

Christian Unity

Preached on Trinity 17
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Oct. 4, 2020
Ephesians 4: 1-6

Today's reading from Ephesians comes right after the one we looked at last Sunday. Paul has spent the first three chapters of this letter explaining the mystery of God's eternal purpose for the world as it's being worked out in history. He's given us all the theory, he's even given us the prayer he prays for his converts, and now he goes on to speak about the practicalities of living out this spiritual reality.

But before we look at that, let's think back to what we've already discovered in Ephesians. Paul begins this chapter by reminding his listeners of the calling that they've received. What is the major task confronting the church? What is the goal towards which we should be working? Part of it, from Chapter 1, is that we're to be blameless and holy in God's sight, and live to His glory. Likewise, in Chapter 2, we've been created in Christ Jesus for good works which God has prepared for us. But that is only an adjunct to the real calling that Paul is talking about here. We encountered it last week in Chapter 3, verse 10. Paul says that he has been given the grace "to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God" should be made known to the rest of creation. That is our calling as His Church. Go back further to Chapter 1, verse 10. God's plan for the world, and in particular, for the Church, is that all things should be brought together under one head, even Christ.

The calling which we've received is a calling to be the new people of God bound together in unity under Christ; and so Paul goes on to outline how being the new people of God is to be worked out in the concrete realities of life. In brief, we are to be a holy people, set apart to belong to God, and therefore showing by our life a purity and righteousness that befits the people of God.

But one look at the fractured state of the Church seems to reduce much of what Paul says to mere "pretty words." We Christians are a sadly divided people, and it should not be so. The history of Protestantism, especially, is the story of dispute, disagreement, and division. For example, in the United States alone, there are some 250 different denominations and fellowships of Baptists. We Christians are Catholic and Protestant and Orthodox, pre- and post-millennial, Arminians and Calvinists, traditional and contemporary, conservative and liberal, and so on and on.

It is part of the human condition to have differences. What requires real wisdom and discernment is how we treat those differences. How important are they? Maybe they are vital, or maybe fairly serious, or maybe just reflecting a difference of emphasis. Is there any room for compromise, or nuance, or an enlarged and more adequate perspective? One big problem facing our churches today as well as society as a whole is polarization. There was a time when a Christian could argue for a position in politics, for instance, that would go some distance in a

conservative direction and at the same time defend some policies given the label “liberal.” That is much more difficult today. Now we are all forced to be “all in.” You cannot accept several points from the Right and some others from the Left. It’s all or nothing. Any divergence from the party line and you are a traitor or sell-out.

It is ironic that in a culture that elevates individualism to god-like status, we have such pressure toward group-think on both ends of the political spectrum. Is there no desire to seek some understanding of the other side? Imagine if a marriage were approached this way. It would dissolve rapidly. But, for a marriage to work, husbands need to listen to their wives and wives to their husbands. Men and women often have different ways of approaching issues and characterizing them. Both their views need challenge and modification. Do you really want everyone to approach things *exactly* like you do, with your various limitations and blind-spots? I certainly wouldn’t want a world full of people like me. There is so much I haven’t encountered, so many perspectives of which I am ignorant, so many skills I don’t possess. We need people who think inside the box and people who think outside of it. We need people who affirm the status quo and those who challenge it. Our views become better defended and articulated when challenged. If there is no conflict or push-back, we can have a system ossify and become quite unjust. But having too much experimentation leads to instability and no clear way forward.

All this is to say, as the well-worn cliché goes, “it takes all kinds.” This is not to minimize the deep fissures that plague our society; but it is a plea to get out of our various bubbles occasionally and try to listen to other views without some talking head telling us what we should think. This goes for the Church as well.

Paul appeals to Christians to act with integrity, to live out their faith in everyday practice. We are to conduct ourselves in a way that is worthy of our high calling as Christians. Sometimes we use the term “calling” as a special calling to full-time Christian ministry. But we are all called to follow Christ in a worthy way, no matter what our profession or position in life. And Christ very much desires our unity so we can effectively be His Body on earth.

In order to maintain this unity, we need to be “completely humble and gentle; ... patient, bearing with one another in love.” (4:2) Even though this is somewhat familiar ground, it bears further attention.

We are to be humble, and so not having a high opinion of our wisdom or moral excellence. As you are probably aware, humility was not considered a virtue in the Hellenistic world. The Greek adjective translated by “humble” is used in company with the Greek adjectives which mean slavish, ignoble, of no repute, cringing. Hence, humility was often looked on as a cowering, servile, ignoble quality; and yet Christianity sets it in the very forefront of the virtues. Whence then comes this Christian humility, and what does it involve? Christian humility comes from self-knowledge. St. Bernard said of it, “It is the virtue by which a man becomes conscious of his own unworthiness. in consequence of the truest knowledge of himself.” And true humility comes when we face ourselves and see our weakness, our selfishness, our failure in work and in personal relationships and in spiritual growth. Christian humility comes from setting life beside the life of Christ and in the light of the demands of God. God is perfection, and to satisfy perfection is impossible. Self-satisfaction depends on the standard with which we compare ourselves. If we

compare ourselves with some caricature of someone whose views we find detestable or ill-informed, or whose achievements and status we find unimpressive, we may see ourselves as superior. But the Christian standard is Jesus Christ and the demands of God's perfection. And against that standard there is no room for pride. Humility does not mean always running yourself down; it really involves not thinking of yourself much at all, but focusing on Christ. There is another way of putting this. We can say that humility comes from the constant sense of our own creatureliness. We are in absolute dependence on God. We are creatures, and for the creature there can be nothing but humility in the presence of the Creator. Christian humility is based on a true appraisal of who we are. When we "glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:3), rather than in ourselves, we can have true humility. And that humility is required to keep unity in Christ's Church.

The Greek noun translated "meekness" or "gentleness", as we've seen before, means submissive to the will of God, teachable, not too proud to learn. What throws most light on its meaning, however, is that its adjectival form is used of an animal that has been tamed and brought under control. Therefore, the person who is meek or gentle is the person who has every instinct and every passion under perfect control. It would not be right to say that such a person is entirely self-controlled, for such self-control is beyond human power; but it would be right to say that such a person is God-controlled. Jesus exhibited perfect meekness, and people were attracted to him. He did not come across as cringing or cowardly.

The Christian must have what could be termed an undefeatable patience, what the King James Version calls "long-suffering." Christian patience or forbearance is the spirit which will not be broken by any misfortune or suffering, by any disappointment or discouragement, but which persists to the end. It is the spirit which bears insult and injury without bitterness and without complaint. It is the spirit which can suffer unpleasant people with graciousness and fools without irritation. In other words, Christian patience is treating all people, friend and foe alike, as God treats us.

All humans are resistant to change. Change is hard and takes time to get used to. We're in a hurry for others to adopt our point of view or "get their act together," but when it comes to our own lives—well, we just need more time. We must extend to others the same kind of patience that we wish them to extend to us. Patience is one of the core Christian virtues and is vital to Christian unity.

And last but not least is love. This is not sentimentalism or easy affection. It describes the particular quality of Christ-like, unselfish love that looks out for others' needs rather than one's own. Love is the last quality in Paul's list of essential attitudes for unity, but the most all-encompassing. Aquinas called it the form for all the other virtues.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13)

Love or *agape* is the ability to retain unconquerable good will to the unlovely and the unlovable, towards those who do not love us, and even towards those whom we do not like. Love is that quality of mind and heart which compels a Christian never to feel any bitterness, never to feel any desire for revenge, but always to seek the highest good of every man no matter what he may be.

These four great virtues of the Christian life—humility, gentleness, patience, love—issue in a fifth, peace. It is Paul's advice and urgent request that the people to whom he is writing should eagerly preserve "the sacred oneness" which should characterize the true Church.

Peace may be defined as right relationships between human beings. This oneness, this peace, these right relationships can be preserved only in one way. Every one of the four great Christian virtues depends on the obliteration of the rapacious ego. So long as it is at the center of Christians' lives, pushing its self-serving agenda, peace can never fully exist. In a society where self predominates, people cannot be other than a disintegrated collection of warring factions. But when this fleshly self is crucified and Christ springs to life within our hearts, this enables the growth of peace, of the oneness which is the great hall-mark of the true Church.

Paul goes on to set down the realities on which this Christian unity is founded.

(i) There is one body. Christ is the head and the Church is the body. No brain can work through a body which is split into fragments. Unless there is a coordinated oneness in the body, the designs of the head are frustrated. The oneness of the Church is essential for the work of Christ. Now as to whether this requires some administrative unity, I am not sure. But at minimum, inter-communion agreements are worth pursuing in some cases. Let us at least begin with a common love of Christ and of each other.

(ii) There is one Spirit. The word translated "Spirit" means both spirit and breath; it is in fact the usual word for breath. Unless the breath be in the body, the body is dead; and the vitalizing breath of the body of the Church is the Spirit of Christ. There can be no Church without the Spirit; and there can be no receiving of the Spirit without prayerfully seeking him.

(iii) There is one hope in our calling. We are all proceeding towards the same goal. This is the great secret of the unity of Christians. Our methods, our organization, even some of our beliefs may be different; but we should all be striving towards the one goal of a world redeemed in Christ.

(iv) There is one Lord. The nearest approach to a creed which the early Church possessed was the short sentence: "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:11). As Paul saw it, it was God's purpose that there should come a day when all men would make this confession. Christians are joined together because they are all in the possession and in the service of the one Master and King.

(v) There is one faith. Paul did not mean that there is one creed. Very seldom indeed does the word faith mean a creed in the New Testament. By faith, the New Testament nearly always

means the complete commitment of the Christian to Jesus Christ. Paul means that all Christians are bound together because they have made a common act of complete surrender to the love of Jesus Christ. They may describe their act of surrender in different terms; but however they describe it, that surrender is the one thing common to all of them.

(vi) There is one baptism. In the early Church baptism was usually adult baptism, because men and women were coming direct from heathenism into the Christian faith. Therefore, before anything else, baptism was a public confession of faith. There was only one way for a Roman soldier to join the army; he had to take the oath that he would be true for ever to his emperor. Similarly, there was only one way to enter the Christian Church—the way of public confession of Jesus Christ.

(vii) There is one God. He is the Father of all. The greatest thing about the Christian God, is not that he is king, not that he is judge, but that he is Father. The Christian idea of God begins in love. Furthermore, He is above all. No matter what things may look like God is in control. He is through all. God did not create the world and set it going as a man might wind up a clock and leave it to run down. God is intimately involved in His world, guiding, sustaining, loving it. Finally, God is in all. He is present everywhere.

If we keep these things in the forefront of our minds, and meditate on them, perhaps we Christians can display that unity that Jesus prayed for.

In the Name...