

August 5, 2018
Is Unity possible?

Ephesians 4:1-16 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.

⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore it is said,

“When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people.”

⁹(When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended^[a] into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

In our Sunday evening Bible Study, we have been reading the book of Ephesians. The last time we met, I had really prepared to lead it. I studied. I read commentaries. I even studied the words in Greek. I done all this good work only to discover that I working on the wrong chapter. I was convinced in my own mind we were on chapter 5. I came to find out we were supposed to be on chapter 4.

It is interesting how we can get so stuck in our own thinking. We know what we are doing and we know that we are right. For some of us it is very hard to find out that we are wrong. I am one of them. Why it is hard to admit you are wrong? Why do we get so convinced of something that we are not even able to hear and listen to what others have to say? But God does have a sense of humor.

So when I started to prepare my sermon and since I decided to follow the lectionary for the month of August, I opened it up, and guess what? It was the 4th chapter of Ephesians, the one I unintentionally tried to skip. I bet there is something for us all this morning to learn and to apply into our lives.

In chapter 4, Paul starts by introducing himself as a prisoner of the Lord. How would you introduce yourself? What would you say about yourself in your relationship to Christ? To God? Would you say you are a disciple? Would you say you are a lover of Christ? Or a follower? A servant of Christ? Paul says he is a prisoner. Why would you call yourself a prisoner?

Yes, he probably was in a real prison – it was more likely a dungeon. He is not defining himself as a regular prisoner. He is not imprisoned by circumstances. In fact, elsewhere Paul writes that he has learned to be content in any situation.

He is a prisoner of Christ. I think that his heart so much belonged to God, that even if he wanted to he could not do otherwise than to serve God. I ask myself does this even appeal to me? Does it appeal to you? How much do we cherish our own will, our own life and our own freedom. Even to God we want to give as much as we feel like giving and the rest, the most, to have to ourselves. But in no way do I want to give all. I am challenged to live a life in which I would rejoice in being a servant and prisoner of Christ. Could this be where the true freedom and a joy comes? Paul declared that he found true freedom only he became a prisoner of Christ.

Jesus said that if we want to have life we must take up our cross and follow him. If we want life we must lay down our lives for Him and for others. Only by being a prisoner of Christ do we find true freedom in life and in world?

In verse 2 Paul says, I beg you, I implore you, I plead with you, to lead a life worthy of your calling. A better translation would be to walk a life that is worthy of your calling. Paul's vocabulary is not appealing at all to us today.

How about the word "begging"? It is not enough that you are a prisoner? Now you are a beggar. Have you ever begged for anything? Have you ever been in a situation that you have nothing and no pride? Have you ever needed something so much from someone else that you do not care anymore about your own feeling or what people would think about you? Have you begged somebody to stop doing something that is harmful? It is a most vulnerable situation to be, but whatever you want to ask or whatever you need is so important that you do not care.

We think of the Syrophenician woman who asked Jesus to heal her child. Jesus tried to ignore the woman but her persistence – even dogs get some crumbs from the table – impressed Jesus because of her faith. We think of the woman who washed Jesus feet with her tears. Remember the leader of the synagogue who begged on behalf of his daughter.

Paul is begging us. He cares not about putting himself in a beggar situation. He is asking us to live a life that is worthy of our calling.

We are sealed, we are branded by God. Do you know how much companies care about their brand? Do you prefer one brand over another? Paul is asking us to act

as though we are chosen, selected, marked and called to be Christians. Far too often we are not living the life according to who we are.

Ranchers in the West brand their cattle by burning a special registered mark on the skin of the cattle so that everyone knows who is the owner. We are marked and sealed at our baptism.

If we are Christians, followers of Christ, we should live this way all the time. It is very hard. Last week I was in Wisconsin. On the way back I wanted to take a train back to Indianapolis, the same way we got to Wisconsin. The problem was that there were no train from Chicago to Indianapolis. We took a train from Milwaukee to Chicago. Have you heard of Greyhound Bus Company? We took a Greyhound bus from Chicago to Indianapolis. It was a little bit of a challenge. I tell you, the rich people are not taking buses to go from one state to another. I sat there with my three kids and first I see a very tired bus driver. I see people who are having a rough time, some with babies, some with disabilities.

It is easier not be surrounded by pain and hard life. You wish not to see, not to hear, not to smell and, even more, not to have a relationship. I had a choice to turn my head to the window and not see.

I prayed, "God help me to minister and help me to be your vessel, especially now." Maybe I should not have prayed.

The next thing I know; the bus driver cannot open the door. He went outside and closed the door. Then he could not open it to come in. It was funny and stressful. No kidding. The driver looked at me through the window and asked me to come to the door and open it from the inside. After few minutes of trying we figured it out. We opened the door. Some even suggested I should get a free ride.

After that my conversation started with the person who was sitting across from me. Because he was with disability it was very hard for me to understand him. But we tried. I offered to share our food. I believe there are ways to live our lives, every day, in every situation when we turn to God instead turning to ourselves and turning away from a situation that pushes us out of our comfort zone.

Paul tells us three things we should consider in walking worth of our calling: humbleness, gentleness and patience. So take these three words with you every morning. I choose to be humble, gentle and patient. I have no strength in my own but with God's help I can. Why do we need these three qualities in our own character. The main theme of the letter to the Ephesians is the unity we have as a body of Christ. His whole explanation, his main purpose is that we would be one.

Jesus, in His prayer found in John 15, 16, 17, asks that through the Holy Spirit, His followers would be one just as He and the Father are one. In the communion liturgy

we pray that we might be one in Christ, one with each other and one in ministry to the whole world.

We recognize and know we are to live as Christ being our leader and the head of Church. We all, with very different gifts and different personalities, will be one. I think you all have heard the analogy that our lives are like a puzzle. You do not know what the picture will look like. Sometimes when you glance back you can see that there is a picture. I think it is a weak analogy.

I prefer to think that each of us is a little puzzle piece. We make a picture only when we join together with others. We tend to think of our lives individual and independent. So much of our focus is about what kind of picture is my life, my world. But the true picture, the true calling is when we are together, when we try to figure out, how does my piece fit together with other believers. Some of us have funny shapes. Some of us do not have very bright colors.

Only when we come together as a church, or even churches, do we make a picture in God's eyes and we find out who we are in this big picture. Maybe we as a church, New Life UMC are as one little piece of a puzzle. We try to work and find a place to make a beautiful picture as we work together with others.

Pauls says : 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. I think this body of Christ starts here, right now, when we come together at New Life. No way is it finished here. It is as big as all believers of Christ gathering together. I clearly understand that sometimes it gets very hard to be together. I think it is so much easier just to be at home.

You can listen to hundreds of great sermons and be happy. You can stop, skip or forward the sermon whenever you want. The best part is that you do not have to deal with people. Just try to get into committee or a meeting. These people are just totally crazy. But if we do believe in the Bible, if we read carefully enough, we are to be together.

Jesus was born in a family. Why? He could have come to the world as a grown-up, or be a super baby and need no help from His parents. Why did he put up with all those disciples? Why does Paul repeatedly talk about the body of Christ? We are not to be individual parts all separated. I love the way Paul writes: It is a sign maturity for Christians to be together in unity. That includes bearing with these annoying people. Not only to put up with others, but be humble, gentle and patient. Love these people as you work together.

It is like my experience of sitting in that bus. We prefer to have nothing to do with all those people. You just want to get to you where you need to go. Come to the church just get what you need and leave. We are called to serve together, minister together

and not just ride in the same bus for an hour or in my case 5 hours. There is a bigger goal, a bigger plan, a bigger picture for us to serve together right where God has put us.

Let's pray.