

"Unity: Given and Displayed"
Ephesians 4:1-16

August 5, 2018

11th Sunday After Pentecost

"As a called and ordained servant of the Word" -- you hear that in the liturgy, referring to your pastor. When you hear it, you expect your pastor to act according to his calling "and by [Christ's authority]... forgive you all your sins." You further expect him to do other things because of that calling: teach the Word of God, preach the Gospel, and so on. I think you would also expect your pastor to live a life worthy of his call: to be honest, loving, and not involved in such things as drunkenness, sexual immorality, or financial misdealings. People with a calling should live differently.

But what about you and your life? You may say, "Well...that's different. I'm not called." But you are, says St. Paul. In our text for today, he writes to all Christians everywhere, saying "I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." God has called you to be His own at your baptism by washing away your sins and creating a relationship with Him in your hearts by faith. As a Christian, therefore, you are to live according to that calling. And that worthy life, according to St. Paul, is to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The "holy Christian Church, the community of saints" is to exist in unity. But of what exactly does that unity consist?

Some might think this is a unity of action or purpose. In other words, Christians are united by what they do. Therefore, we will be united by being kind, loving, and helpful. Now, it is true that our actions can cause disharmony. Those who profess to be Christians can be prideful and self-exalting; self-serving and self-centered; discourteous and inconsiderate; short tempered and intolerant. Those attitudes and the actions that come from those attitudes can indeed hurt our union together. Therefore, Paul does exhort his hearers to have different attitudes and actions, living "with all humility and gentleness with patience, bearing with one another in love."

However, we must not put the cart before the horse here. Improvement in attitudes and actions is the result of our unity, not the cause of it. The holy Christian Church is not like the Boy Scout which exists in order to do things such as camping and other outdoor skills. The Church is not the Lions' Club, unified in its efforts to help the blind. The unity of the holy Christian Church is much deeper and more profound than merely our actions.

Our unity -- our oneness -- consists of the one thing that differentiates us from any and every group of human beings on the face of the planet. It is the doctrine of God, revealed by God, which unifies us and make us one. As Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Christian unity is something objective, not simply something based on changing feelings. There is one Christian church, not many churches, inhabited by one Holy Spirit, not differing spirits, with all of its members possessing one hope, not a variety of

hopes - that of everlasting life. There is one Lord - Jesus Christ - not a multitude of gods and religious deities. There is one faith which includes not only our personal believing, but also the substance of faith -- the content of what is believed. There are not a multitude of differing faiths, ideas, and opinions. There is one baptism -- one divine door into the Holy Christian Church by which all enter. There is one God and Father of all in the Holy Christian Church. He is over all Christians, through all Christians, and in all Christians. That is our unity.

How is this unity and oneness to be kept in light of differences among Christians? Some would say that there is not a problem with unity because there aren't really any differences (since we are all Christians) or that differences don't really matter. But the appearance of unity simply because one belongs to an institution or organization claiming to be Christian is not enough. Four card players sitting around a card table may think they're united simply because they are together in the same place, engaging in a similar activity. However, if one intends to be playing bridge, another cribbage, another gin, and the other poker, that's not unity. They aren't even really united if all are playing pinochle, but one with a single deck and the others with a double deck. When all four agree on a single game with a single set of rules, then they can share the evening together in harmony.

The same is true in the Holy Christian Church. Simply "being together" and claiming to be Christian is not unity. However, these days, "tolerance" is the buzz word in our society. Some would say that the Church need to be sensitive by being tolerant of all beliefs and doctrines. Those who contend for pure doctrine are called "troublemakers" and are accused of being intolerant and insensitive. Such accusations have come up lately with the debate about human sexuality. People who oppose error are accused of having political motivations and are called divisive of Christian unity.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The ones who damage or destroy the oneness of the Christian Church are those who deviate from the Word of God in any way, even when it is politically or socially correct to do so. Satan has turned things completely upside down by making our society believe that error is truth, that evil is good, to tolerate evil is being sensitive, and to support truth is being intolerant. The unity of the Christian Church, therefore, is not being destroyed primarily by attacks from the outside, but is rotting from within. With the things you read and hear about churches doing these days, it can seem to be pretty hopeless. Where is the unity that we are called to have? Is there any hope? Yes, there is.

The Good News is that we do not have to create unity on our own. As sinful human beings, that would never be possible. "The unity of the Spirit" of which Paul speaks is unity "established by the Holy Spirit when by regeneration, faith, and a new life he joins us all spiritually." (Lenski, p.509) Through the Word of God in its various forms, people do come to faith in Jesus Christ and will continue to come to faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of denomination affiliation. We are one with all people who trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness and life everlasting, regardless of whether they are Lutheran, Catholic, Methodists, or any other group.

Yet, at the same time, we must be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Why? Because people, out of pride, arrogance, or ignorance, will

seek to break that unity by introducing teachings that are not found in the Word of God or by rejecting teachings that are in the Word of God. Differences in doctrine are not mere opinions or political machinations, but are destructive to the unity of the church. It is important to make every effort to keep the unity, not so the Lutherans win or the Catholics win or the Methodists win, but so that the Holy Christian Church continues strong and unified.

The Good News is that Christ provides the gifts for keeping this unity. The text says, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers." Why did He do that? It was not merely to fill offices in the church or keep an institution running. The men given to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers are "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

This is done, Paul says, so that "we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Notice that. When the gifts Christ gives proclaim His Word of truth, we can reach true unity both in faith of the heart and in knowledge of the mind about the Son of God. Both are important in becoming a mature Christian.

That is why it is so vitally important for you to be in worship every Sunday to hear the Word of God. That's why it's so vitally important for every one of you to be involved in reading and studying the Word of God. Learning the Word of God is not just for the kids in Sunday School or Confirmation Class. It is for every person of every age.

You may be thinking, "But, why? I had all those Bible stories when I was a kid. I don't need more of that now." Respectfully, I would disagree and say, "Yes, you do". Times have changed. There are more people spreading more teachings about God which are false than they have ever been. It is so easy not to know what is right and what is wrong. It is so easy to be swayed by the sincerity or eloquence of a persuasive Bible teacher or preacher or, for that matter, by the culture and society around us.

But God's Word says that, as you are instructed in the Word of God and prepared by those whom Christ has given to the Church, you "may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

If you choose not to be continually instructed in the truth, lightning will not strike and you may not notice any difference...for awhile. But as the waves of a storm-swept lake gradually cause a boat not tied to the dock to slowly drift away from safety to destruction, so also the waves of false doctrine will gradually cause your soul to drift away from the safety of the unity of the Holy Christian Church to eternal destruction.

How do we deal with this situation? Do we simply proclaim the right doctrine and blast those who are in error, whether they are members of our own congregation or in some other denomination? Sadly, we have often done that very thing in an uncaring and loveless manner. This has led to the exact opposite error: trying to be "loving" rather than being so dogmatic and insistent about biblical teachings.

So...which is it to be? Shall we be truthful or loving? Our text says we are to do both: to speak the truth in love. We must speak the truth of God's Word and not sacrifice truth for some mushy loving feeling just to get along with people in other

denominations that have departed from the truth. At the same time, we are to speak the Word of God in love and not sacrifice love for the individuals who are erring by bashing them over the head with truth to win the argument.

When we, with the Spirit's power, are "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" by "speaking the truth in love", God's Word does not necessarily promise institutional growth or the admiration and liking of everyone around us.

In fact, Jesus promises just the opposite result a lot of the time. The Father of Lies, Satan, always opposes the truth and will fight against it. However, the Word of God promises that we shall grow stronger and more united in Christ and with each other as we face the Father of Lies. As Paul puts it, "we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

"When each part is working properly...." This is the key. Although you are not "called and ordained servants of the Word", you are "called and baptized servants of the Word." Live a life worthy of that calling which you have received in both words and deeds. Receive the gifts Christ has given this congregation in pastor and teachers. Receive the gifts which these gifts give – the Word and Sacraments.

Put yourself in a position to hear the Word of God, learn the Word of God, and meditate on the Word of God so as to allow its doctrines the opportunity to shape your faith and life. Continue, for the rest of your life, to make every attempt to keep the unity of the Spirit by reaching unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.

Then speak that truth (without error, compromise, or apology). Speak that truth in love (without arrogance, hatred, or pride). Speak that truth with humility, gentleness and patience. Then, by God's grace for Jesus' sake, the unity that has been given will also be the unity that is maintained and manifested within our congregation, our denomination, and within the Christian Church as a whole throughout the world until Christ comes again. Amen.