

*Keep the Unity of the Spirit . . .*

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Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

Among the people I came to know and love in my old life as the Middle East Executive for our church were the Armenians. Someday I'll tell you about our denomination's fascinating and meaningful history with the Armenians, but not today. One of my Armenian friends told me a story—ok, it's really a joke—about an Armenian sailor who was shipwrecked on a desert island that was completely uninhabited by humans. Armenians justifiably take pride in their industry and their ingenuity, and this sailor was true to form. By the time he was discovered alone on this island by a landing party from a passing ship, five years later, he had cultivated the land for a farm, built roads, and had even constructed a little town, complete with a store, a school, a post office and two churches. The leader of the landing party asked him, "You did all this yourself?" The Armenian responded with typical modesty, "Who else?" "Well, this is amazing, but I have to ask you why, since there is only one of you, you built two churches." Pointing to one of the churches, the Armenian said, "That's the church I go to." And then, pointing to the other church, "And that's the church I *don't* go to."

Christians have, almost from the outset of the history of the church, needed that church, or those churches that they "*don't* go to." There are always the ostensible reasons, of course: we've argued about the nature of Christ—human, divine, how much of each; we've argued about baptism—infant or adult, sprinkling or immersion; we've argued about communion—who qualifies to receive it, what we think really happens when we are given the bread and the cup; we've argued about how the church should be

governed—with opinions running the gamut from the ultimate authority of clergy all the way to the town-hall ethos of congregationalism, with every shade of difference in between; and we've argued about the Bible—inerrant or inspired; literally true, allegorically true, or eternally true (there's another sermon hiding in there). We've even argued about which translation is the real one, with some people still insisting that Jesus spoke Elizabethan English. And this has been just a beginners' list of our historical and contemporary disagreements.

But, truth be told, most of the things that have divided Christians from one another over the years have had little to do with faith. The early fights over the nature of Christ were more about the rivalry between the eastern and western parts of the Roman empire than abstract metaphysical arguments about the human and divine in Christ. The bloody wars in Europe between the followers of Luther and the radical Anabaptists had more to do with power struggles between German princes and rebellions against those princes than they did with how and when people were baptized. And, let's face it, there's a heavy-duty political component in the divisions within American Christianity today. Sometimes, either reading history or observing our present-day differences as Christians, I have been tempted to ask, "This isn't *really* about religion, is it?"

And yet, it has become customary, almost an adage, to blame religion for many of the world's contemporary conflicts. I think that those conflicts are really more about the attempt to use religion or religious labels to advance non-religious causes than they are about the content of religion itself. It almost always *isn't* about religion. It's almost always about nationality or race or kinship, or economics, or class, or about the particular version of history that someone cherishes in opposition to someone else's particular version of history. And all of these versions are inevitably self-serving.

In all of the sixteen years of the Lebanese Civil War, which I got to witness up-close and personal, from beginning to end, I never heard anyone argue about the theological

differences between Christians and Muslims, or between Sunni Muslims and Shi'ite Muslims. What I heard were variations on the theme of “*those* people are trying to run things,” or *those* people are trying to wipe us out,” or *those* people have always had more privileges than we do.” There was a lot more fear than there was faith in the Lebanese conflict, and that has also been true in diverse war-torn places like the Balkans, or Sri Lanka, or Myanmar or northern Ireland—anywhere where barbarous slaughter marches proudly under the banner of religion. Does anyone really think that the bloodletting in Ireland over the years has anything to do with what people believe about the body and blood of Christ?

When the leaders of this congregation asked me to be your interim pastor, I felt that I should warn them, “Look, I’m old. I have plenty of energy still, but I share with many of my contemporaries the reality that I have more to look back on than I have to look forward to.” And one of the things I look back on is my experiences in Lebanon, a place where I spent a lot of time and expended a lot of emotional energy. I was, and still am, fascinated by Lebanon because it reminds me so much of the world, and of our country as well.

Lebanon is diverse. Like the world, like our country, it has no religious or ethnic majority. Like our world, like our country, it has felt the impact of the movement of populations: first the Palestinian refugees and more recently Syrian refugees. In the 1970’s Lebanon failed to come to terms with its diversity. Ethnic and religious groups retreated to their respective corners and came out fighting in a 16-year civil war that left a beautiful country ravaged, a vibrant economy destroyed, and people still deeply distrustful of one another. Lest we be judgmental about this, our own Civil War was the most deadly war in our history, and the wounds from that war have still not healed.

So, here are a couple of things I learned from Lebanon, which might be useful for us. One is that it is much easier to divide than it is to unite. It’s easy to identify and stoke

grievances because there are so many of them around. It is easy to take advantage of fear because fear is a more accessible emotion than trust; hatred of the other comes more naturally than love of the stranger. A second learning is that once the process of division has begun, it's not only difficult to reverse; it actually metastasizes. Division begets more division.

The Apostle Paul was well acquainted with division in the early church. At the outset there was the fundamental division between what Paul called "the circumcision and the uncircumcision," between those who still followed Jewish law and looked down upon those who didn't, and those Gentiles who had begun to follow Christ not because of tradition, but because of the Gospel message of inclusion and love. And, in addition to the Jew/Gentile dichotomy, there developed partisanship around particular charismatic leaders in the early Christian community. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul listed some of those leaders, and then appealed to the obstreperous church in Corinth to "be of the same mind, and the same purpose." "Has Christ been divided?" he asked plaintively.

It is out of this background that today's passage from Ephesians arises. Listen to what Paul says to the church in Ephesus: "I, therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

I'm sure that I had read and heard that passage any number of times as I grew up in the church, but it just flew by as a nice sentiment. But the first time it really jumped out at me as something that was really important was at an early meeting of the Middle East Council of Churches in Cyprus. At that meeting, for the first time in literally centuries, the Christians of the Middle East came together to recognize that in spite of all their doctrinal differences, in spite of a history of division, "There is one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all."

The theme of that meeting was “Keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.” And what a gathering that was! People who over the years had literally been told by other Christians that they were going to hell, and who had too often returned the compliment, worshipped together, shared their worries and their joys. A hardy band of Protestants led one worship service with a spirited rendering of “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” and at the next Syrian Orthodox priests in bright red robes and with long white beards down to their waists sang chants in the language that Jesus spoke, and knelt and prorated themselves in prayer.

Here is what these Christians who traced their history back to the very beginning of the church had finally realized after centuries of mutual condemnation and disdain: they realized that when Paul spoke of the “unity of the Spirit,” he didn’t mean uniformity of belief and practice. Unity is different from uniformity. Uniformity is imposed; unity is chosen. Unity of the spirit recognizes, and even celebrates difference because difference is a quality of God’s creation; uniformity, on the other hand, requires conformity. Uniformity is boring. If we were all alike; if we all thought and did the same things, we would not be closer to God, we would just be boring.

Our church, the United Church of Christ, came out of different theological streams and out of different ethnic roots. We were German Protestants with a clear sense of how things were supposed to be done, and we were English congregationalists who were in constant rebellion against being told how things were supposed to be done. And along the way, we picked up a whole bunch of other people, like former African slaves whose liberation we supported and for whom we built colleges in the South; like Samoans and other Pacific Islanders; like Latinos who, shall we say, brought a little more spirit to our worship, and then other little minorities, like the Armenians I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, with their history of faithfulness, even in the wake of genocide. There is

no uniformity to be found in this history; but there is the choice we all made for the unity of the Spirit, for unity in the Christ who is not divided.

And so with this congregation—and this is something to ponder during this interim time, when we have the opportunity to remember where we have been and to look forward to where we are going. There have been challenges to our unity in the past; many of us remember them and, for some of us, there is still hurt in those memories. But we also remember that even when we could not be uniform in our opinions, this congregation chose to keep the unity of the Spirit. It was the Spirit, after all, who on Pentecost enabled people to hear each other in all their differences. It is the Holy Spirit who makes us one in Christ. Amen.