

Unity in the Spirit

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

Short pre-Pentecost series on the Holy Spirit—the gifts, blessings, and work of the Spirit. What the Spirit brings, to each of us and to the church and the world. This morning we're going to look at the Spirit's gift of unity. And it is indeed a gift.

Unity is one of the most important threads in the New Testament and a critical necessity for Christ's church. Especially today. Because there is so much *disunity* all around us in society. And not just politically. If you've been on Facebook or any social media lately you've seen people getting into heated arguments about wearing masks, or about social distancing. This virus isn't just affecting human bodies; it's taxing our emotions and our minds too! And in some instances our relationships.

Therefore I believe that *our* unity as Christian believers is of utmost importance right now, not just for our own 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 effect,

and people who are uniters and not dividers. And our Christian unity as sisters and brothers in Christ is the starting point.

So here are two texts that speak beautifully to this.

Ephesians 4:1-6

⁴I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

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 unity.

Unity comes from the Holy Spirit. We’re told in this passage and elsewhere to maintain the unity “of the Spirit” (literally *from* the Spirit). In two Sundays we celebrate Pentecost, when we remember and celebrate the Holy Spirit descending upon the first disciples who were gathered and waiting in Jerusalem, as Jesus instructed. And when the Spirit came, the church was powerfully united, and then sent out, empowered, as we talked about last week. And what a powerful witness they had—not only because of the Spirit’s power to strengthen them to be witnesses, but because of the unity the people were given. The Spirit is the bond, like glue, which binds the people of God together—in their life together, and in mission.

Along these lines, I’d like us to notice something in verse 3 of our text from Ephesians. Notice, Paul says “*maintain* the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” He doesn’t say “*create*” spiritual unity—or, “please try really hard to get along with each other.” He says, “*maintain*” that unity which comes from the

Spirit and binds you together in peace. So the first thing to be aware of as we talk about unity is that our unity is a gift, it's a reality. It's something we have already. We could read this line as saying, "Maintain the unity that already exists from the Spirit of God."

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 Spirit is among us and in each of us. So we can't *create* unity. It already exists, and when we receive the Holy Spirit, unity is part of the deal. Therefore, we can only maintain what we already have. Unity is normative for the church. So, it follows then that if there is disunity, it's abnormal. We can't create unity, but we can create disunity; human beings have been pretty good at that for a long time. We are called to maintain the unity we have from the Holy Spirit.

Think of this in terms of our physical body. The body is the dominant metaphor for the church in the New Testament and Paul makes frequent

comparisons of the church to the human body. Our body, with all its parts, is created to work in harmony. The body has inherent unity, generally speaking. So, when parts of the body fight against each other, or it fights against itself, that is abnormal and causes problems and physical dis-ease. So, our human body has inherent unity, physically. We don't create it. What we do is... *maintain* that unity in our own bodies by giving the body what it needs: nutritious food, regular exercise, getting appropriate rest, minimizing bad stress, and tending to our souls and the Spirit within.

Likewise, we maintain the unity of the body of Christ by giving that body what it needs: nutritious *spiritual* food, regular exercise (challenge and stretching experiences, exercising our gifts as Paul talks about in a few places), getting appropriate rest, minimizing bad stress. And, continually tending to our collective soul, the Spirit within and among us—even if from a distance right now.

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 Jesus-people 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: unity. As we heard from John 17, the very night he went to the cross, Jesus prayed for the church that he knew would be established after his death and resurrection. Jesus didn't pray for large buildings or bigger budgets. He didn't pray for ministry programs or administrative finesse, or creative 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, Father. 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."*

If we're going to be 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. And it sometimes makes the news, unfortunately.

That's why the devil's main ploy and strategy is to divide—to cause controversy and conflict and pettiness and competition. One of the New Testament words, or names, for the devil is diabolos (diabolical). As a verb it means "to divide." As a noun it means, "the divider." The root word was used to describe the splitting of wood. That ought to give us a nice mental image of what the devil does. The devil is called diabolos because the devil knows, when we're unified... look out! So the devil's goal and strategy is to divide.

So, unity is something we have from God, in the Holy Spirit. We are to maintain it.

Now, a couple reflections on this unity, based on our text from Ephesians:

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 live for him. That is our primary calling; to belong to Christ. Second (and inextricably linked to that) is the calling to be part of a particular 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 Paul puts 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. Therefore, none of us is part of the church by accident. Ponder that for a few moments. You are not here (well, 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 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. 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.

2. Our unity (from the Spirit) 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 our homes right now 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.

Paul calls the church to unity by appealing to their common life *in Christ*—not their common experiences from the world, or 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, with Christ added on to that. 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 studied 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 get 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. Back to 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 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 about personal wants and preferences.

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). The higher bar we strive for, the greatest of the Biblical virtues, though, is love. To seek the best for another.

So, how do we do all of this as we shelter in place? What does Christian unity and love look like in the age of social distancing? Well, first, it looks like social distancing! Because that is the loving thing to do right now! 'Nuff said about that.

Being sheltered in place does not push the hold button on Christian unity. Many of you are maintaining the unity of the Spirit and showing love by making phone calls, writing notes, checking in on people, quietly saying your prayers for others in the congregation, and loving your neighbors—your literal next door and

across the street neighbors. You are praying for our country, and praying for the world.

In a way, we are being united by God in new ways, like never before, even though we are separated. New or deepening connections are being made, here and around the world. This is all good. Coke commercial