

Together in Christ amid Divisive Times

Sermon 1 in Series

Ephesians 4:1-6; John 17:1-23

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4 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **3** eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. **4** There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6 ESV)

This year (2020) has been strange and also a little trying. I hardly need to enumerate the reasons, but in case you just arrived from Mars: A pandemic brought the global economy to a near halt, upended all normalcy, and continues to try our patience. Protests and riots over questions of race and justice erupted across American cities, with intensity we've not seen since the 1960s. And added to the mix this fall is a presidential election which, we are told, may be extremely contentious.

I'm a young leader. This summer marked my first year as rector at The Falls Church Anglican. I've found myself asking God over and over how to lead our church at this moment. *What does the church need to hear? In what direction are you guiding us? How should we engage the issues surging about us?*

In this posture of listening, one thing that has struck me is the diversity of opinions right here, within our own church family. Well-meaning, wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ, hold different views about the issues upon us. We agree deeply in our love for Christ, in our desire to see godliness and goodness increase in the world around us, especially when there is so much uncertainty and pain. However, we don't always agree on the best ways to go about things.

- We all agree, for example, on the importance of public health, economic stability, and the wise balancing of courage and prudence. We don't always agree, however, on how courage and prudence work themselves out in our response to the Coronavirus. There are real differences of opinions in our church family about this.

- We all agree, I pray deeply, on the evil of racism. How best to diagnose its prevalence today, and the best ways to bring increased healing or talk about it, are matters upon which our community holds various views.
- We all agree on the benefits of our democracy, that we can vote, freely voice our opinions, even run for political office. We don't always agree, however, on which policies or parties best capture the passions of Jesus Christ.

As I've observed these differences, I've come to see them as a good thing. I hope we can always be a church where, though we agree deeply on Biblical Orthodoxy, we are allowed to hold various views on matters of "applied wisdom". However, as I've watched the mood of our culture, so rife with division, I've also become concerned about something. I believe a spirit of division is at work in our land. A lack of trust, listening, and love sits upon us like a black cloud, and subtly seeps into everything. My concern going into this fall is that this spirit of division seeks to sow its seeds inside the body of Christ.

We are a wonderful church and have been through so much together, and we love each other. But I want us to be alert to Satan's devices as we enter this fall. Do you know that *division* is one of his chief tactics? The Serpent divides Eve God by sowing seeds of mistrust (Genesis 3: 1-5). Sin, crouching at the door of Cain's heart, creates a murderous division between Cain and his brother Abel (Genesis 4). While Moses is atop Mount Sinai, sin in the form of pride and impatience sows seeds of mistrust and lust amid Israel and divides a people from their God and leader (Exodus 32). And reaching its ultimate culmination, sin divides the Son from the Father on the Cross, with Jesus crying, "my God my God, why hast thou forsaken me" (Matthew 27).

Satan and sin divide. They divide us from God and each other. We should anticipate that, in a moment of such division and stress around us, Satan and sin will surely seek to sow division within our church family. Sin will take an issue that two brothers in Christ disagree about, but who has the best of intentions and twist it into a feeling of disdain for one's own brother.

Seeing this dark cloud in our land, I am setting before our church family a higher calling this fall. The calling is to embody Paul's words in Ephesians 4:3: "Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

My vision for TFCA in the next several months is this:

May our love for Christ, and Christ's love for us, foster a togetherness that bears witness to the Gospel of Hope, which we hold out to a weary and divided world.

In short, I'm praying that especially at this moment, our community in Christ would be compelling. Hence, our series for the fall is titled *Together in Christ amid Divisive Times*. Drawing from the book of Ephesians, we will consider in depth the community that Christ creates, His Body, the Church. And we will take note of these three aspects of it: that community's *nature, habits, and love*.

- By the **nature** of the community, we will consider what is unique about this community in terms of how it comes about, and whom it may include. We'll consider its *depth* and *diversity*.
- By the **habits** of the community, we mean that the community created by Christ thinks and acts in a unique way because it is endowed by the Spirit of Christ. What does it mean to understand and engage with the issues around us, not with the wisdom of the world, but through the eyes of Jesus Christ? Here we consider the *thinking* and *doing* of the community.
- By the community's **love**, we must ask what's unique about how the community loves *inwardly* and *outwardly*. Here we will spend much time on what it means to love one another inside the body of Christ, and then from that foundation head, to be a loving presence in the world.

With the remainder of this sermon, I want to do three things, all drawing from Scripture: First, further, explain the importance of considering the unity of the body of Christ. Second, clarify what we mean, and don't mean, by unity. And third, briefly highlight what is the driving energy of Christian togetherness.

I. The Importance of Christian Unity

I wonder if for any of you a focus on church unity is somewhat disappointing; perhaps, in light of all the pain in the world right now, to focus inwardly, on the nature of our own community, seems selfish? I want to give you a few reasons why this is not the case, why focusing on the nature of our own community and its health is essential to us and our mission.

1. The Church's togetherness, unity, is key to the vibrancy of its witness

I want to give you this connection in Scripture. As noted above, in Ephesians 4:3 Paul says to the church community: "be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This is not merely driven by Paul's desire that those individual Christians enjoy harmony. Rather, in Ephesians 3, just prior, he tells us what is at stake in the Church's togetherness. God has built the church, Paul explains, so that "Through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 3:10).

People see God's glory manifest through nature—a beautiful landscape or sunset. Ephesians 3:10 tells us that the power of God's love and grace are made tangible, manifest, through the quality and uniqueness of Christian togetherness. Our love and commitment to each other is the vista by which our neighbors will see God's love. In a passage we will return to in a moment, John 17, Jesus prays to His Father for His followers: "May they become perfectly one, so that the world may know that they sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (John 17:23). Here again, oneness is for the sake of the world knowing who God and Christ are.

2. Knowing this, Satan sows seeds of division inside the church

If the quality of our life together is essential to God's mission, then it makes sense that Satan would work to undermine it. Let me give you an example of this at work in one of the first churches, the church in Corinth. Three times in 1 Corinthians Paul uses a word we could translate as "schism." And it's not over issues of biblical doctrine, but issues of Christian maturity.

In 1 Corinthians 1:10-12, Paul writes:

10 I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and

the same judgment. **11** For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. **12** What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

They are quarreling over which leader they associate with, as though Paul is someone competing with Jesus for disciples. Later, in chapter 11, Paul addresses their behavior when they come together for a meal and the Lord's Supper:

18...when you come together as a church, I hear that there are **divisions among you**...**20** When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. **21** For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. **22** What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? (1 Corinthians 11:18, 20-22)

The church drew people from various classes, the wealthy and the very poor. Apparently, those with plenty were feasting while the poor who had come to know Christ, went hungry. Perhaps it was simply the case that these different classes didn't associate in normal life, so had no desire to engage inside the church, either. A division of society running right through the people of God.

Finally, in chapter 12, Paul deals with divisions over the nature and practices of spiritual gifts, and here we find what is really at stake:

24 But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, **25** that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. **26** If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:24-26)

Division undermines the community's care for itself

Like releasing poison into the air ducts of a hospital, division undermines the bodies' purpose to build itself up. We could turn to almost any of Paul's letters and find him dealing with threats of division and the need for the young churches to remain united. I don't flag this aspect of the early church because I feel we have all types of divisions in our own church. As I said before, I think we are an amazingly loving family of God. I flag it to alert us to a way I believe the enemy may threaten us in weeks and months ahead, and so you see that it's an old trick.

3. The divisiveness of this American moment is about heart allegiances; therefore, it's an opportunity to reevaluate which community holds the greatest sway over our hearts

Nearing the end of his life, Paul writes to his prodigy, Timothy, these sad words about a mutual friend: "Demas, in love with this present world, deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:10). Demas didn't leave the church because of an intellectual difference; he left the church because his heart was more pulled by the world.

What we love most has the greatest pull on our hearts

As tensions rise, **what do you love?** This fall, as you feel passionate about causes or parties, or communities, you should be asking yourself where your deepest loves lie.

What most captivates you? What holds your greatest hope? Where are you putting your ultimate trust? From what do you get your real identity and sense of worth?

Is it from a nation? Is it from a political party? Is it from a movement or a social cause? Is it from your family? Or, is it from Jesus Christ? Does Jesus Christ really possess your heart? Is He really your ultimate faith, hope, and love? Of course, we can be patriotic, fiercely committed to a political view, or deeply committed to a movement. Paul himself has no qualms about appealing to his Roman citizenship when needed (Acts 16; 22), nor in telling his churches to honor governmental authorities (Romans 13). However, he ultimately tells Christians, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20).

If we are a community of people whose first love is not Christ, but rather some other cause or movement, then our unity will be under great threat in a season such as this. If, on the other hand, we are united around our love for Christ, then our bonds of love are strong enough to bear the strain of differing opinions, even when there are deep differences.

These, then, are some of the reasons for us to consider the vibrancy of our togetherness in Christ this fall. Our unity is integral to our witness; we can expect it to be under attack, and when it appears weak, it may be because of disordered loves.

II. Clarifying Unity

We need to take a moment to clarify a concept. What do we mean, and not mean, by unity? An Episcopal bishop once quipped: "I would gladly take heresy over schism." What he meant was that it's more important to preserve unity than to agree on truth. Is this the vision of unity we get from Jesus?

1. Unity not around unity, but Christ

If we turn to John 17, where Jesus is offering one of His final prayers to the Father before His crucifixion, we can gain a better sense of what Jesus understands unity to entail. His focus in this prayer surely is our unity, but it is not around a mere sense of unity. Let me point out a few aspects of Jesus' view of unity.

First, notice that Jesus is not praying for everyone, but a select group of people. He says, "I am praying for **them**. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9). To our surprise, Jesus is not praying that every person in the world would be united. He literally says, "I am not praying for the world." Rather, He says, "I am praying for them." Who, exactly, does this "them" refer to?

Put succinctly, it refers to a group that has these three things in common:

- First, they have undergone a **conversion** from no faith to true faith in God—a new birth. In verse 6 Jesus says, "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world" (John 17:6). The language of "whom you gave me" refers to those God has chosen, who have been born anew by the Spirit through faith in Christ.
- Second, they are those **trusting in God's word**. "You gave them to me, and they have kept your word...I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them." (John 17:6, 8)
- Third, Jesus is praying for those who **believe that Jesus is God's unique Son**. "...those who have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me." (John 17:8)

When we talk about the unity of the people of God, we are not talking about an ethereal sense of unity we'd like the entire world to enjoy. It's not that such unity is not important. Rather, it's crucial that we see that in God's plan, He is creating a unique type of unity around some specific realities: conversion, faith in Christ, and fidelity to God's word.

2. Unity is not a mushy feeling but a blood-earnest commitment

A second clarification about this unity has to do with its *quality*, or what it may feel like. Some may think that Christian unity means that Christians can never disagree, and always feel warm and fuzzy toward each other. Of course, our unity has at its core a deep love, but it is strong enough to bear disagreements. Just consider the Apostle Paul, who tells the Ephesians to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:3) Paul was no naive simpleton when it came to togetherness in the church; in fact, he seems to have been temperamentally predisposed to a good debate.

In a stunning episode in Galatians, Paul tells us he has a public blow-up with the great Apostle Peter, and "opposed him to his face" (Galatians 2:11). In Acts, we find him at odds with his dear friend Barnabas (who is the Son of Encouragement) about mission tactics. They two have a "sharp disagreement" and need to "separate" for a season (Acts 15:39).

Part of the uniqueness of Christian unity is that our eternal bonds of agreement in Christ are so deep, they can bear the momentary strain of disagreements.

III. The Love that Binds

I want to close with a final word about the center, or secret, of Christian unity. For some groups, unity is aimed at through mutual toleration: just put up with each other. For other groups, unity comes through shared interests or mutual commitments. The burning heart of Christian unity, however, is none of these—it is, in a single word, *love*.

Turning again to Jesus' prayer in John 17, and this time to its close. Our Lord concludes this prayer for unity by asking the Father that "...the love with which you have loved me may be in them" (John 17:26). Take a moment to realize what this prayer is asking: Jesus is asking that the depth, passion, and extent

of the Father's Love for His Son, would be *in us*. This is how He concludes His prayer for our unity. *Together in Christ amid Divisive Times*. Why? Because when we love and commit to one another because of our bonds in Christ, then our community is the burning flame of God's love for His own Son.

Concluding with one application, I recently went for a haircut. The first thing the barber did was take my temperature; they had to be sure that I wasn't sick with covid. When we find ourselves disagreeing with the views of a brother or sister in Christ this fall, I want us to pause to take our temperature. And here is what you are to look for:

You sense a strong difference of viewpoint or opinion from someone in your small group: If your reaction is "I think I may ask them to coffee, or perhaps to go for a walk, to learn more about why they hold that view. I want to really understand where they are coming from, then perhaps ask if I can share my thoughts." This is a passionate interest guided by love for them; you are being guided by the Spirit of Christ. On the other hand, if your reaction is disgust and disdain, and you find yourself questioning not only their sanity but salvation, then you are being guided, perhaps, by the spirit of the World.

When you disagree with your brother or sister in Christ, does a spirit of passionate interest or a spirit of disgust and disdain arise?

This is a question that will help you discern which spirit is at work within the body.