exciting this is new, go make this happen. And then the challenge became, oh now I actually have to do this thing. I'd spent months sharing and praying over this vision that Spirit had given me, and now we actually have to make this thing a reality. Well on the last week of November 2017 we launched our first house church, we launched Revive House Church. 10 People meeting in my house, that was our first house church. By February fo 2018 we had grown by more than double, which when you only have 10 people is super challenging, but we had gotten too big for one house and so we multiplied for the first time in February and now have 2 house churches, and now those are strengthening and the Spirit is just working in these incredible ways, forming people in disciples, teaching people what it means to actually love each other, and showing people what it looks like to actually do life together. And as we continue to work and aim for the fall the Spirit is continuing to open doors and we have the opportunity, the possibility to launch another 6 house churches. Do I know if all of those will be successful, I don't know, but I know the Spirit is working in front of us creating possibilities that absolutely can be a reality. 6 new house churches. We still are just a little fledgling movement but its continuing to grow and multiply and its this incredibly beautiful work of the Spirit. But it would have never happened had we not "God I just want to be united with your Spirit. Lord I just want my heart to be shaped to your will and what the Spirit is trying to do. My wife Alicia and I were just talking about this a few weeks ago, how in September of 2016, when we started pray, God what are you asking of us, what are you calling us to do? When we had started that prayer, little did we know what God was shaping our hearts for, that God was shaping us to pioneer and start and reach out and do something new, and that the Spirit was in the midst of this calling us, trying to unite us to itself so that it could do something through us and the people around us. What was new and what was birthed out of it we now the opportunity to share

about and speak to people about all around the world and share what the Spirit is doing. And none of that, none of that would have been possible, had we not united with the Spirit. That we could have picked any issue, or any hot topic, or that we could have picked the way it's been done over and over again in our context, and who knows what would have happened, but the Spirit was calling us to be united with it because it knew that God had will and it knew that God had a desire to do something new. And so when I look at the future of the church, when I look out on our generation, I don't think about what new issues lie near and dear to you, I don't think about what new issues will arise for us to take sides on, I think about what would happen if we surrendered our hearts and said I want to be in a deep personal, purposeful, passionate relationship with Jesus. And I want to follow His commandments, I want to love God, and I want to love my neighbors. And this power, this person of the trinity, this Spirit that dwells within us, I want to know that. And I want to be united to that. I want to be united to that and that alone. Wow, if we can get to that point, if we can let go and shed everything else, and say the thing I care about more than anything else, is to be united with the Spirit. What might God do through us. (x2). United with the Spirit we go. To light this world on fire with the good news of Jesus Christ, amen.