

“We Really Do Need Each Other”¹
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Text: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

In the background of this sermon are thoughts gleaned by news reports of addresses to the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity during its recent meeting in Chicago.

I assume that by now many of you know the story of our Anglican sisters and brothers and their struggle over the approval of Gene Robinson, an openly gay clergyman, to be the bishop of New Hampshire. And you may have read that the threat of division in this worldwide body of over sixty million Christians over this action has led the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, to convene a special meeting in London next month to try to avert a schism in the body.

I also assume that many of you know that our own beloved denomination is in the midst of its own internal struggles; struggles that have consumed enormous time and resources and someday may very well lead to schism in our body. What you may not know is that at the same time as the Episcopalians were meeting in Minneapolis, a much smaller group of Presbyterian ministers and elders was meeting in Chicago to talk and pray together about the peace, unity, and purity of our communion. Called the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a classic Presbyterian title if there ever was one, this group was constituted by the General Assembly a little over two years ago to seek the mind of Christ in this difficult time.

Well, if all you know about these “goings on” is what you read in the newspapers and hear in church, you might be forgiven for asking a very pragmatic question: why are these church bodies trying so hard to stay together? Why can’t we just accept our differences and go our separate ways? What’s the big deal if Christians want to affiliate with “likeminded” brothers and sisters and disaffiliate with those who are “other-minded”? What’s at stake that the Archbishop of Canterbury would call together Anglican officials from all over the globe? Why does our own General Assembly go to such lengths to try to pursue the peace, unity, and purity of our communion?

You might be forgiven for asking what is a very good question, and this morning I would like to suggest that there are at least three reasons why—two are basically biblical and theological and the third is a bit more practical.

First. It matters that Christians strive to be one because God is one. The Bible is unequivocal on this. God is one.

Deut. 6: Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.

¹ Haberer, Jack, *GodViews: The Convictions that Drive Us and Divide Us*, title of Chapter 11.

Eph. 4: 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.

John 17 (Jesus is praying): "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...I 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."

Hearing these words of Scripture, how can a "divided" church say that it is faithfully following a "united" God? "Nothing angers God so much," John Chrysostom wrote back in the 4th century, "nothing angers God so much as the division of the church; even if we have done 10,000 good deeds," he says, "those of us who cut up the fullness of the church will be punished no less than those who cut up his body."² God is one and so, the church should be.

Second. Though the argument for just accepting our differences and going our separate ways sounds very appealing, it is based on a very faulty assumption. That assumption is that the church is a voluntary organization made up of like-minded persons.³ That, like the National Rifle Association or the Sierra Club, the church is made up of volunteers gathered around a unifying cause.

My friends, this is simply wrong. It's not biblical and it flies in the face of our Reformed confessional witness. The church exists, not because some well meaning, religious person thought it might be nice to join with other well meaning, religious persons. The church exists because Jesus wills it to exist, and because Jesus still chooses to be known in this world in a community which is not always like-minded, which is often far from perfect, whose life together is terribly messy, but who is nevertheless trying its best to live by his teachings.

As far as I can tell from reading the New Testament, there is no inkling in Scripture of this 21st-century phenomena we call "church shopping." As far as I can see, Scripture doesn't envision the kind of multiple-choice options we have today for choosing churches. And though we live in a consumer society and we Presbyterians are like everybody else, competing for "market share," the fundamental truth is that we don't choose to be part of the body of Christ. We are chosen for that. It's called the doctrine of election and it says that God does the choosing, not the other way around. And one of the implications of our election, one of the consequences of being a chosen one of God is this: we are thrown together with all of God's *other chosen ones*—placed in Christ's church and told to be one.

I recall some years ago preaching a sermon on that greatest of American high holy days, Mother's Day. I titled it, "The People We're Stuck With," and talked about what it is like to live and love over the long haul within our families—with people that we didn't get to choose, with people we're stuck with.

² Quoted in Achtemeier, Mark, *The Church and Its Unity*, Office of Theology and Worship, p.22

³ Haberer, Jack, *GodViews: The Convictions that Drive Us and Divide Us*, p.119

Well, I took some minor flack for that sermon and how negatively I portrayed family life. “I don’t feel like I’m stuck with my family!” some of you said. “What a blessing!” I replied. And I meant it. I am happy for those of you who never feel like a family member is somebody you’re stuck with. But the fact is in my experience, you are the exception.

The same thing can be said of the family of faith. Perhaps more than anything, Christ wants unity for his children—within his family. But opening ourselves to this gift—actually receiving Christ’s gift of oneness and living it out with all the other folks Christ has called into his church (with all the other folks we’re stuck with) is very, very difficult. We talk a good game about everybody being welcome at the Table of our Lord—until everybody shows up. Then we wonder. Living with and loving our brothers and sisters in Christ is very, very difficult. But it’s our job.

Allow me to offer one more reason why sticking with our sisters and brothers in Christ is vital, even though we vehemently disagree. This reason has less to do with theology than it does our growth toward spiritual maturity. It’s really very simple: if you affiliate only with like-minded folk and separate from “other-minded” folk, you will limit your growth toward mature Christian discipleship. Small, private, protected faith will remain just that—small, private, and protected.⁴ It will never grow up, never get any bigger than the individual or the group that produces it. And though human nature is to surround ourselves with people who look and think and talk and believe like us, we must resist this tendency with all our might. Because religion’s greatest error, repeated time and time again through history, is its attempt to domesticate God; to align God with our group, our values, our agendas; to reduce God down to a workable, manageable size. You may have heard the old quip, “God created us in God’s own image and we are still trying to return the favor.”⁵

Well, the God of Scripture is always far bigger than we think.

Isaiah 55: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”

The God of Scripture is high and lifted up, the God of the cosmos, from everlasting to everlasting! God of Europeans... God of Africans... God of Asians... God of Americans... God of a billion years ago... God of right now... God of a billion years hence.⁶

This is, in part, what was being prayed for in our text from last week when Paul asks that we might be given the power to comprehend the full scope of God’s love in Jesus Christ.⁷ And this is what other Christians, especially those who are different and with whom we passionately disagree, that is what other Christians do for us: they challenge us to widen our perspective... to deepen our insights... to strengthen our commitments... to venture out from our country and

⁴ Chatham, Jim, *Be Imitators of God*, a sermon preached at Highland Presbyterian Church, June 10, 2001.

⁵ I don’t know when, where, or from whom I first heard this.

⁶ Chatham again!

⁷ Ephesians 3:18-19

kindred and family home to a place where God will show us.⁸ In other words, to grow up into Christ.

Not infrequently someone will say to me, “I believe religion is a personal thing. I believe in God. I have faith, but I have my own ways of practicing it.” Though I’m too chicken to do it, what I want to say is, “That’s fine, but be careful. Such a small God is not likely to challenge you to anything bigger than you already are.”

Conclusion

Why are the Anglicans gathering in London next month? Why do Presbyterians so value the peace, unity, and purity of our church? Why should you—if you have a run-in with me or another member of this church—why should you do everything you can to reconcile yourself with that person? Does Christian unity really matter? It does to God. And the good news, which we heard so eloquently at the end of last week’s passage, is that God can do **in us** what we cannot in ourselves.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph. 3:20-21).

Charge

How do we do this? How can we open ourselves to the oneness and unity that Jesus so desperately wants for his body? Well, maybe this will sound trite and overly simplistic, but I think there are clues scattered throughout the rest of this chapter in Ephesians. Though we cannot create unity in the body of Christ, we can open ourselves to its gift. And we can do this by practicing the behaviors that are spoken of in this chapter. For instance, be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love, speaking the truth in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. And there’s more: put off falsehood and speak truthfully. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Do not let unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only that which is helpful for the building up of others and meeting their needs. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.⁹

⁸ A reference to Genesis 12:1-2

⁹ Ephesians 4 (selected verses)