“In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north.” Our opening hymn is a familiar “oldie,” at least it’s one I grew up singing. In 2019, the words take on new meaning. They sound like a description of the global world we live in.

Advances in technology and transportation transcend geographical and political boundaries. Satellites transmit instant news from the other side of the globe. Mass migration is changing the make up of the population of countries all over the world.

The world is and has been getting smaller for a long time. You probably remember the song, “It’s a Small World.” The “It's a Small World” exhibition was created by Walt Disney for the 1964-1965 New York World’s Fair. It was a huge hit. In 1966 it was shipped to Disneyland park. In 1971 “It’s a Small World” was recreated as one of the Opening Day attractions at Disney World here in Florida. Replicated around the world, it is considered a Walt Disney masterpiece.

Fifty-five years ago who could have predicted how small the world would become?

The hymn “In Christ there is no east or west” is loosely based on the morning’s scripture. Paul was writing to the Galatian church. As always, to understand what he was saying, we have to understand something about the context—starting with the fact that the early Christians didn’t call themselves Christian. There was no such thing.

They were Jews who followed Jesus because they believed he was the Messiah for whom they had long waited. One of the early church controversies was about church growth. There were Gentiles who believed in Jesus and wanted to follow him. But the division between Jews and Gentiles was huge and important and not easily overcome. The Jews were God’s chosen people; the Gentiles were considered outsiders, sinners who did not obey the law.
Could they join the church? Did they have to become Jews first? That’s exactly what some were saying, that Gentiles could only enter the church if they became Jews first. They had to obey all of the law, including the requirement of circumcision. That’s the debate that Paul was addressing.

His response was clear. The law was good and had a role as a “disciplinarian” or some translations say “tutor,” teaching right and wrong, and revealing human sin. But Christ transcends the law. In Christ, faith was revealed, and people were justified—that is, made right with God—through faith in him rather than through obedience to the law.

Paul then says something that is as remarkable as it is transformative. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Wow. Those were major social categories that divided people in Paul’s time. The divide between Jews and Greeks was one of the most significant socially and politically. Similarly, slaves and free, women and men described groups of people of unequal status and worth.

One commentator observed, “It is impossible to overstate the impact of [Paul’s] statement. Racial, religious, ethnic, class, and gender roles are deemed invalid. In a culture based on these divisions, with a careful order to everything, this is beyond radical.”

Of course, Paul’s words did not suddenly change the social structure. There were still Jews and Greeks. The slaves were not set free. There were still women and men.

The point is different. In Christ, these are no longer defining categories that determine how people relate to one another. In Christ, human relationships are transformed. In Christ, we are ONE. In Christ, we are equal. In Christ, we are not defined by the group or category to which we belong. In Christ, we are defined by faith in God’s gracious love.
Almost every day I read or hear someone say that the times we live in are more divided than ever. I don’t know if that’s true historically, but I do know that we are polarized.

As the world grows smaller, people who differ by race, nationality, language, and culture are coming together more than ever, both here in this country and around the world. Different groups of people have different life experiences, and often see the world through different lenses, sometimes viewing the same events in diametrically opposed ways.

For these and many other reasons beyond the time we have today, it feels like the tension among diverse groups is increasing; vicious rhetoric and acts of discrimination seem to be on the rise. There appears to be a growing fear and distrust of “the other,” whoever “the other” may be. We live in a small, but divided world. We live in divided times.

What I feel called to share with you this morning is what I am wrestling with, what I am trying to understand and live in my own life. The question is: How does this passage about our ONENESS in Christ speak to our divided times?

Who are the Gentiles among us to whom we’re saying—indirectly or directly—you have to become like us to be one of us? Who are the slaves among us who live in prisons of poverty, violence, and oppression? Who are the women among us who still live as second-class citizens? What are the categories that we use today to divide ourselves one from another?

What would it mean for us to hear Paul say: In Christ, there is no longer conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat, progressive or evangelical. There is no longer citizen or immigrant, legal or illegal, black or brown or white. There is no longer American or Mexican or Chinese or Somalian. There is no longer rich and poor, elite and not-elite. There is no longer male and female, gay and straight and transgender. In Christ, all of the human categories we use to divide ourselves are removed; all of the barriers we erect are taken down.

In Christ, we are one. In Christ, we are equal. In Christ, we recognize that we are all created by one God. In Christ, we know that we are all loved by
God...loved equally by God. **In Christ, there is no “other.”** In Christ, there is no other.

We’re hearing the message today through Paul’s letter. But it is entirely consistent with Jesus’ ministry. There was no “other” for him—no person of any group or status—to whom Jesus did not show God’s love.

Of course, saying that we are one in Christ does not dissolve human categories. It does not make us the same or cause us to suddenly think alike. (We wouldn’t even want that.)

But believing “In Christ, there is no other” can transform our relationships. We can accept and love and listen and speak to one another differently if we start from the premise that we are one in Christ. We can treat one another differently and learn from one another, and yes, we can experience the oneness which is ours in Christ.

At the Women Engage! discussion on Thursday, one of the women shared a quote from John Wesley: “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?”

I considered a subtitle for this sermon, **Unity in Divided Times: Gift and Challenge.**

I believe the possibility...the hope...the vision...the promise of our ONENESS in Christ is a gift, a gift we desperately need to receive, accept, and embrace in order to break down the barriers that divide us.

It is also a challenge to live into that promise. I am not naïve. It is not easy.

It is a challenge to listen to people we know disagree with us. It is easier to hang out with people who think like us.

It is a challenge to confront our own biases and judgments of others. It is easier to think like the groups we belong to, whether we belong by choice or the status we have based on education, wealth or age.
It is a challenge to welcome strangers who speak a language we do not know. It is easier to insist that they become like us.

It is a challenge to find common ground for collaborating with people whose values we oppose. It is easier to ignore them, to do nothing.

Our ONENESS in Christ is a gift we need and a challenge that we must accept. What would it look like to begin to experience this oneness?

In her book, *The Strength of the Weak*, German theologian Dorothee Sölle recounts the story of a rabbi who asked his students how one could recognize the time when night ends and day begins. “Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?” one student asked. “No,” said the rabbi. “Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?” another student asked. “No,” said the rabbi. “Then when is it?” the students asked. “It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or your sister there. Until then, night is still with us.”

I have been speaking about our divided times in a very general way. I believe that the divisions around us are so evident and painful that you know what I am talking about.

But I want to close with a few words about the church. The Christian church itself is divided. The church is divided in all the ways I’ve already mentioned, but also in other ways—theological, sociological, and even political.

Even within the context of individual church communities, there are frequently divisions which separate people from each other. I find that sad, but also entirely predictable. We’re human. We’re diverse. And sometimes that leads to division. But—and this may sound strange—I also find it kind of wonderful. It means that each individual community, including this one, has the opportunity to practice, if you will, to learn and live into the promise of our ONENESS.

In Christ, whatever the dividing lines among us here at NUCC—and I am new enough that I can honestly say I don’t know what all of them are—whatever the divisions among us, in Christ, they are overcome. We are
called to welcome all, however alike or different from us they may be. And we are invited to know each other, to value each other, to love and care for each other because of our unity in Christ.

If there is any place or setting or institution in which people can overcome the barriers that separate them, it has to be the church. Here the human categories that divide us are overcome because we are called to regard each and every person as a sister or brother. In Christ, we are one.

The wonderful part is that this “human laboratory” where we can practice and learn what it means to be one in Christ can then be a model for others outside the church. Experiencing our oneness in Christ here empowers us to move beyond our doors to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world, helping the world to overcome all that divides us from one another and from God.

In this ever smaller world in which we encounter more people who are different from us, in which fear of “the other” is growing, the gospel message is clear and unequivocal: “In Christ there is no other.” This is a gift and a challenge. Amen.