

Ephesians 4:1-6 (NRSV)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.



Uniting a Community

Bishop Will Willimon loves to tell the story of his introduction to his first pastoral appointment.¹ He was a student at Emory University at the time. And as instructed by the district superintendent, he drove out to the church on a Saturday to meet the lay leader. They were to meet at a little one room church, then named, “Friendship Methodist Church”, which, he goes on to state, was a misnomer if there had ever been one!

Will says, “I got there before my host, so I thought I’d go in the church and look around. But I was surprised by a big padlock and chain barring the front door. When the lay leader arrived I said, ‘Glad you are here to open the lock on the door.’

“‘Oh, that ain’t our lock. The sheriff put that there,’ explained the lay leader. ‘Things got rough here at the meeting last month. Folks started yelling at one another, carting off furniture they had given to the church. So, I called the sheriff and he came out here and put that lock on the door until the new preacher could get here and settle ‘em down.’”

It seems to me that we live in an age of deep divisions and polarization. Whether one is speaking of the world, our nation, our United Methodist denomination, our neighboring denominations, and even some local congregations, there are disagreements, questions of loyalty, and parting of the ways, that make us all look anything but unified. But friends, wallowing in DISunity is destructive to the cause of Christ Jesus. And, as the saying goes, “a house that is divided will fall.” (*I know, you are all expecting to start singing, “United we stand, divided we fall!” We’ll save that for another day!*)

As the wise folks on our Visioning Team prayerfully discerned a vision statement for the future of our congregation, they realized the need to be intentional about who we are, how we represent Christ, and creating an environment conducive to spiritual growth and increasing discipleship. This kind of vision does not become a reality accidentally. It takes intentional planning, strategy, engagement, and evaluation in order to partner with God to bring out the best in all of us, and in those we will encounter. Last week we discussed the first line in our new vision statement: KNOWING JESUS CHRIST. The part we address today is UNITING A COMMUNITY.

In the intentional choice of language, we did not decide to say “uniting this church,” “uniting the church family,” or, “uniting those like us!” We chose, “Uniting a Community,” because as Christ followers who are united in purpose and vision and living into our calling, our deepest desire is for our love, service, and witness for Christ to reach beyond this church family, and influence our whole community in a loving way!

You may have noticed that both last Sunday and this Sunday, I have selected scripture texts which come from Paul’s letter to young Christian churches for our reference and inspiration. That is because Paul was trying in his own way to help these new believers to become a healthy church family that would not only attract and influence more new believers, but would also have a positive impact on their communities by representing the love, mercy, and teachings of Jesus Christ. Because, you see, Christian unity starts within and works outward, much like what we see in the growth and blossoming of a flower.

Today, we hear in Paul’s words as recorded in Ephesians 4 that unity of the Spirit, unity in Christ, are part of God’s grand design for the church. In fact, Paul goes on to describe **that unity** more specifically as the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, which is accomplished by those living into their calling **“with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.”**

Paul then goes on to develop the metaphor which compares the church to the human body with its many uniquely appearing and functioning parts. That is important because it would be dangerous to define unity as “uniformity.” On the contrary, the most beautiful, powerful, and effective unity is **rich with diversity**. In the body, the parts do not look or function alike, yet, they are all important, needed, interdependent, and work toward the same end. We have fingers, eyes, kidneys, knee caps, tongues, skin, elbows, and the list goes on and on. The purpose for which each member was designed in the functioning of the body is to cooperate in achieving God’s loving abundance and healthy existence for the soul housed therein.

In the church, likewise, our richly diverse experiences, faith encounters, education, gifts, skills, passions, reception of grace, and so on, are designed to enrich the whole and enhance our mutual experiences of worship, service, spiritual growth, witness, **and the creation of that environment of mutual care**. Like the body, some parts of the church are more visible, and others less visible. Some roles are more obvious, and others less so. But all are essential to the effective and healthy functioning of this spiritual body. And when we function well together, our efforts to follow our Savior, Jesus, are capable of UNITING A COMMUNITY in the name of the Author of Love.

An article appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*ⁱⁱ quite a few years ago reporting about superstar tenors Jose Carreras, Placido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti performing together in Los Angeles. A reporter conducting the interview for the magazine pressed the issue of competitiveness between the singers. In response, Domingo said, “You have to put all of your concentration into opening your heart to the music. You can’t be rivals when you’re together making music.” Isn’t that the way it should be in the church as well. When we are focused on together serving a Savior who would die for us, our competitiveness

Uniting a Community

September 16, 2018

Rev. Rebekah Sweet

should melt away, and it will be clear that we are UNITING A COMMUNITY for Christ.
Amen.

ⁱ Willimon, Rev. Dr. William H., Day 1, "One in Christ," http://day1.org/7975-will_willimon_one_in_christ

ⁱⁱ Atlantic Monthly, November 1994.