

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 56:6-8  
SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 4: 1-5  
October 4, 2024

## ***“We Are Called to One Hope”***

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The story is told of two men riding a tandem bicycle up a steep hill. After much effort, they finally made it to the top of the hill. The front rider said, “Whew! That was a tough ride.” To which the second rider replied, “Sure was, and if I hadn’t kept the brake on the whole time we might have slipped backwards.”

Ah yes, doesn’t this perfectly exemplify church life? I once had a dear old Session member named Dick Beltz who made it his policy to say “no” to everything. It pretty much didn’t matter what it was, Dick was going to say “no.” When I asked him why he said it was easier to change a “no” to a “yes” than a “yes” to a “no.” Unfortunately that doesn’t make for easy progress!

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day in which we consider the unity of the whole worldwide body of Christ, a unity that is often only there in theory. But our struggle for unity starts at a much more immediate level than that. Every Christian congregation I know struggles to find unity. We might agree on everything theological. It’s highly unlikely but possible. But even then, we would not be unified because of personalities.

What does it take to create unity? According to Ephesians three things: humility, gentleness and patience. We are to bear with one another in love. Paul reminds us that, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Humility is not the same thing as humiliation. It’s not that we despise ourselves. It is rather that instead of comparing ourselves to others we compare ourselves to Jesus, and thereby see the truth of the matter. We all fall short, sometimes way short. To be humble is to be right-sized, and as a result we don’t have an inflated sense of our own importance or “rightness.” Most conflicts start where one person feels themselves to be better or “righter” than another. And the person being judged and found wanting is pretty much not happy about it!

We are also to exercise gentleness with each other. Sometimes this word is translated self-control. We might be frustrated. We might be angry. But if we can exercise self-control and treat that other person with gentleness instead of hostility it will go a long way to healing a breach.

Finally, Ephesians says that we need to embrace patience or steadfastness as a way of life. We should be “long-tempered” instead of “short-tempered. It helps to remember how endlessly patient God is with us. And with patience comes forgiveness. It’s pretty much a requirement.

A German philosopher once compared the human race to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter’s night. He said, “The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth’s winter eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness.” The answer to this is forgiveness. Forgiveness allows us to stay together and stay warm. The fact that we will inevitably hurt one another is a given. But we don’t have to stay there. We can forgive. We can heal.

When the words in Ephesians were first written there were no Christian denominations. There was only one church and the call for unity had a much narrower focus. There were Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, and the urgent need to bring them together. Congregations were small. They were house churches. Ephesians speaks about Christian unity not in theory and not at a distance, but in person. Now we have denominations, and denominations do not always see eye to eye. Mark Twain once said he put a dog and a cat in a cage together as an experiment to see if they could get along. They did, so he put in a bird, pig and goat. They, too, got along fine after a few adjustments. Then he put in a Baptist, a Presbyterian, and a Methodist, and soon there was not a living thing left.

When we contemplate World Communion Sunday there is always a tendency to focus on large structural denominational differences. We think of institutions working together. But Christian unity does not begin with institutions. It is about how we live together in the nitty gritty of real congregational life. We are currently sharing a building with another congregation! This is a godly and wonderful thing to do. Of course, challenges arise, but God’s abundant grace is more than enough to meet them. As we live with one another we are to be humble and gentle. We are to be patient and bear with one another in love. There would be no need to say these things if it was easy. It is not easy. As human beings we often get impatient and annoyed with one another. Even within families, friendships and congregations we have personality conflicts and strong differences of opinion.

The biggest challenge facing the Church as a whole today around unity is much less to do with denominational conflicts. Churches today are divided most often, tragically, along political lines. Where we used to argue theology, now we argue hot button issues—issues that have been inflamed by social media and deliberate distortion. There was a time before we became so polarized as a society that political affiliation was irrelevant in church. But somewhere along the line politicians learned that they could mobilize and manipulate a power base by emphasizing and even creating issues to fight over. Politics are now portrayed in terms of good versus evil which easily infects the Church. We have learned to demonize one another. Social media has amplified the divisions and fed division and fear. Tragically many, many churches in America and around the world have been infected by this disease of the spirit.

This is where our challenge to find Christian unity is today—not between denominations—but between churches divided by social issues and fear.

Christian unity is about breaking down the barriers and the forces that cause us to dehumanize one another. There is no “righteous” political party and no “evil” political party, as each characterize the other. There are just people, people who sometimes have differences in belief but who are not inherently better or worse than the other.

Unity is not uniformity. We don’t have to all agree with one another. That would be impossible. But where we draw the line on essential versus unessential in the body of Christ should be very narrow. We are one in Christ. Christ died for us. All of us. Views on controversial social issues are not essentials of the faith. While we want everyone to agree with our perspective because it makes us more comfortable, that is not what it’s all about. God called Jews and Gentiles together. Jesus called political enemies—a Zealot and a tax collector together and made them brothers. If a Zealot and tax collector can love one another, surely Republicans and Democrats can too.

Our life together is also not hard by accident. It is hard by design. God calls very different people together so we can rub the rough edges off each other. God teaches us patience by bringing us into contact with people who try our patience. God teaches us our need for the Holy Spirit to bring wholeness to our relationships by showing us that that is the only way it can be done. Christian unity is a gift, a gift that can only be found when we fully surrender our lives to God, accept the challenges, and intentionally walk in grace. Amen

Isaiah 56:6-8

<sup>6</sup> And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord  
to minister to him,  
to love the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants,  
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it  
and who hold fast to my covenant—  
<sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain  
and give them joy in my house of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house will be called  
a house of prayer for all nations.”  
<sup>8</sup> The Sovereign Lord declares—  
he who gathers the exiles of Israel:  
“I will gather still others to them  
besides those already gathered.”

Ephesians 4: 1-5

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. <sup>2</sup> Be completely humble and gentle; be patient,

bearing with one another in love. <sup>3</sup> Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. <sup>7</sup> But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.