

Proper 13 B
Ephesians 4:1-16
August 4, 2024

“The Heart of Unity”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and parent of all, who is above all and through all and in all . . . But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

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There was conflict brewing at First Community Church between its minister and its choir director and it was beginning to spill over into worship. Everyone noticed when the minister preached on commitment and dedication and then the choir sang, “I Shall Not Be Moved.” Everyone noticed when the minister preached on giving to the ministry of the church and then the choir sang, “Jesus Paid it All.” Everyone noticed when the minister preached on the evils of gossip and then the choir sang, “I Love to Tell the Story.” It had all become too much. The minister could take no more. “Jesus led me to this church,” she said one Sunday during the sermon, “and Jesus is leading me away.” She resigned on the

spot. Everyone noticed when the choir concluded with, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”¹

Let’s face it, churches are no strangers to conflict. In fact, the New Testament book of Acts attests to the fact that conflict and church have coexisted since nearly the beginning. The apostle Paul often wrote to churches in conflict, letters still preserved in our Bibles. And the passage I shared a few moments ago from the Letter to the Ephesians could be summarized simply by saying: “Church, get along!” But that’s not how the author does it. Instead, they appeal to the virtue of the hearers – to their humility, gentleness, patience, love, and peace. The author reminds them of the one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God they share. And then, in what is an ingenious metaphor, the author implores their audience to work together as the different parts of one body, united in Spirit for the body’s good.

I’ve always loved this body metaphor for the church. I especially love fleshing it out with children. “If the church were a body,” I’d say, “and you were one of the body parts, which one would you be?” Which one would *you* be? One precocious child might say, “I’d be the mouth, cuz I talk a lot.” Another might say, “I’d be the hands, cuz I like to help.” And another might say, “I’m kinda naughty, so I guess I’d be a pain in the...neck!” Seriously, though, what part are you?

We all have gifts and talents, skills and abilities. It really does take all of us to *be* the church in this time and place. We’re Congregationalists, for crying out loud, we actually believe this stuff! So, what part are you? In the unity of the Spirit, we each do our part and the body functions properly, growing and building itself up in love.

¹ H. Guthrie Chamberlain, adapted. “Church Conflict – Humor Unplugged,” Wisdom-trek.com, November 12, 2020: <https://wisdom-trek.com/wisdom-trek-podcast/day-1517/>.

Unity, though, is a word that gets thrown around an awful lot. In the last couple of weeks, we've heard politicians calling for national unity saying things like:

- “The discord and division in our society must be healed.”
- “Unity is the most elusive goal of all. But nothing is as important as that right now.”
- “We rise together. Or we fall apart.”

But, sadly, such calls for unity ring hollow when followed up with the kind of partisanship, blaming, and divisiveness we've come to expect in our nation's political arena.

Unity is not a warm and fuzzy campfire feeling that you get while holding hands and singing “Kumbaya.” But it's also not that rock-solidly right feeling that you get when you're with a group of folks who miraculously agree on everything. Unity is not the absence of disagreement or difference. It is not a state of sameness-induced serenity. And it is not easy.

But you get this. New England Church gets this. It's one of the things I love most about you – about this church. We are a united church, but we are certainly not all the same. We can disagree about a variety of topics from politics and current events, to biblical interpretation, to the best volume for a pipe organ. We can talk about things openly and express ourselves freely and respectfully. And we can do it all while being fiercely committed to one another, to the community we create together, and to the spirit of the faith we profess. That, friends, is real unity. Authentic unity. And it's what the author of our text from Ephesians was calling that church to embody. And it's what our nation and our world desperately need to figure out.

We are each a part of the body. We have different functions, different beliefs, different values, and different ways of doing things. But together, in the unity of the Spirit, we each do our part and the body functions

properly, growing and building itself up in love. So, why can't the rest of the world do it too?

I have a theory and it's this: I believe that the beating heart of unity is an ironclad and unwavering commitment to one another, to togetherness, to being community as one. Without that heart beating in our body – the body of this church – I don't think we would be any different than any other group of people whose differences rend them asunder. But with it, we are able to do and to be so much more than we could be as individuals. And together, we stand a real shot of showing our community that unity is more than a nice word to throw around in speeches – that unity is actually possible.

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1). Thanks be to God and may it be so. Amen.