

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 56:6-8
SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 4: 1-5
October 2, 2022
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

“Christian Unity”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A man was walking across a bridge one day in England and saw another man standing on the edge, about to jump. He ran over and said: “Stop. Don't do it!”

“Why shouldn't I?” asked the suicidal man.

“Well, there's so much to live for!”

“Like what?” asked the man.

“Are you religious?”

The suicidal man said: “Yes.”

“Me too,” said the first man. “Are you Christian or Muslim?”

“Christian.”

“Me too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?”

“Protestant.”

“Me too. Are you Church of England or Baptist?”

“Baptist.”

“Wow. Me too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?”

“Baptist Church of God.”

“Me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?”

“Reformed Baptist Church of God.”

“Me too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?”

The suicidal man replied: “Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915.”

“Die, heretic scum!” declared the would-be rescuer, as he pushed him off the bridge.

You have to realize that the British have a wicked sense of humor.

What does Christian unity mean? Today is World Communion Sunday, a day we celebrate Christian unity. But to be brutally honest about it, we're not very good at this unity thing. Just consider for a moment how many different Christian denominations there are. There are about 200 in the United States alone and 45,000 in the entire world. We would be hard pressed to find that in any other religion. Islam is divided into Sunni and Shia with various sub-

divisions within each, but has nothing like what we have produced. Judaism has Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Hasidic. What on earth happened to us Christians?

What happened is that Christians became focused on dogma, as opposed to practice. Exactly what you believed became more important than how you lived. And Presbyterianism is a perfect example of fighting over dogma. In the history of this congregation alone are five different Presbyterian denominations and two schisms! Being Scottish might have something to do with it, but really! And while Roman Catholics might argue that all this splitting up is a Protestant thing that they have never struggled with, that is because historically speaking they had things like the Inquisition to keep everyone in line. Doctrinal differences were just not tolerated.

A scientist who is a Christian recently commented on this phenomenon pointing out that while scientists disagree, they don't accuse one another of not being scientists. The minority of scientists who don't believe global climate change is caused by humans are generally accused of being wrong. They are not accused of not being scientists. But we don't do that. We accuse those we disagree with of not being real Christians.

The problem began very early in the history of Christianity. Only 100 years after Christ competing Gnostic versions of Christianity were emerging—versions that said Jesus wasn't really human. He was a spirit or an angel. And to make matters more complicated in the 2nd century a man named Marcion created a whole alternate form of Christianity. He got rid of the Old Testament and the Old Testament God completely. The Marcionite Church became a strong competitor for the original Church, which was forced to fight back against both Marcionism and Gnosticism by defining what Christianity was. This is the origin of our creeds. And other divisions were soon to follow in the wake of persecution. What was to be done with those who failed the test of martyrdom? What about those who collapsed in the face of persecution, who told the authorities whatever they wanted to hear in order to live? If these people came back to the church (and many did) were they to be rejected or accepted? The north Africans kicked them out. The western Roman church created a penitential system that would enable them to work their way back in.

An unintended side-effect of all the struggles is that with Christianity, what you believed became the most important thing. Correct belief took central stage. And it's not far from there to see the ripple effect. Martin Luther might have said, "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity," but that's not how people live. Adult believer's baptism versus infant baptism? What exactly happens in communion? Divorce. The role of women. Acceptance or rejection of LGBTQ members. And most recently, politics. Churches have divided into liberal and conservative camps, pro-Trump and anti-Trump factions. And a new heresy, Q-anon, has even infiltrated many congregations. I heard a pod-cast recently given by an evangelical pastor from the south who was forced out of his pastorate of over 13 years because the people he had known and loved for years had become brainwashed into believing truly crazy things. Sermon topics that had always been normal before suddenly turned into lightning-rods in this new heated atmosphere. He was

bewildered to find himself accused and rejected for preaching the way he had always preached.

There is a time and place for boundaries. It was essential to reject Gnostic beliefs. It was essential to reject Marcion's view of Christianity. And it is essential today to reject Q-anon. Donald Trump, regardless of what you may think of him, is NOT the Messiah, and he is NOT fighting a cabal of evil pedophiles running the world. That is NOT Christianity.

But there are many, many things that we should set aside and put into the category of "optional". I am a gay pastor, but I fully accept and recognize as my sisters and brothers in Christ those who believe that homosexuality is a sin. We disagree about a central part of my life, but we agree on Christ—and that is what matters. Regardless of how they view me, I accept them. I understand. I get it. They are trying to be faithful to the word of God as they understand it. That is a noble thing. Their motivation is pure. Of course, I am not speaking of the "God hates fags" brigade. That is a church based on hate which is not what Jesus teaches at all.

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.

When we contemplate World Communion Sunday there is always a tendency to focus on large structural 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. Ephesians isn't speaking to institutions but to individuals. 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. We have personality conflicts and strong differences of opinion. Jesus promised that where "two or more are gathered" he would be with them, but sometimes we know that "where two or more are gathered" there will be an argument.

Christian unity starts with us. If we cannot love those we know, how can we possibly love those we don't know? But 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 should be very narrow. Politics are outside the line. Views on controversial social issues are outside the line. What we think about wearing masks is outside the line. 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 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 achieve God's purpose, accept the challenges, and as a result experience profound grace. Amen

Isaiah 56:6-8

⁶ 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—
⁷ 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.”
⁸ 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. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.