

Christian Unity

Preached on The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

Sept. 26, 2021

Text: 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 is being worked out in history through his Church. 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. God's plan for the world, with the Church as the vanguard, is that all things should be brought together under one head, even Christ. The calling which we've received is a calling to be a holy people, a *new* people of God bound together in unity under Christ.

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. Our history is one of dispute, disagreement, and division. For example, in the United States alone, there are some 250 different denominations and fellowships of Baptists. And splits between ecclesial bodies aren't the end of it. Roman Catholicism, once appearing a stable monolith, is suffering internal fractures and strains as different understandings of "true Catholicism" go head to head, often with much acrimony. And Orthodoxy, that tradition most mysterious to Americans, has its own factionalism and ethnic separatism, even if unnoticed by most of us.

Now for many people, this is no problem. Since we in the West have become comfortable with ecclesiological relativism, the multitude of denominations, doctrines, disagreements, and factions is no big deal—in fact, it is a testament to our glorious diversity and freedom of belief. Let 10-thousand flowers bloom! We assume that our choice of religious affiliation is a function of the complex interaction of our upbringing, personality, and experience. We should therefore not be upset by all the many ways of being a Christian. Added to that, our religious outlook has long been undergirded by a neo-Gnosticism and anti-sacramentalism that sees private mental assent as central to faith, while the visible church body one chooses to join is salvifically irrelevant. So, in this environment, many will declare with utmost certainty that "God doesn't care whether we are Episcopalians, Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, or whatever!" In one form or another, this is the default belief of the overwhelming majority of modern American Protestant Christians, and many ecumenical Catholics, too. We are ecclesiological relativists; our choice of visible church affiliation is a matter of taste.

But what then of the "unity of the Spirit" Paul refers to? Well, we must find a way to domesticate that, for sure. Perhaps we can describe this unity as a general and reciprocated benevolence Christians extend to their ecclesial neighbors. After all, most of

us will grant that other groups are trying to do the Lord's work and this certainly seems like unity of a kind. Or, if we are concerned about the theological and moral disagreements between Christian groups, we might handle this by seeing the Holy Spirit as the ultimate customizer, granting assurance to every Christian of the legitimacy of whatever seems "true to them", even if in direct contradiction to what seems true to others. To more progressive Christians, the Spirit says one thing; to more conservative, another. Of course, this seems to make the Holy Spirit redundant; but heck, we are talking about religion, aren't we? The incoherent and paradoxical are a big part of the game, right? So maybe we shouldn't get hung up by rational considerations and remember that we are first and foremost good liberals, and so believe that religion belongs in the private realm of feelings, not the public realm of the rational and empirically testable.

But if we are serious about being faithful to Christian tradition, it is really difficult to accept uncritically this consigning of our Faith to the private and non-rational. Paul and the other Apostles were proclaiming something they believed had profound social and political—even cosmic—import. The Church was definitely a public entity. In Her original self-understanding She was not merely a club of the like-minded nor an umbrella term encompassing numerous denominations with discordant beliefs. A church consisting of numerous bodies out of communion with each other would have been a self-contradiction to the early Fathers. There was no such animal. But a homily is not the place to propose an answer to the vexing problem of whether a divided church can really be the Church. Instead, let us look briefly at how divisions might be prevented at the local level

Paul answers this early on in our reading. He says that our vocation is to walk "with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love..." First, we are called to be humble, not thinking that we have unassailable knowledge about what must be done. Humility is acknowledging how far above us God is, and realizing that our knowledge about the way forward is quite limited. The person exhibiting true humility will never say "I alone can fix it."

Second, we must also be meek. The contemporary understanding of a meek person is one who is weak, submissive, and easily imposed upon, or someone who is timid and retiring. Now the meek person does submit—but to the will of God. He realizes his total dependence on the Lord and this knowledge controls his approach to problems. The meek person is gentle and restrained, seeking to do the will of God and lacking that constant self-concern which rules in most people's lives. He does not seek to dominate or justify himself before others. What Paul has presented so far is nothing other than a call to imitate Christ. Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart." In other words, our Lord is meek and humble.

Third, we need also to forbear with one another, be patient with one another, have empathy with our brothers and sisters, try standing in their shoes. This requires getting outside of ourselves and not seeing our cherished attitudes and unexamined assumptions as the lodestar for all "right-thinking people." We desperately need God's grace to get

beyond our rather limited viewpoints. Forbearance means showing graciousness to those we find unpleasant or thick-headed. In other words, Christian patience is treating all people, friend and foe alike, as God treats us.

Fourth, and most importantly, we must love one another. Christian love looks out for others' needs rather than one's own. Love is the last quality in Paul's list of essential attitudes required for unity, but the most all-encompassing. It is the ability to retain unconquerable good will to the unlovely and the unlovable, towards those who do not love us, and those we struggle to be around. It is not an optional virtue in the Kingdom. It 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 everyone no matter what.

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.

This is threatened when God's people are not walking in lowliness and meekness, seeing others as more important. It is threatened when people set their own agendas on the throne, often claiming that this is God's will. Church divisions don't begin from heresy; they begin from people, blind to their ego, selfishness, and pride. Fractures don't occur because people have different views on things. They occur because people lack humility, see their own thoughts on some matter as beyond question, and don't have time for those who might disagree.

This can manifest itself in many ways and the fractures it introduces can be quite subtle. Still, the damage to the Body is real, even if not immediately visible. For example, if a person or group has attained dominance, they can preside over a pseudo-unity based on fear or apathy, often leading to submerged resentment and hopelessness on the part of those not wishing to rock the boat. In effect, much of a congregation becomes disenfranchised and therefore neutralized. Where their might have been real grappling with problems or an honest facing of a failure in a church's ministry, there is grudging acquiescence by those without power. Or perhaps someone needs to be in control, so he dismisses any ideas that are not his, or maybe just claims that all agree with him when they really don't. Or maybe the leadership of a church or jurisdiction wants stability above all else, finds change threatening, and so undermines any efforts to address new problems with new strategies. Church leaders are often prone to a prideful and self-important posture that shuts them off from seeing what is really there. They become enamored with their delusions and so cannot—or will not—see patently obvious institutional failings. Anyone who points them out is dismissed as a malcontent or hysteric. The list goes on and on.

But what all of these have in common is someone or some group placing its desires or fantasies before the health of the Church. They will often claim that they are defending orthodoxy; but usually they are only buttressing their own position using some appeal to

authority as a cover. Seldom do these people take a deep dive into the Faith; they don't even get their feet wet. Rather, they take what suits them, call it orthodoxy, and then exalt their rather impoverished understanding of it as "the final word". These behaviors might not lead to open dissension right away, but they sow the seeds.

Paul's words lead us to act against these destructive tendencies, to act with integrity, to live out our faith in the concrete ways discussed above. If these four virtues were truly practiced, churches would be full of people who respected one another, listened to one another, and learned from one another. Disagreements wouldn't lead to division, but rather honest re-appraisal. Healthy churches can weather disagreements; it is dismissing each other that weakens the Body.

If we conduct ourselves in a way that is worthy of our high calling as Christians, we might see more reunions and less fragmentation. If this loving approach works consistently at the micro-level of individual congregations, maybe the question of Christian unity at the macro-level might be taken more seriously. We might no longer be satisfied with this thin, vaporous, pseudo-unity we have come to believe represents the Body of Christ on earth.

In the Name...