Psalm 133
1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!
2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.
3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

When I was in college two of my three roommates had a terrible disagreement. Voices were raised, and they almost came to blows on several occasions. For days the belligerence continued until it became clear that one of them was completely wrong. To his credit, he apologized and offered his hand in reconciliation.

The wronged party stared at the offered hand for a moment and then replied in a huff, "Hell! I'd rather be mad!" While he immediately chuckled and accepted the handshake, his humor in 1961 foreshadowed what today is accepted as a normal reaction in the settling of human differences: "We'd just rather be mad!"

Do you remember reading about the duels in which some of our forefathers engaged? Compared to suicide bombers, duels may seem a rather tame way of settling philosophical and political differences. For one thing, two persons put only their own lives at risk, and both go into it fully aware of the possible consequences. Still, it is a primitive and barbaric way of resolving differences.

In today's sociopolitical climate, however, I would not be too surprised to see a report about an old fashioned duel on the ten o'clock news tonight.

If I had to choose one word to describe today's American culture, it would be a challenge: but high on the list of possibilities would be the word, "disunity."

From the halls of congress, to Wall Street, to our systems of economy, education, jurisprudence, and health care, to the board rooms of the corporate world—and yes, even in the church—disunity increasingly is a primary trait. _America is a house divided_, and most people are acutely aware of Jesus' words in all three Synoptic Gospels: _**"And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand."**_ (MARK 3:26 NRSV)

We humans long for unity; but too often by unity we mean uniformity—conformity to a specific belief system or tradition or moral standard. And when we confuse unity with uniformity we virtually always set ourselves up for failure.

Humanity is broken. The Bible calls it "sin"—a condition in which people generally have set up their own needs, desires, and preferences as ultimate reality (which is a form of idolatry), and have assumed God exists to provide and sustain those personal needs, desires, and preferences. That brokenness is manifest at an individual level, but also in social structures such as families, groups and nations. And, yes, it has infected the church, as well.

We set ourselves up for failure because when broken humans don't find the level of conformity we desire, we too often resort to familiar patterns of manipulation and confrontation in order to enforce our own perspectives—to inflict them on everyone who disagrees.

There are at least three words that describe that reality: Wayne Self calls it a "supremacist" perspective.[1] It is defined in the Encarta Dictionary as

> *"a believer in the superiority of a particular group; somebody who believes that a group is innately superior to others and therefore is entitled to dominate them."*

Former President, Jimmy Carter, uses a second word: "Fundamentalism".

> "There is a remarkable trend toward fundamentalism in all religions—including the different denominations of Christianity as well as Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. Increasingly, true believers are inclined to begin a process of deciding: 'Since I am aligned with God, I am superior and my beliefs should prevail, and anyone who disagrees with me is inherently wrong,' and the next step is 'inherently inferior.' The ultimate step is 'subhuman,' and then their lives are not significant."[2]

There is yet a third word: Triumphalism, and its roots are deep. In a 2011 blog, SMU theology professor Frederick W. Schmidt described Triumphalism as…

> "…a desire for victory hardened into a mindset—the certainty that we are unerringly superior, fundamentally different from others. Triumphalism leads to a fatal loss of moral perspective. We begin to assume we are uniformly and universally unerring and we label *others* in universally and uniformly negative categories.
>
> "The only cure for triumphalism is an awareness of our own fallibility; a capacity for confession and self-criticism *(which, BTW are biblical values and principles)*; a sense of the shared threads of our common humanity; and the realization that, ultimately, there is only one who is 'other'—and that is God.[3]

Virtually no one other than a NAZI or a member of the Klan will admit to being "entitled to dominate" anyone else; but, the truth is that social and cultural domination is systemic in most all human cultures. It is infused in certain assumptions and expectations we take for granted, and, whatever it's called, it's increasingly difficult to deny or even to avoid.

Theologian Walter Wink says it's used to justify what he calls "the myth of redemptive violence." It enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world. To sustain that myth, Wink says (and I'm paraphrasing and summarizing from his book, *The Powers that Be*) we first locate all evil outside ourselves and assume we are "right". By extension, all else is "wrong". "Wrong" quickly mutates into "evil", and by ignoring or even denying our own evil, we can easily

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[1] http://www.owldolatrous.com/?p=369
[2] Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005) p. 30-31.
[3] https://www.smu.edu/News/2011/fred-schmidt-patheos-4nov2011

scapegoat others: the commies, the gays, the straights, the blacks, the whites, the liberals, the conservatives, etc.

The next level in "the myth" is the conviction that, since other ideologies are evil, they must be eliminated at all costs, and since we are right and good, we must prevail, no matter what. The result is an "ends-justify-the-means" ethic. And when the good guys—that's us—finally win (no matter by what means, regardless of ethical or moral considerations) humanity can re-establish a sense of goodness (however the good guys—that's us—define goodness); and all this is done without coming to any insight about our own inner evil.

That's not unity. It's dominance and intimidation and forced conformity.

_Of_ _course_ it's an extreme scenario!

Or is it?

It's extreme only by degree, and since the emergence of the conquest cultures 5,000 years ago it has been a dominant pattern of human interaction—especially in resolving conflict and resolving the eternal question of who will control a given relationship, be it one-on-one or global.

Control: the desire for which possibly is the precondition of all human disunity. It at least is the opposite of unity. Yet, lacking an effective model for unity, we humans too easily settle for conformity—which almost always must be maintained by force.

Today I'm beginning a series of sermons for those who are sick and tired of "business as usual". It's for those who volunteer in their community and take mission trips and serve on their church boards and generally try to make the world a better place and have written off the government or the political process as a workable resource in that effort. And it's for people who work a lot and don't have time to volunteer and can't take mission trips, but who still want the world to be better and are worried every time they turn on the news, whether it's MSNBC or Fox or CNN or whatever. These sermons will be offered as my attempt be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

My approach, of course, as a Christian preacher, will be biblical and theological. And since I believe with all my heart that I will be announcing an aspect of God's will as it relates to human interaction, it will be prophetic in nature.

While I have not found one comprehensive biblical model for unity, I have found seven biblical _principles_ which can be organized into a cumulative model.

I begin in absolute confidence that if these seven principles are applied faithfully, the result will be an experience of the unity we humans long to have—a unity that is promised in Christ.