

John 17:20-24

Ephesians 4:1-16

August 1, 2021

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE PARADOX OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

To the saints who are in Wallace and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What's that you say? You don't consider yourselves saints? Well, how about this?

To the holy ones who are in Wallace and faithful in Christ Jesus.

What? You still don't think this applies to you? Well, consider this – "holy" means "set apart by God for God's use." So, it follows that "holy ones" are ones who are set apart for God's use. And, if you call yourself a Christian and a follower of Jesus Christ, then you have been set apart for God's use. . .

. . . which is why the apostle Paul would write to the Ephesian Christians, "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called . . ." During the months of June and July, we heard what kind of life we are called to lead as followers of Jesus Christ, in his Sermon on the Mount. It just so happens that the letter to the Ephesians continues to describe the kind of life we are called to lead as Christians, beginning with this description: "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:2-3)

Paul's plea to the saints who are faithful in Christ sounds a lot like the prayer Jesus offered for his disciples and for us the night before he died. Just imagine – Jesus was praying for you and for me, that we would lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one . . ." (John 17:20-23)

This week we received the summer newsletter from Dustin and Sherri Ellington, the mission co-workers our church supports. They are anxiously awaiting word about returning to Zambia to resume their work, but the COVID-19 pandemic is extremely dangerous in that country. The title of Dustin and Sherri's letter is "Living the Faith with Zest" and Dustin begins, "Dear Friends, Sometimes Sherri and I are asked what we find inspiring about Christians in Zambia." Dustin then lists three particular traits: singing their faith; evangelism and planting new congregations; and belonging to others and sharing. I read their letter in the midst of my sermon preparation and that third trait – belonging to others and sharing – jumped off the page at me. Here is a real-life example (which I have seen and experienced firsthand) of the unity in Christ

that Paul writes about and encourages us to live out. Let me share Dustin's words with you:

"The way I'm probably most challenged by the believers who surround me in Zambia is the extent to which they feel they belong to one another and thus share with one another. I think this sense of belonging to one another already existed before the Christian faith began to grow strongly in Zambia around 60 years ago; it's an African trait that melds well with being Christian. People have a deep sense of belonging to groups. This is part of why Zambians typically feel like being part of a church is about the best thing one can do in life, and why many feel that there is just nothing quite like getting to go to church and singing in church. No wonder many worship services last two, three, or more hours! [My note: been there, done that!]

"This sense of belonging prods Zambian Christians to be generous in a way that can inspire us in the U.S. Most people on the edge financially. And yet, they are so quick to contribute once they know of a need. Under normal circumstances, people are looked after because everyone belongs to other people. Time after time, our students even give up their limited scholarship money to help others around them who are in greater need, though it can mean they may then go without meals. Because they belong to one another, sharing is the way of life.

Wow! Can you think of a better description of "making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" in the body of Christ? Notice Dustin's last sentence, "Because they belong to one another, sharing is the way of life." That is Paul's sentiment in his letter to the holy ones who are faithful in Christ Jesus and in Jesus' prayer for all of us who believe in him because of the words of the disciples. We are called to a way of life, to a unity with one another and with God, that is rooted in our one, true God. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:4-6)

Our Christian unity is a gift from God, and it is a gift that is meant to be used. Remember what Jesus prayed? "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." (John 17:23) That sounds a lot like what Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16) and "You will know them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:20)

The paradox of Christian unity is that our unity is a gift from God, something we already have. However, our Christian unity is also something we have to work to maintain, something we have to aim for in our Christian lives. This paradox of Christian unity is a great example of "use it or lose it." As one writer has put it, "Unity is something we choose to do. The maintenance of unity requires 'every effort' on the part of the baptized – where diversity in life and practice is honored – where there is recognition, acceptance, practice, and celebration of gifts given to the community for building up the body of Christ."¹

Remember that remarkable trait of Zambian Christians who consider themselves to be part of one another and are quick to share? Think about that as you listen to this description of one of the foundations of our Presbyterian Church. Certainly, this sums up what it means to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which we are called” – “Unity is God’s gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. Just as God is one God and Jesus Christ is our one Savior, so the Church is one because it belongs to its one lord, Jesus Christ. Because in Christ the Church is one, it strives to be one. To be one with Christ is to be joined with all those whom Christ calls into relationship with him. To be thus joined with one another is to become priests for one another, praying for the world and for one another and sharing the various gifts God has given to each Christian for the benefit of the whole community.”²

If we don’t make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we may very well end up like the Chicken Leg Church. The story is told of a church in which two brothers maintained a years-long disagreement about predestination. One Sunday after worship, during dinner on the grounds, one brother picked up a chicken leg, pointed it at his brother, and said, “It was predestined before the foundation of the world that on this day, at this time, I would eat this scrumptious chicken leg.”

His brother, who had a very different interpretation of predestination, snatched the chicken leg out of his brother’s hand and threw it on the ground. Just then, a dog trotted up, grabbed the chicken leg, and ran off. And the one brother said to the other brother, “Now your chicken leg stinks, and so does your theology!” The church split – and that’s the story of the Chicken Leg Church!

It’s a funny story, but all too true. Christians do a pretty poor job of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in the churches. We find all kinds of things to disagree about and split up over. Instead of celebrating the diversity of God’s people and God’s gifts, we exclude people and don’t appreciate their gifts. When we do that, people won’t know us by our fruits or by our love. People won’t look at who we are and what we do and know that God sent Jesus and that God loves them. Then the body of Christ won’t be healthy or working properly or growing in love.

The 2020 + 1 Summer Olympics have already been full of drama and inspiring stories. Team Jamaica gymnast Danusia Francis tore the Anterior Cruciate Ligament in her left knee before the Tokyo Games. This injury knocked her out of competing in some events, but she performed for eleven seconds on the uneven bars. Russian male gymnast Artur Dalaloyan had surgery three months ago to repair a torn Achilles tendon, yet he still performed as a member of the gold medal winning Russian Olympic Committee team. But you could see the pain and effort in his face when he stuck his landings on the floor exercise.

That’s the same imagery Paul uses to describe the importance of our working hard to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. A healthy ligament attaches bone to bone, provides support and structure for the body, and keeps the bones and body stable. In the same way, Paul writes, “we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit

together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." (Ephesians 4:15b-16).

Last Sunday we heard about building our lives of faith on the sure foundation of Jesus Christ. Today we hear about being a part of the body of Christ, who is the Head of the Church. Both ideas are summed up well in the great hymn:

*Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and cornerstone,
chosen of the Lord and precious,
binding all the church in one;
holy Zion's help forever,
and our confidence alone.*

That's the paradox of Christian unity. We are one in the Spirit because God has made us one in Jesus Christ. At the same time, we must make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Friends, let's get to work!

Let us pray: Jesus Christ, our Lord and our brother, you have called us to be your one Church. Make us one in our faith and hope, and one in our loving service. Make us one in worship and in daily living. Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to make us one as you want us to be. We ask this, Jesus, for you are our Lord and our Savior forever. Amen.

NOTES

¹Richard F. Ward, "Ephesians 4:1-16: Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 307.

²Book of Order 2019-2021, F-1.0201, The Authority of Christ," (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019),