

Trinity 17

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians:

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in 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 you all.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

Last week, we looked at St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians from two standpoints: first in a historical sense, placing the time and place of its writing, and second, as a circular letter written around the year 62. By circular letter, we mean that it was not written expressly for the Church in Ephesus but was sent out to all the Churches, ending up in Ephesus, where it was given its name, the *Epistle to the Ephesians*.

In looking closely at this particular letter, we were impressed by its beauty; but, at the same time we became focused on something else; something that Paul had stumbled upon which he referred to as *cause*. Indeed, we asked, what was this *cause* that Paul felt needed to be universally addressed, so painstakingly addressed?

We concluded that, simply stated, it is the unity of all things in Jesus Christ.

We paused to look at the world today, noting that *unity* is not one concept that comes to mind.

Rather than unity, there is disunity among nations, and within nations. There is cultural disunity, racial disunity, religious disunity, and even disunity within families. We find within ourselves, there is disunity as we struggle with good on one side, and evil on the other.

In the midst of a splintered, chaotic world, the question of Christian unity may seem a remote concept; but, no doubt, it is very present in the minds of many Christians. The thought may even occur that this lack of Christian unity, even Christian resolve, might be a significant factor in the many crises that we Christians and the Western World face today; not just the Western World but the entire world.

Why are we as Christians so divided; so many denominations and sects, themselves splintered and divided? Indeed, why is the Anglican Church, in particular, long considered one of the three Apostolic Churches, at the forefront of catholic reform, so divided?

And, today, why is what we refer to as the *Continuing Church* so divided in its formidable role as *Preserver of the Faith*?

First, though, let us focus on the central theme of St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, this idea of **unity**, the unity of all things in Jesus Christ: it is the *cause*, for which, Paul states, *I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ....*

Notwithstanding disunity in the world, we turn our attention toward a more pressing *cause*, a *cause* of greater concern, that of disunity within the **Church**, and, perhaps, more to the point, disunity within ourselves; for, within ourselves, we are divided in a struggle between good and evil.

In his Epistle, Paul points out clearly that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ into the world to show us the way to unity, and it is in Jesus Christ, and through Him, that we are brought into unity with God, reconciled to our Heavenly Father.

It is the task of the **Church**, indeed, the task of each individual Christian, to be the instrument of our Lord in bringing about a universal reconciliation between individuals, within the world, and with God.

For us as individual Christians, this is seemingly an overwhelming task.

Now, as we turn to today's passage, St. Paul lays down the basis of *unity*:

There is one body, that is, the Church, of which Christ is the head;

There is one Spirit, the life-giving breath of the body, the **Church**, which is the Spirit of Jesus Christ;

There is one hope of our calling, that is, there is one goal, and that goal is a world redeemed in Christ;

There is one Lord, Jesus Christ;

There is one Faith, in which is the complete commitment of every Christian to Jesus Christ;

There is one baptism;

And there is one God who is the **Father** of all: He is *above* all, He is *through* all, and He is *in* all.

What this means is that God is in control, no matter what things may look like, no matter how chaotic and desperate the world may seem.

God did not create the world, and leave it to its own devices, whatever we might think. He is all through the world, guiding and sustaining it, and, most of all, loving all that he has created.

God is the spark that gives us life, and he dwells within us through the Holy Spirit.

It is our Christian belief that this is a God-created, God-controlled, God-sustained, and God-filled world. He is the unity to which we, as Christians, seek reconciliation through Christ. Thus, it is, as it should be, a God-centered world. But, it is?

In his Epistle, Paul charges us as Christians to work to maintain a visible unity in the **Church**. We are not to be passive believers, but doers.

He begins the passage:

"I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the call to which you have been called."

What is it to which we are being called? It is a new society, and the call is a divine call. This new society, the **Church**, has two major characteristics: **Unity** and **Purity**;

Unity, in that it is composed of Jew and Gentile, a single family of God;

Purity, in that this one people are *holy*, and set apart from the rest of the world.

Yes. We Christians are set apart from the world. We are sojourners. Our true home is not here on earth but elsewhere; it is a heavenly home; and our final destination where we will be united to God through Christ Jesus.

Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians concerns both **Unity** and **Purity**: the *oneness* of the new society, the unity of which depends on **Purity**.

By purity is meant our character and conduct; the kind of life we must live within the fellowship of the Christian Church.

Paul characterizes our calling to this new society by five qualities: lowliness, meekness, patience, mutual forbearance, and love.

While most people would approach the calling to a new society by first addressing the structure, Paul does the opposite, and puts the emphasis on moral qualities.

The moral qualities Paul lists are a reflection of Jesus Christ Himself.

First, *lowliness*, a quality much misunderstood, not servility, but rather *the humble recognition of the worth and value of other people*.

Indeed, our Lord humbled Himself, and it was through Him that true humility was recognized.

How is this humility essential to unity?

True humility promotes respect of others for their intrinsic God-given worth, as opposed to pride, which promotes discord.

The next quality is *meekness*, which balances *lowliness*; it is a quality of moderation, the mean between extremes, as in *the mean between being too angry, and never being angry at all*.

Meekness was not a synonym for weakness, but rather was the gentleness of the strong; strength under control.

Lowliness and *meekness* formed a natural pair, and were found together in our Lord, who was *gentle and lowly in heart*.

The next two qualities also form a natural pair: *patience* and *forbearance*.

Patience is *long-suffering towards aggravating people*; while forbearing one another is mutual tolerance, so necessary for human beings to live together in peace.

The final quality is *love*, which encompasses the other four, the crowning virtue, which seeks the welfare of others and the good of the community. Paul elaborated on this in the 13 chapter of his first letter to the Church at Corinth.

These five qualities — *lowliness, meekness, patience, mutual forbearance, and love* — form the basis of Christian unity; they are the foundation stones without which no external, or visible structure of unity can stand.

Paul next focuses our attention on the unity of God, the premise being that *Christian unity arises from the unity of God*.

In the four verses, Paul uses the word *one* seven times, alluding to the three Persons of the Trinity, and our experience in relationship to the three Persons.

First, we were all, whether Jew or Gentile, baptized into one body by the one Holy Spirit. That body is the Church, the Body of Christ.

The Holy Spirit dwells within this Body, animating and providing the cohesion.

Secondly, in our calling, there is one Hope, one Faith, and one Baptism, because there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is the object of the faith, hope, and baptism of all Christians.

And thirdly, we are all one Christian family, because there is one God and Father, who is above all and through all and in all.

Thus we affirm that there is one Father, who creates the one family; one Lord Jesus Christ, who creates the one faith, hope, and baptism; and one Spirit, who creates the one Body.

The Christian reality is that there is only one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and, thus, only one *Church*.

But how does this account for all the denominations and religious sects?

Perhaps we can recall from our Anglican teaching the terms *visible* and *invisible* Church, also expressed as the Church militant, and the *Church* expectant.

The invisible *Church* is one *Church*, one body, because God is one; while in our physical reality, the *Church* has the appearance of disunity.

There is this paradox of unity and disunity. The *Church* in our limited human vision seems to be splintered, and indeed, in our human reality, it is. There is no visible appearance of unity; yet there remains that invisible unity, which can be demonstrated through reconciliation with God.

Still, as human beings, our focus is more on the visible, than the invisible; and the world responds more to the concrete, than the spiritual. The visible disunity, therefore, will continue to be a stumbling block within the *Church Militant*, and will continue to be a source of empowerment for those fomenting chaos within the world, and undermining Christian resolve in the conflict between good and evil.

That we can ever achieve visible *Christian Unity* may be a theoretical question.

However, the qualities St. Paul lists in his Letter to the Ephesians are essential prerequisites to unity. *Lowliness, meekness, patience, mutual forbearance, and love* must be reflected in each of us if we are to take the first step toward *unity*. No one who wishes to be called a Christian can be exempted from these essential moral qualities, which are the foundation stones of the Christian character.

Indeed, these characteristics, or virtues, spill over into the natural world for they reflect exactly what distinguishes human beings from the rest of *Creation*, and form the basis for the moral standards of any society, more specifically, the basic framework of our own American society which has so declared them and constituted them.

Indeed, from family, to community, to Church, to nation, even the world, these Christian virtues lead us into the *bond of peace*, that is, a right relationship, one with another. This *bond of peace* reflects the sacred oneness that should characterize the true *Church*, and depends on the Christian's integration of the virtues Paul lists. Such integration results in the obliteration of *self*, for as long as *self* is at the center, oneness can never be fully achieved.

It is only when the *self* gives way, allowing Jesus Christ to spring to life in our hearts, that we can experience the peace, the oneness, that is the hallmark of the true *Church*.

Thus, to this *cause*, with Paul, we bow our knees unto God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we, united in fellowship, in the *bond of peace*, may become one in Christ, and experience the all encompassing, limitless love of Jesus Christ.