

ONE

Ephesians 4:1-16

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

August 5, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 4, verses 1 through 16. It is on page 828 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the reading of Scripture. From Ephesians 4, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore it says,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”

⁹(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is one Lord. His name is Jesus Christ, and he is the only Lord. And he is who he is. What is true of him is true, and what is not true of him is not true.

The same thing is true for the other members of the Trinity. The apostle Paul says there is “one Spirit” (4:4), there is “one Lord” (4:5)—who is Jesus Christ—and there is “one God and Father of all” (4:6). They are who they are. There is only one of each. What is true of them is true. And what is not true of them is not true.

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Now this should be obvious, but, oftentimes, when we deal with religious matters, we get this silly idea that what is true in one person's mind is different from what is true in another person's mind, and both can be true in reality. And I suppose this idea persists because religious matters, at least for the most part, lie beyond what we can see and handle at the present moment.

Many ordinary nonreligious controversies can be settled simply by investigating the facts. Suppose you have a friend named Bill. And you and another friend are confused about Bill's family tree, so you're arguing about whether Bill is the son of Fred or some other guy. You can't both be right, but fortunately you can settle the argument. You can go and ask Bill, or you can ask Fred, and you can find out for sure whether or not Bill is Fred's son, because, either Bill is Fred's son, or he is not. You can't both be right. But you can discover the truth, and then, when the person who was wrong is persuaded to the right side, you can both be right.

But for some reason we get this silly idea that religious truth is somehow different than real truth. So we say stuff like, "What's true for one person might not be true for another." So one person's truth might be that Jesus is the Son of God, but for someone else, it's not their truth. This is pure nonsense.

But people tend to think this way because they think that religious truth claims can't be tested. They think that the laws of truth that govern every other area of life don't apply to religion. Now most religious truth claims can't be tested. And if that's the case, we shouldn't call them truth at all. We shouldn't even say that that untestable claim is someone's truth, because none of us know if it really is truth.

But Christianity is different. It is actually much different, because God appeared in human flesh, proving himself with signs and wonders. Chief among these signs and wonders is his resurrection from the dead. This either happened, or it didn't. So Christianity actually invites the world to test it by the standards of history. And there is only one religion that does this: Christianity.

Now we could go on and on about the evidence for Christianity, especially regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that would be worth our time, but we've done that before, and it's not really the point of this text. I brought it up because what Paul teaches in this text is dependent on the reality that there is only one Father, there is only one Lord Jesus Christ, and there is only one Holy Spirit. What is true for each of these members of the Trinity is true, and what is not true about them is not true.

So you and I cannot have different Jesuses. We cannot have different Holy Spirits. And we cannot have different heavenly Fathers. There is only one of each, and they are who they are. We might have different beliefs regarding each of these three persons, but these three persons are who they are, regardless of who we think they are. So we should not be content to have different beliefs regarding these three persons. In fact, we should not be content to have different beliefs regarding any aspect of Christian doctrine, because if we are content to let our differences remain, it means that at least one of us will be wrong.

Now this is opposite to the way many Christians approach the problem of Christian unity and our theological diversity. In my observation, at least, most Christians tend to think the best thing we can do for Christian unity is not worry about our differences. But in this text, Paul teaches the opposite. In this text Paul teaches that there is one truth, and we should strive for unity in this one truth.

Christian unity is the theme of this text. Now, on one hand, Christian unity is a reality, whether we recognize it or not. And, on the other hand, Christian unity is still a goal to be attained.

First, Christian unity as a reality that we should recognize: Paul says that we should be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). So he speaks of Christian unity as something that already exists. He also says, “There is one body” (4:4). This is a reference to the Church. There is only one Christian Church. Now there are certainly lots of Christian congregations. We typically refer to them as “churches” with a lowercase c. But there is only one Christian Church with a capital C. This one holy Christian Church is often referred to as “the body of Christ.” And since there is only one Christ, there can be only one Church. So Paul says, “There is one body.”

And this is related to Baptism as well. Baptism is the instrument the Holy Spirit uses to connect us to Christ. We are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12). We are not baptized into anything or anyone else. There is only one Baptism, and it is Baptism into the one body of Jesus Christ. This one Baptism unites us into one body—the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. So, whether we recognize it or not, we already are united with one another in Jesus Christ. So, on the one hand, Christian unity is a reality to be recognized.

On the other hand, it is still a goal to be attained. And this has to do with the term “one faith.” Now usually the word “faith” is kind of synonymous with the word “trust.” It typically refers to our believing in something or someone. This is what we mean when we say, “I have faith in Jesus.” It means the same thing as, “I believe in Jesus,” or, “I trust in Jesus.” But other times the word “faith” refers to a system of doctrine. And this happens in both Greek and English. We might refer to “the Christian faith,” or “the Hindu faith,” or any other set of religious beliefs as a “faith.” In this way the word “faith” is basically synonymous with the words “creed” or “doctrine.” And this second definition is how Paul uses the word “faith” in this text, both in verse 5, where he talks about “one faith” and later in verse 13 where he talks about “the unity of the faith.”

So when Paul says there is “one faith,” he means that there is only one Christian truth. Within a congregation and among different denominations of Christians, we might have different opinions and beliefs. We might have different understandings of what this Christian faith is, but there is only one Christian faith. There is only one Christian doctrine.

Sometimes we talk about different denominations as if we have different doctrine. We talk about Lutheran doctrine, or Roman Catholic doctrine, or Baptist doctrine. But that’s not really the right way to speak of it. There is only one Christian doctrine. So a better way to distinguish out differences is to speak of “the Lutheran expression of the Christian faith,” or “the Roman Catholic expression of the Christian faith,” or “the Baptist expression of the Christian faith.” Now maybe that just seems a little too wordy and too fine of a distinction. But hopefully it will help us remember that we don’t have a bunch of different truths. There is only one truth, and we should all try, as best as we can, to express that truth faithfully and accurately. It’s not a truth that we get to make up. We don’t get to decide what it is. We could have a voters meeting and decide that God is a rainbow colored unicorn, but that doesn’t make it true. We do

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not determine what truth is. Truth exists outside of us, and if we are going to know the truth of God, the best way to know that truth is to listen to what he has revealed about himself.

The sad reality is that we have a lot of differences among Christians. And this is not a good thing. We should not be content with this. Paul expresses God's desire that "we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (4:13).

It's easy to see the differences among Christians when we think of it on the level of denominations. Lutherans and Baptists and Presbyterians and Pentecostals and Roman Catholics all have differences. That's plain to see. But you or I are not going to swing an entire denomination. So the place where we should work to "attain to the unity of the faith" is on an individual level—with our Methodist or Catholic or even other Lutheran friends. Because Lutherans don't always agree with each other. Even within the same congregation—including this one—we are bound to find areas in which we disagree. And this is not good.

Now the world tells us that we should celebrate diversity in all its forms. And some forms of diversity are good. *I know that; please don't sign me up for sensitivity training.* But theological diversity is not good. Suppose we have a group of ten people, and all ten of us have different beliefs about God. All that means is that at least nine of us are wrong. That's not good. If we believe that God exists, and if we believe that God has revealed his truth in the Holy Scriptures, then we should not be content with our doctrine until we reach unity in every part. Now that might sound crazy and unreasonable, but this is the will of God—"that we attain to the unity of the faith."

And maybe "doctrine" is a dirty word in your opinion. But the only kind of doctrine that is bad is false doctrine. True doctrine is good, because true doctrine is simply the teaching of who God is and what he does. Sometimes you might hear someone say, "I don't care much for doctrine; I just care about loving Jesus." But the problem is, you can't love Jesus unless you know who he is, and doctrine is the teaching of who he is. It's kind of like saying, "I don't really know much about my wife; I just focus on loving her." That won't work with your wife, and it won't work with Jesus. It's impossible to love Jesus without doctrine. A Christian really can't ignore the study of Christian doctrine. Without doctrine—that is, without the study of the Holy Scriptures—your faith will have no content, and that faith will die. This is what we remind parents, sponsors, and the congregation of every time we baptize a child. Teaching the Christian faith is not optional. It is necessary.

So God "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers" (4:11) for this very task. The word "shepherd," by the way, is the same as the word "pastor." This is why I'm here—to teach the Word of God, with the goal that we might all attain to the unity of the faith. The goal is that, by teaching the faith, we would all come to a common understanding of the truth. Now that doesn't mean I'm always right, *though I suppose I could be wrong about that.* But God's Word is always right, and when we study it together, and when we wrestle with it together, and when we submit ourselves to its authority, we will grow together into a better understanding of it, and we will get closer and closer to attaining the unity of the faith. Perfect agreement doesn't seem quite possible, at least, not on this side of eternity, but every step closer together is well worth it. And this is God's will—that we "attain to the unity of the faith."

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This goal is worthwhile because doctrine is not trivia. Doctrine is the biblical teaching of who God is and what he has done for us. There's nothing trivial about that. It teaches of our gracious heavenly Father, who created the world and everything in it, yet still cares about each of us individually. It teaches of the Son of God, who came willingly as a human being to suffer and die to make atonement for our sins and who rose again on the third day, opening eternal life for all mankind. It tells of the Holy Spirit, who is sent to be our comforter and sanctifier. He convicts us of our sins when we go astray, and he convinces our hearts that those very sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. Biblical doctrine is not trivia; it is the revelation of this God who loves us and has worked to save us. Everything in Christian doctrine—from the doctrine of the Trinity, to Baptism, to the doctrine of the Church, and everything in between—is connected to the story of our salvation.

So we unite ourselves in this task of growing together in God's Word. We do this so that, with one voice, we might praise our gracious God who has made us one in the body of his Son Jesus Christ. For there is one Lord. His name is Jesus Christ. He is the only Lord. And we are his body. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.