

Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity 2024
Ephesians 4:1-6 (ESV)

“Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Blessings to you on this Lord’s Day, dear ones. One thing you might notice about St. Paul, speaking as he is by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is that he doesn’t have any problem making a point and driving it home.

In today’s Epistle lesson, we hear him urging the church in Ephesus to preserve the *unity* of the Spirit in the bond of peace. He goes on to say this right after:

“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”

How can he make it any clearer? We are called to *unity* in the Church, to be united as one in Christ, in a true confession of the Christian faith as the baptized, and therefore to put away and even flee from all causes of division among us in the Church—just as you rightly flee and turn away from anything that would sever your limbs from the rest of your body.

It’s obvious to all of us how catastrophic and horrible it’d be for such a thing to happen and the great lengths to which we’d all go to keep ourselves intact as one organic whole from head to toe. It’s necessary for us to do this. It’s a matter of instinct.

And so too, as Christians and members of the body of Christ, it’s likewise necessary and instinctive for us to strive not for a superficial, paper-thin kind of oneness—but a unity that runs deep.

We’re talking about unity from the heart. We’re talking about true Christian unity established by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament.

Dear ones, it’s the Holy Spirit Who makes the Church one in Christ. And for us to be one by the work of the Spirit means that, together, we also have the bond of peace in the Spirit. The two go hand-in-hand. They can’t be separated.

So, what precisely is necessary for authentic unity in the Church at the deepest level, then, you might ask?

Well, here’s an excerpt from Article VII in the Augsburg Confession on the Church, “For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.” These two things are essential.

You see, it's not necessary for true Christian unity that human traditions—different rites and ceremonies instituted by men—it's not necessary for these to be the same at all times and in all places.

But *it is* necessary to agree on the Gospel, that Christ was put to death on the cross for every last one of our sins, that He was raised on the third day for our justification, and that the free gift of God is salvation and eternal life in Him. On all of this, and on the administration of the Sacraments, we simply must agree—or will have no true unity from the heart! It's not possible.

And one who knows this very well, by the way, is the devil, who hates God and hates us and who hates how pleasant it is for Christians to dwell in true unity from the heart. And because of these things, he goes about his work of spreading lies, sowing disunity and dissonance among the people of God.

I'll give you two very concrete examples:

A few hundred years ago, a Reformed theologian named Theodore Beza, who was John Calvin's right hand man and successor, he had the audacity to claim this: that in the Lord's Supper, Christ's body is as far removed from the bread and wine as the highest heaven is removed from the earth.

Mr. Beza claimed this despite the clear words of Christ saying, "This is my body."

Dear ones, we know that Christ's body is there because He says it is; His Word makes it so. He will never lie or deceive us, and He knows perfectly well how to say exactly what He means.

But the point is, how can we have true unity from the heart with Reformed Christians, following Mr. Calvin and Mr. Beza, who don't believe Christ's true body is really there in the Sacrament—when we would rightly say of the consecrated bread in the Lord's Supper, "This is the true body of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins," and they would say, "No it's not?"

Well, we simply can't have true unity with them. We can't just agree to disagree, because allowing them to commune at our altar—God forbid—would be to mix truth with error and to let them eat and drink judgment upon themselves. And these things we cannot do.

So, sadly we're forced to say to the Reformed, and many others, "Go your way with this error, this falsehood that you've embraced." And just think of how many Christians have been deceived and stolen away from fellowship with us because of the division sown by the devil's lies. It's nothing short of a travesty.

I'll tell you what else is a travesty—this is my second example—and that is what Pope Francis said just a couple of weeks ago in Singapore.

He said publicly that all religions are different ways of reaching God, that they're just like different languages, different idioms, to get there and reach Him. Some happen to be Muslim, some are Hindu, some are Christian, but they're all essentially paths to God. And to my knowledge, not only has he issued no retraction, but he's even gone on to say that different religious identities are "gifts from God."

And this from the pope is, of course, blasphemous, heretical teaching. You all know very well from the Holy Scriptures that *Jesus* is the Way and the truth and the life, and *no one* comes to the Father except through Him.

There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. And for the pope to say that other religions are also apparently equal paths to God makes a mockery of the suffering and death of Christ, the very high and costly price He paid to redeem us and reconcile us to the Father.

And you should know that right now, there's terrible division among many Roman Catholics because of what the pope said. And I've even witnessed a Roman Catholic urging others to pray to God, that He would give them a catholic pope!

Here again, the point in all of this is that without agreement on the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, there can be no true unity in the Church, only discord and division and the bond of peace being shattered. And this is why St. Paul urges us in Romans 16 to "watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that we've been taught—avoid them," he says (v. 16).

And avoid them we must. Because the unity of the Spirit that we enjoy in this place, the fact that no false teaching divides us and that *our hearts are one* in the bond of peace—this is a sacred gift and a priceless treasure that is our common possession. How could we not strive to protect and preserve it—to adorn it with humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another in love? How could we not?

Together we are members of the body of Christ knit together as one. You might also think of how many grains of wheat are brought together, baked, and transformed into one single loaf of bread.

This is what St. Augustine, one of the ancient fathers of the church, preached along with Luther some time after him, and it's what I want to leave you with today.

St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:17, "The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." One body. One bread.

Thus, along these lines, St. Augustine presents an extended eucharistic analogy to illustrate the way we all become one in the holy Church.

In one of his sermons, the great bishop points to the eucharistic bread on the altar and he says this: "Call to mind what this [wheat] was, not so long ago, in the fields; how the earth produced it, the rain nourished it, ripened it into the full ear; then human labor carried it to the threshing floor, threshed it...stored it, brought it out, ground it, mixed it into dough, baked it, and hardly any time ago at all produced it finally as bread."

And in similar fashion, St. Augustine goes on to say, all of "you were created, you were carried to the Lord's threshing floor [here], you were threshed by the labor of oxen, that is, of the preachers of the gospel...[in baptism] you were, in a manner of speaking, moistened with water

in order to be shaped into bread,” and “made into one lump,” and with the fire of the Holy Spirit you are baked together into one loaf.

And as he once again directed the attention of his congregation to the eucharistic bread, he famously said, “Be what you see and receive what you are”—by which he means one bread, one body.

For St. Augustine, the Lord Jesus gives us His Supper as the sacrament of our unity and peace as His forgiven people.

Dear ones, may God grant that we would always be eager to partake of this blessed Sacrament with one another and maintain the sacred unity of the Spirit we share in the bond of peace, and that we would all be perfectly one in Christ, even as He is one with the Father and the Spirit

To Whom is all glory unto ages of ages. Amen.