

UNITY IN THE CHURCH IS ON ME!

(REALLY?!)

Ephesians 4:1-6

The Bridge at St. Paul's, Muskego, Wisconsin

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Why are there so many Christian denominations—so much difference of opinion? Let's back away from that for a moment and ponder a different question: *what makes Christians unique in all the world?* Most precious would have to be salvation through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus. A good #2 on our list? Allow me to share a story.

I don't recall any "rifts" in my family growing up, though we came close in 1993. Mom's Parkinson's disease was becoming more noticeable. I was the out-of-state sibling home on vacation--"Let's have a family meeting to discuss mom while Nathan is home." Good thought; poor planning!

We met in the basement; mom was making lunch. We were concerned about her forgetfulness, her "shuffle" as she walked, burning herself around the stove, driving the car. We had important decisions to make! But are you noticing our flawed approach?

We were speaking in whispered tones, with dad, in the basement, to get it done before lunch--filled with love for mom...but misguided with our lack of respect for her person and voice. Mom was not there for the conversation about HER journey, her life! It was relatively early in the Parkinson's trajectory and mom was no fool! Quietness on the first floor; muffled voices below. Down the steps she came--and hurt was born that did not quickly fade.

Have you ever left a key person OUT of an important conversation? A relationship now stretched or torn? Joy sucked from what was once good? Never is there more harm than in the family of God when we forget what I would contend is the #2 unique truth about the Church: **We Christians remember to listen to the voice that matters most!**

Christians sometimes gather to talk and feast on the smorgasbord of God's Word, only to neglect his voice—the listening. Imagine that! "Well, I believe...I think God meant..." Whose voice is most important at THIS family table--bringing the wisdom, hope, joy, UNITY? Is it not the voice of Jesus? And what happens to the Church—what would happen to St. Paul's--if the voice of Jesus were left out of our conversations?

Whose job is it to bring the voice of Jesus to the table so that he is heard? Paul is clear this morning that **UNITY IN THE CHURCH IS ON YOU AND ME!** (Sort of!) It is up to us to invite him to the table through prayer and to open his Word and listen!

1. I WILL LOVE WORTHY OF GOD'S CALL

A. Humble and Gentle

Unity in the Church is on me? REALLY?! What does Paul say? *"I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received...completely humble and gentle...patient."*

Have you ever known someone who divided a room, or cleared it, just by entering? Outspoken and opinionated with only time to listen to their own voice?

You and I were called into God's family through the gospel—at our baptisms or through the hearing of God's Word. We believe in Jesus as our Savior. What are the traits of a Christian?

On June 12, 10-year old Selah Schneider became the youngest person on record to climb El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. A five-day climb with dad. Sleeping suspended from the cliff face. The oldest of four who climb a rock wall in their garage every day. Mom and dad met climbing El Capitan. Climbing is in their blood. Climbing is what they DO.

In coaching Christians, Paul reminds us that to BE a child of God is less about the DOing of faith and more about the attitude of heart—beginning with *humility and gentleness*. Do you remember how Paul coached the Philippians? *“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Jesus...who humbled himself becoming obedient to death.”* Before the “DOing”, the Christian IS—humble, gentle. Attitude and traits that come from self-awareness in our walk with Jesus.

Do you remember Moses, the servant of the LORD? The 10 Commandments, the Ten Plagues, the parting of the Red Sea? Of Moses, the bible says: *“Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.”* What kept Moses humble as he wielded the power of God through his words and shepherd’s staff? Maybe it was Moses’ memory—his self-awareness--of his cockiness before God!

When God called Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, Moses began well: *“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”* But then Moses asserted himself and resisted God’s will: *“Pardon your servant, Lord, I have never been eloquent. I am slow of speech and tongue.”* When God persisted, Moses spoke brashly, *“Pardon me, Lord. Please send someone else.”* Whoa!

Yet God chose Moses anyway in grace, undeserved love—just as he chose you and me to serve him and people! Moses’ attitude became humility as he experienced the holiness and the power and the forgiveness of his God. Who am I that I should be given heaven? Who are you? Who am I that I should called a child of God as I stand here? Who are you? “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me!” God has forgiven me, he has forgiven you--so with great humility we serve!

B. Patient

And as we do so, Paul says, *“Be patient, bearing with one another in love.”* Being God’s child is less about DOing and more about self-awareness, which leads to being less about ME and more about YOU. How patient does God need to be with YOU every day? “Slowness to anger”? How slow to anger are you with the people in your life? Less about you, more about them?

There are times still as a pastor when my wife gets the leftovers of my patience by the time I get home in the evening—to my shame. I can rush a conversation or an explanation and lose patience if she struggles to see my point; I sin against her. She gives me grace! Years ago she once spoke humbly, yet boldly, and said, “Why can’t you be as patient with me as you are with the rest of your members?”

Is Jesus patient with you and me? Matthew 20. Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem. He takes his disciples aside: *“We are going up to Jerusalem. I will be handed over to the Romans by our own people. I will be crucified.”* The next words are shocking! *Then the mother of James and John came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”*

You have GOT to be kidding! My sinful nature would have lit ‘em up! “What a couple of momma’s boys getting mom to ask—and the timing!” But Jesus didn’t “light ‘em up”.

Lovingly and patiently he gave them the light of the gospel that they might better understand. ***“You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”*** To BE a child of God is to be like Jesus, our brother—patient. Less about me; more about you!

APPLICATION So what are you like when you “talk religion”—with a fellow believer or with an unbeliever? Are you a unifying force for Christ’s Church through humility, gentleness and patience—or are you one who empties the room?

Have you ever been a spiritual chihuahua—barking nonstop in self-defense knowing that you are small in your knowledge of Jesus and not wanting to be ashamed?

Have you ever been the German Shepherd, dividing or emptying the room with loud barks of authority as you wield the Word of God like a club--putting fear into hearts rather than bringing comfort to souls?

As Jesus walked the earth, I envision him more like a yellow lab, just wantin’ to be your friend! People drawn to him, knowing he would be loving and comforting. Oh, man’s best friend shouts the alarm, warns of danger, barks to get our attention! Jesus is our best friend and the most important voice in the room, speaking with “gravitas”, weightiness, but with gentleness and patience. He knows our struggles...our weaknesses. He knows what to say!

2. I WILL LIVE WORTHY OF GOD’S GIFTS

A. Peace with Him

“Live a life worthy of your calling. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

The empty cross of Jesus unifies his Church. It is the symbol of our faith because it says it all about the way of salvation. The punishment for sin is real—Jesus took it for me. The payment for sin is real—blood--Jesus shed it for me. The shedding of blood is complete—the cross is empty for me. ***“My peace I give to you,”*** Jesus says.

The cross sits high atop our churches and large above our altars, reminding us of the peace we have with God, and God’s intent that we share his peace with the world. Peace with God—the vertical beam—peace with fellow Christians—the horizontal beam.

“Eager to keep the unity of the Spirit”? It means to cherish the peace that we have with our God—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. It means to spend time in worship regularly to grow the bond we have with our Father as we confess our sins and he reassures us of his forgiveness. The child of God is not afraid of the Father ***who is over all and through all and in all***. God is in every corner of our world and in every moment of our lives, yet there is no fear for you and me. Though he sees our sin, he sees the blood. Though he sees our sin, he hears for our cries for forgiveness. Though he is a holy God, he leads with grace, expressed at the cross and reassures us of the peace we have with him.

B. Peace with You

“Eager to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” also means to nurture the peace that we have with all Christians as we share richly the voice of our God. It means to anticipate the peace yet to come with people the world over as we share the good news of Jesus, his voice. *Nurture* and *outreach*...both of which are on you and me.

For its own purposes, the world longs for unity and peace. History is filled with attempts to bring about lasting peace between peoples. Forced empires, negotiated treaties with threats,

coalitions with promises, the United Nations with vision, NATO from fear, the “War to End all Wars” a forgotten hope! What unites doesn’t last; what is evil tears down again.

But there is *a peace that surpasses all understanding* that thrills the hearts of Christians around the globe--first seen at Pentecost as diverse peoples heard the gospel and believed—pictured in Revelation with the great multitude in heaven from every nation, tribe, people and language who loved the voice of the Lamb and now stand before his throne--and nurtured in this place as you and I love the peace of our God and share it joyfully with any and all who come through these doors curious about our God! A message of UNITY: one body and Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. Ours to share. It is on us!

APPLICATION I know of a family who once switched churches within the Milwaukee area with the specific intent of getting to know and to worship with people of different skin color and nationalities BEFORE arriving in heaven! They felt they were missing out on the tangible peace that the people of God enjoy in Jesus. Jesus connects the dots between differences through his love. Jesus heals the strife of sins’ hurts with his forgiveness. Jesus addresses it all through his Word. And Christians are blessed with these, his gifts, when we bring his Word to the table and when we remember to listen to his voice, the one that matters most.

CONCLUSION Unity in the Church. Is it really on me? Hmm...no. It is truly the work of God’s Spirit. But, YES, for the Spirit chooses to work through us. Let us live worthy of that calling—humble, gentle, cherishing his peace, cherishing his voice! Let us share it with the world!

Why so many denominations? Ask God’s people. And bring Jesus with you to the table. Amen.