

Bonds of Peace

Seeking God's Wisdom in the Bible

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Ephesians 4:16, 11-16

Introduction

You might have noticed that our society is pretty polarized at the moment. It almost doesn't matter what the issue is anymore – be it immigration and border issues, the role of police in our society, racism, LGBTQI+ issues, or even wearing a mask in the time of corona virus, we are a society where speaking past one another has been taken to a fine-art form on cable TV and the internet, and can spill over into our real lives as we encounter friends and family who think differently..

Listening to the passage in Ephesians about unity therefore seem pretty needed in times like these. Let's see what we might gain from this letter.

Biblical Unity

Our passage in Ephesians uses the word "unity" twice in its short breadth. This might lead you to think that the Bible has a lot of passages about unity, but it doesn't. The word for unity here – "enotata" is only found in the book of Ephesians in this passage. Its close cousin, the word translated as "knit together" is found in only two of the letters attributed to Paul – and these are what scholars call the "doubtful" letters, probably written by his followers.

Indeed, if one takes a look at the New Testament all together, the theme of unity doesn't really seem to enter the picture much at all. Jesus doesn't seem particularly concerned about his debates with the Pharisees, the powerful Jews, the Romans, etc. Sure, he debates them well, but he's not putting himself out to get everyone on the same program.

The early church grappled with its very existence amid a wider culture that didn't really care whether it survived. This letter called Ephesians probably was written by a follower of Paul's, either while he was in prison or after he died. It was a time when the leaders of the first generation had died off, and the leaders of the second generation were facing a more hostile culture, and group of believers who were discouraged that Jesus had not come to deliver the world into a new age.

Furthermore, the early Christians, we know by history, weren't a particularly unified group. Each town (and it was mostly found in towns) had its group of believers, and they were loosely linked by relationships to other groups – much like our worldwide web is today, with no central organization. There weren't a lot of rules that "everybody" followed, because there weren't enough of them to organize that much. Perhaps the clue to the text is in this situation.

Instead of trying to imagine a huge number of people all trying to "believe the same thing" perhaps what we have is group that needs to stick together like family because their numbers are small and they are struggling over what their future might be.

What We are To Do

Along with the exhortation to unity, Paul gives some pretty specific advice on how they are value each other and behave to each other.

First, Paul gives them guidelines on how to behave to each other – to be humble and gentle, with patience and love. I'm thinking that this kind of behavior we especially need to bestow to each other as we continue to cope with altered daily lives and increasingly challenging news around the coronavirus here in Arizona and other states. Anxiety is a challenging emotion, and when coupled with fear, it can overwhelm us.

Anxiety is itself like an emotional virus, and it can spread unless one takes preventive actions. People are losing it in stories and on the highways, I'm sure there are plenty of us having moments of breakdowns in our homes, and plenty of folks are having to face the normal challenges of life on top the base of losses due to the coronavirus.

That's when we need to slow down. That's when Paul's words to us need to guide us in how we treat one another.

At one church I served, there was a bronze plaque on the wall right by the light switch in the pastor's office, to be seen each day the pastor walked into the office. I've since learned that it's an old Russian proverb. It says, "Pray to God, but row toward shore."

These days, rowing toward share looks a lot like what Paul is telling us – the daily acts of discipleship are not big and showy; they are small, but telling.

Dealing with Differences

Frankly, life can be easier when we have folks who will reinforce our own points of view, but we don't grow that way. It takes some differences among ourselves to move along in spiritual development. That can create tension – which we don't like – and it can create some fear on some of us who don't like to express our differences out loud, but it is a skill worth honing, so that we can be real with one another about what we believe, and yet still respect and love one another.

Binding Ourselves Together

Sometimes when we deal with differences it can make us very nervous. We want to “be nice.” We don't really want to know that somebody else thinks something different because it might threaten some of our cherished beliefs.

The passage of scripture is helpful here, I think, for it talks about making sure that we are approaching life and issues with maturity -- that is to say, with a perspective of centeredness in Christ, and in working for the building up our community as the body of Christ. In our sermon bible study this week, several folks noted that being respectful is an essential component to remaining connected.

There's a very helpful set of guidelines put out by our Presbyterian denomination that can help us deal with our differences as members of God's family.¹ The most key thing is that we keep the lines of communication open-- “speaking the truth in love” is how scripture puts it. If we fail to talk to one another, then misconceptions arise almost without trying. *How* we talk to one another is an important part of the equation. Here's what we don't do: talk about other people behind their backs or use judgmental language. Instead, Christ calls us to share our concerns directly with the people we have a problem with. Yes, that can be scary, but it opens us up to creating those bonds of peace that Paul talks about.

What results from this kind of encounter is that peace that is the shalom of God. Shalom is not simply the absence of war. Instead, the word shalom encompasses much more about the well-being of all concerned. Some synonyms are

peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility

Those are worthy goals for us to have, aren't they? Let's strive together as disciples of Christ so that we can bring those qualities here on earth. Amen.

¹ *Seeking to be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement.* Available on PCUSA website at <www.pcusa.org/pcusa/cc/seeking.htm>