

The Bottom Line on the Body of Christ

Sunday, August 1, 2021

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

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Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 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. 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. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, 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.

Paul's Ephesian letter presents us with two very popular themes: unity and diversity. His lofty and poetic language describing our unity is sweet to the ear. We also delight to learn of our diversity. Each of us is special and different from others as God has given us unique skills and abilities. This too is a topic which gives us joy. There is, however, a third theme which Paul introduces which gives much needed context to the first two, and that is *the Body of Christ* into which we are all joined. As we look closely at what it means to be the Body of Christ, we come to understand unity and diversity in their truest sense. It may be a sweet experience to revel in notions of unity

and diversity, but if our lives are to be truly changed, we must also embrace Paul's full teaching and what it means to be Christ's Body.

Our lesson begins with Paul celebrating the glory of our unity, and his language is a most elegant poetry. *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.* These poetic "ones" are lovely, but like many beautiful passages of scripture we can become so caught up in the beauty of the words that we miss the real meaning. I think of the "Love Chapter," 1 Corinthians 13, which speaks so elegantly of love—so elegantly in fact that most who hear it never get beyond the lovely poetry to consider the message. These words of Ephesians are often quoted against some sectarian group with the assumption that disunity is the problem of others and not a challenge to each of us. Over the years I have learned to become wary of unity movements, for too often the people launching an attempt to gather and unite various Christian groups end up starting their own new group and ultimately not helping the cause at all! True unity demands a deeper consideration.

Next Paul speaks of our diversity and the wonderful variety of gifts which God has given us by the Holy Spirit. *But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.* Each of us has been gifted in special ways. We know that all people are different and have different sets of skills. Along with the gifting of nature, God's Spirit does a special work within us. Paul mentions only a few of these gifts (more are discussed in Romans and 1 Corinthians) and the ones he mentions here are leadership gifts which are crucial to the Church. The study of spiritual gifts is a popular one as each of us finds a special delight in discovering things about ourselves and skills which we may not have yet recognized. The problem here is that we naturally enjoy self-discovery, and this search too easily becomes only about ourselves. God does not give us gifts for our own benefit, but for the service of others! As is true with the matter of Christian unity, our diversity also demands a deeper look.

Unity and gifts are important doctrines, but their real meaning and purpose becomes clear when we consider the third element of Paul's teaching: The Body of Christ. Paul's first mention of the word body seems to describe the Church as a gathering of people. *There is one body and one Spirit.* We commonly speak of a group of people as a body. For instance, a leader may have a group of assistants which they refer to as their advisory body. Paul seems to first mention the Church as simply a group of people, but he takes this notion of body further in later verses. *But speaking the truth in love, 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."* Now we are told that not only should we be united with each other as a well-connected body, but that we are joined to Christ who is our head. Just as the head

directs the body, so we are to be awaiting Jesus' command. This is the real and full context of our unity and diversity. We are to be united to each other and to Christ, and our differences and special gifts are not for our own convenience, but to be used to honor Christ our head and help others around us. The true meanings of our unity and diversity are only understood as we consider our being a part of the Body of Christ.

With this in mind, let us take a closer look at these themes—first unity. What does it mean to be united in and to Christ? I had mentioned Paul's lofty rhetoric in the matter of unity, but alongside of that beautiful poetry is some very gritty and real language of unity. *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.* Now Paul is speaking in very practical and meaningful ways. Be humble, be gentle and patient, and make every effort toward peace. *Bearing with one another in love* is quite the challenge, but this is what it truly means to seek unity. Imagine for a moment what it must have been like for Jesus to bear with his disciples. This was a difficult collection of strong personalities and differing opinions, and certainly our Lord's patience was tried on numerous occasions! If Jesus could get along with his disciples, even knowing that one was going to betray him, we can find a way to bear with others.

"Get along!" is the plain lesson. Our calling and witness of love to the world is to be shown by our getting along with our families, neighbors, church families, and even our foes. We are to care about one another, and this love should extend not only to those we know, but to the world! As we gather this Sunday morning, we pray for one of our own, as Valarie Weaver is now in Ghana assisting in a medical mission. Do we long to be united in spirit with the believers of Ghana? Truth be told most of us are hard pressed to find Ghana on the map, and our concern for this small and poor country is minimal. God's call to unity in the Church includes our need to get to know the world Church and to start caring, praying, and helping. I do not mean to imply that we care nothing for the world. We can rejoice that we have just raised enough money over the past month to send twenty-four beehives around the world through Heifer Project International, to help poor farmers find an extra source of income and food. This and other of our collections is an expression of unity with the wider world which is so essential to our walk with God. We do know how to reach out, but we can always learn to do much more.

Although the word is seldom used in the Bible, I love to remember that our call to unity is a command to live in *harmony* with others. Think for a moment what this means. When Christians differ on any matter, we may be hasty to claim a lack of harmony within the Church, but this may be far from the truth. What is harmony? Is it all singing the same note? Not at all! To sing the same note is anything but harmony. Harmony is when differing notes blend together to form a sweet sound. We too easily grow intolerant of differing opinions and presume that there is discord when we may be denying what actually could be harmony in the Church! We could all learn to be less afraid of and resistant to that which is different.

Along with this unity among the people of the Church is our call to be united to Christ Himself! *Until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.* We are to grow ever closer to Christ. We are to gain *knowledge* of Christ. Sermons, Sunday Schools, and daily devotionals are not there for our mere amusement. We are also urged to become wise and mature. We are to persist in love, and as we love we grow closer to Christ. This is work, but it is the best and noblest work we could possibly pursue.

The United Church of Christ, as our title implies, is founded on the notion of unity. Our motto, written on our denominational emblem and displayed in the floor mosaic in our narthex is from John 17:21: *That they may all be one.* These words are from Jesus' prayer for the Church, and his prayer was not simply that we be united to each other, but that we be united to God, just as Jesus was. When the United Church of Christ was founded in 1957 the traditional denominations were going strong and there seemed to be a strong spirit of unity. Greater Church unity seemed just around the corner. That unity did not happen as we had hoped, and now we live in a day of even more denominations and a whole new wave of congregations with no denomination affiliation. I do not believe that our United Church of Christ failed in our search for unity. Unity is always illusive. What we have before us is an even greater challenge in the seeking of unity than we first imagined!

The realizing of our unity is hard work, and time is wasting. I put forth the challenge to you all for greater unity. We cannot make perfect unity suddenly appear in the Church, but we can all take meaningful steps in the right direction. In the days ahead, resolve to draw closer to God. Perhaps this is through more prayer or time in the Bible. Perhaps this could be accomplished by finding more quiet time to be with God. Find a way to draw closer to another believer or to the Church. Make real contact with others. Offer encouragement or assistance. Let us be about the work of unity.

We are to be a people of unity with each other and with Christ. Similarly, we are to use our diversity of gifts and talents in a way which draws us closer to each other and to God. Let us build with our gifts. As Paul tells us that *each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.* This teaching compels us to discover our special abilities, and teachings on spiritual gifts are often popular Sunday school material for young and old alike. We love to learn about ourselves and to discover what makes us special, and this desire can lead to greater faith and service, or it can become a selfish indulgence. I have long had an interest in studying personality types. I have sponsored classes on this in the past and hope to do so again in the near future, and I know that I must be careful how I promote this study. It is usually helpful for us to gain self-understanding. For instance, one might lead a study on whether one is an introvert or an extrovert. An introvert is one who finds their strength through

thoughtful time alone. Their inner life of thought is usually strong, and they value time to think. Extroverts, on the other hand, find their energy and understanding by engaging the world around them. Their lives are more outwardly focused. God made both of these types of people, and each can serve in special ways. They may be different from one another, and an extrovert and introvert may not always find it easy to get along, but they need each other. It truly does take all kinds to make the world go 'round. Are you an introvert or an extrovert? It helps to know which one you are as you move along life's path.

One could use this knowledge in a selfish way, or at least a way which is not directed toward the help of God or others. I've known introverts who love to gather with other introverts and complain how the Church is a conspiracy of extroverts directed against them. (And I can even understand much of this reasoning!) I have heard people busily analyzing others as to their personality types. Such behaviors are of little real help in our call to serve. Then there are those who identify their personality type and gifts and use this understanding to improve their service to God and to others. These introverts may identify their own meditative tendencies and their special skills in matters of worship and the Church arts. Extroverts may come to appreciate the skills God has given them in reaching out to others and building fellowship and family. To know one's personality type and one's skills is a great resource, but only as we direct this knowledge toward making ourselves better servants are we truly using our gifts for Christ. Having informed us of our God given gifts, Paul makes it clear how these gifts are to be used: *to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*

We must be Church builders. All that we do must be directed toward building unity and wisdom in the congregation. What gifts do you have? I know. Now is when we all begin to poormouth and plead that we are utterly talentless, but God does not believe us. God has gifted each of us, so we dare not complain to Him that we are without any skills! What are your skills, and how can you be using them to build up to engage other people and to build up the Church of Jesus Christ? This is the question, and it should not be just an academic question. What real actions can you be taking in the days ahead to be using your skills for the service of Christ and others?

Paul is telling us all to be engaging one another, and this runs contrary to a culture which views Christian faith as a very individual pursuit of God and truth. But real faith engages and builds up others! Real faith works in groups! Many times, after a large fund-raising event, I will hear volunteers reflecting upon that group effort by joyfully telling how exciting it was to see so many people work together, each with a special task, and all working together to accomplish a great amount of work. Such testimonies offer both joy and a concern. It is wonderful to catch a vision of group cooperation. It is sad, however, when this is the only understanding of Church cooperation that some may have. Fund raisers are good, but God has called us to do more than fund raisers. Our choirs, consistory and our committees, Vacation Bible School and the Sunday

School and *Lunch with Luke* are wonderful examples of cooperative efforts creating unity and building up others.

We believers in the western world think too much of our faith as only an individual matter and not a group endeavor, and the ongoing COVID crisis has not helped matters at all. We continue to feel the need to separate from each other and stay safely isolated. May we all remember that if isolation and separation are necessary, this is not to be a permanent arrangement, for we need to be engaging one another, up close and personal. And as one of our own is now in Ghana serving the poor, let us also remember God's call to step out of our comfort zones as we seek to serve. Perhaps we should be considering whether we should be in Ghana next year.

Unity and diversity of gifts are popular themes which stir our hearts. Let us be sure that these themes also move us to be the Body of Christ. In seeking such service, we will find the highest joy.