

One

Ephesians 4:1-6 John 17:18-23

Unity is one of the most important threads in the New Testament and a critical necessity for Christ's church. Especially these days. Because there is so much *disunity* all around us.

Therefore, *our* unity as Christian believers is of utmost importance right now, not just for our sakes and for the church's sake, but for the sake of our witness, and for the good of society. The world needs God's people—people who are salt and light. That is, people of good and positive influence, and, therefore, people who are uniters and not dividers. And our Christian unity as sisters and brothers in Christ is the starting point. And not just here at MPC, but across lines of denominations and traditions and cultures.

We heard the first text that speaks beautifully to this from Ephesians 4. Now, we turn to John 17 where, in a rare occurrence, we are let in on the content of one of Jesus' prayers. We are told that Jesus often prayed, but we aren't let in on what he prayed, except for two instances: in the garden of Gethsemane, *and this prayer in John 17*. And because John lets us in on Jesus' prayer—in a fair amount of detail—that tells us how important it is. I'm reading only part of it...

John 17:18-23

¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

²⁰ I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

A few years ago, following an NBA playoff game, an all-star basketball player was being interviewed, and was bragging about his skill and how he's carrying the load for his team. The reporter recited the old cliché: "You know, there is no 'I' in "team." To which the basketball player said, "Ya, but there is an 'I' in 'win' and this team can't win without me." No shortage of ego there!

We're talking about unity this morning, and yes, there is an 'I' in 'unity.' But there is also a 'you.' You (u) and I together! So let's talk about Christian unity.

Unity comes from the Triune God. We're told in the passage from Ephesians and elsewhere to maintain the unity "of the Spirit" (literally *from* the

Spirit). And in Jesus' prayer he makes it clear that Christian unity means not just *human* unity, but unity that involves and includes the Trinity—God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and us, and all believers. God our creator, Jesus our Redeemer, the Holy Spirit our sustainer and teacher are the bond, like glue, which binds the people of God together—in our life, and in witness and mission.

Think of this, in light of the trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in unity and community. That's what Jesus expresses in his prayer when he affirms, "I in you, and you in me." God is one, and oneness proceeds from the triune God: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Spirit," as the apostle Paul points out. So, unity is *God's* nature.

What the apostle Paul and Jesus are both saying, then, is that unity is therefore inherent in the *church's* nature as well, since the triune God is among us and in each of us. So in a way, we can't *create* unity. It already exists, because the triune God is with us; so, unity is part of the deal. Therefore, we can only maintain what we already have. That's why Paul says, "*maintain*" the unity of the Spirit and not "*create*" unity in the Spirit. And btw, he says to maintain unity *through the bond of peace*; ie, we maintain unity by being irenic! When we do what makes for peace, we maintain the unity of the Spirit.

So, unity in the church is not just a good thing to have. Unity already exists; and it is essential to maintain it. Because the very nature of the Godhead is at stake. That's why Paul spends so much time in his letters begging the church to maintain unity in the body of Christ. Bible scholar Gordon Fee calls it "one anothering." Because the phrase "one another" occurs at least 60 times in Paul's letters, and a bunch more in the gospels. We are told to do a lot of one-anothering, in the Spirit. In our text from Ephesians, we have a good example: bear with *one another*. In other places we are told to encourage *one another*, build *one another* up, love *one another*. And on it goes.

This is Jesus' great desire for his followers: that we have unity. As we heard from John 17, on the very night he went to the cross, Jesus prayed for the church that he knew would be established after his death and resurrection, first through his disciples, and then the believers after them, and after them, and so forth. And in his prayer, Jesus didn't pray for large buildings or bigger budgets. He didn't pray for ministry programs or administrative finesse, or specific types of worship services. When he prayed, he asked for only one thing (John 17:20): "*I pray that all of them (that's us!) that they may be one. Just as you are in me and I am in you, may they be also in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I pray that they may be one, as we are one.*"

As we live out our life and calling as the people of God, and have an effective witness for Christ in the world (which is also part of Jesus' prayer: that our unity would lead to witness), then we need to take this prayer of Jesus to heart. When the church has unity, it is one of the most powerful forces on the planet for good, for the Kingdom of God. When the church is not unified, it is crippled and its witness is hampered.

So, unity is a gift we have from the triune God, which we are to maintain.

Now, a couple reflections on this unity, based, on our texts this morning:

1. We are a unified body because of a common calling. Paul: live a life worthy of the calling to which you were called. What is this calling to which we are called? First and foremost, it is the calling to belong to Jesus Christ and to follow the Way of Jesus. That is our primary calling; to belong to Christ and follow the Way of Jesus. Second (and inextricably linked to that) is the calling to be part of a community of faith, with others who share the same calling to belong to Christ. So, our calling is to belong to Christ, and by association, belong to one other. One body, as both Jesus and Paul put it. We are the body of Christ, not a random collection of individual Christians. We are a body, by calling, and we are united, spiritually. It's a spiritual reality that we are the body, together. That's part of what we acknowledge and

celebrate in communion. Therefore, none of us is part of Christ's church by accident. Ponder that for a few moments. You are not here (or there) by accident, but by God's calling and invitation, whether you are aware of that or not. And you and your sisters and brothers in Christ are unified around this calling, by the Spirit, whether you are aware of that or not. I guess I'm just naming it, and making us aware of it.

And by the way, that calling and unity extends around the world. The church is worldwide, not just on the corner of 84th and 196th. I have as much in common with sisters and brothers in Christ in Nigeria as I do with my Episcopal neighbors across the street, for example.

So, we are a unified body as one congregation, and at the same time we are a worldwide body, one in the Spirit. Therefore...

2. Our unity is *in Christ* and not simply in common experiences, common friendships, or common interests. It's a spiritual unity, primarily, and not just a social unity. Which is why our unity can be just as strong and maintained from home as it can from a building where we gather. Because the Spirit of God isn't confined to a church building, but exists with each of you where you are, keeping us all connected with each other. Maybe we can say that the Holy Spirit is the original and great wireless connection

between us! Spiritually, in Christ. We benefit from being together in person, and need that, definitely, but it doesn't necessarily hamper our unity when we need to be apart—whether because of a pandemic, or because of illness or travel.

Paul calls the church to unity by appealing to their common life *in Christ*—not their common experiences from their social lives or their common ideologies or ethnicities. People tend to gravitate together around social lives and common interests and backgrounds, which is natural. But Paul is very adamant here that the church is not merely a social group of people with common life experiences or common interests or common history. Our unity is based on our faith in Jesus Christ as the spiritual center of our lives, and on our unique calling and mission in the world, *no matter what our background or differences*.

A great Biblical example of this is found in Romans 16, which is nothing but a list of names of people Paul wants to greet. It's like he's reading the city of Rome's phone book. Most of us would skip over this chapter because on the surface it isn't very interesting.

But thank God for a British scholar named FF Bruce, who researched every name in that list. And you know what he discovered? That this was the weirdest

collection of people around at that time. This was anything but the “homogeneous unit” that church growth folks used to talk about back in the 80’s and 90’s—where you work to collect like-minded people from the same demographic group together, because they will attract more like-minded people from the same demographic group, and that’s how you grow the church. That’s the homogenous unit principle and strategy. Which is really an unbiblical practice. Because, the early church was a rag-tag bunch of people, much like Jesus’ first disciples. Much like in Romans 16...

What FF Bruce discovered in this list of names of people that the apostle greets, was that the Roman church was as diverse as it gets in the early church. There were aristocratic wealthy people (like this woman Phoebe who Paul describes as a benefactor). There were poor people. There were slaves (we know that because slaves were given different names than Roman citizens). There is a man in the list who was part of the theatre, the performing arts. There were tradesmen. There were Jewish converts. There were married couples; there were single people. There were people from Africa; there was a Roman politician in the list. There were political revolutionaries who wanted to *overthrow* people like the Roman politician. Talk about diversity! This is anything but a church of people who have a lot in common. But the one thing they all did have in common

was faith in Jesus Christ, and a calling to be *in Christ*, together, unified by the Holy Spirit. Why else would a group that diverse come together, and remain together?

So it's very important that we don't miss the "in Christ" aspect of our unity.

This is a spiritual unity among those who experience the same reality of Jesus Christ, even though we have different backgrounds and interests and... different opinions.

Speaking of different opinions...

Living into our unity doesn't mean that we always agree with each other on everything, or that we *have to* agree on everything. Yay! What it does mean is that where and when we disagree, we are learning how to love and how to listen, and how to talk with each other graciously, with respect and kindness (with humility, gentleness and patience to use Paul's words). It means we are learning how to forgive and reconcile when we do or say dumb things and hurt each other. And to keep our focus on Christ and the Kingdom and on our common vision and mission together—because in my experience, many church disagreements are almost always about lesser things, or when personal wants and preferences become more important than a common calling and mission. We need to do the work of finding and focusing on common ground, and what unites us.

Here is a saying worthy of a sticky note, or a framed picture to go on the walls of a church. This has been attributed to many different people, from Mother Teresa to Pope John Paul II to Ghandi, but who cares. It's a word from God for Christ's Church: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." In all things, charity. Love.

We are called to love. In Ephesians it says: "Live out your calling with humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love." Here and everywhere else in the New Testament, we are not asked just to be nice to each other. That's a really low bar! We're not asked to tolerate each other either—though sometimes that helps; if loving someone is a challenge at the moment, tolerance may be what is needed, temporarily. But again, tolerance is a low bar, and sometimes it's code for "I'll just avoid you." The higher bar we strive for, the greatest of the Biblical virtues, is love. To seek the best for another. "Let all that you do be done in love" is Paul's great admonition at the end of 1Corinthians.

So, how do we do all of this during an ongoing pandemic? What does Christian unity and love look like in the age of social distancing and mask-wearing? Well, first, it looks like social distancing and mask-wearing! Because that is the loving thing to do! 'Nuff said about that. We'll get past that in time. Hang in there!

Having hybrid worship with some people here—socially distanced and masked—and some people watching from home does not push the hold button on Christian unity. We maintain the unity of the Spirit and show love, as many of you have been doing, by making phone calls, writing notes, checking in on people, quietly and faithfully saying your prayers for others in the congregation, and for the needs of God's people in various places. You are praying for our country, and praying for the world. You are supporting organizations that promote well-being.

This is actually a hopeful time, because we are being united by God in new ways, like never before, even though we are sometimes separated or practicing social distancing. New or deepening connections are being made, here and around the world. And, I think we are all realizing and appreciating how much we need each other. This is all good.

One of the fun parts of having technological capabilities is that we can celebrate communion together. In person and on line we can all experience the blessing and unity of the risen Christ with us, and among us.

I Come with Joy