

Sermon: June 7, 2020 – Ephesians 4: 1-16
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

YouTube Link: <https://youtu.be/hEqynq64MBI>

In this week when the United Church of Canada reaches the 95-year milestone, my wonderings have gone to what it means to be United, and how we can view unity, not just as practical and efficient, but as an aspect of who we are in Christ.

First, a few quick notes regarding this particular form of unity – what it is and what it is not. There are some related words, like uniformity, unanimity, words suggesting one mode of thought, belief or action. And indeed, the quickest and easiest way to get unity, is to only gather people who look the same and think the same and act the same, and then set up some hard-and-fast rules that make sure that nobody acts or thinks or grows too far outside that initially-agreed-upon fenceline.

That, however, is not the kind of unity that today's reading from the 4th chapter of Ephesians is talking about. Even the great theological authority, *Microsoft Word* tells me that unity is bigger and broader than this. When I ask MS-Word for synonyms for unity, it does come up with unison, union and unanimity but also agreement, concord, accord, and perhaps my favourite of all, harmony. As a congregation that loves to sing, we know the beauty of unison singing, but what richness there is when many notes combine in harmony.

So with that sense of unity in mind, we turn to Ephesians. (4:2-6)

“² Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. ³ Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. ⁵ There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ there is one God and Father of all people, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all.”

Unity is described here as something that the Spirit gives to us, as the Church and, hopefully, in the way we live in a society, and God gives us the toolkit we will need in order to keep it healthy, to keep things in tune: humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, and a commitment to peace.

As a singular gift, given by the Holy Spirit, unity lives within a sense of common ground, and our most basic common ground is God, one divine entity that is the foundation of our being and the source of our love, one universal presence that is “in all” and “works through all.” There are profoundly different ways in how we discern and experience and articulate the holy presence we call God, but it is one loving, present God who loves us, calls us, takes up residence within us and around us and between us.

As this passage about unity continues, verses 11 and 12 say this:

“[Christ] appointed some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers. ¹² He did this to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service, in order to build up the body of Christ.”

Here and elsewhere in the Bible (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12), unity and diversity are directly linked – that “harmony” bit, again. A healthy community, Church or otherwise, will include people with different gifts, approaches, aptitudes and abilities. Common goals,

hopes or a well-articulated mission will help you work with these differences, but in a congregation, one of the keys is to create spaciousness for one another, so that each may express the divine spark within, in whatever ways are most authentic, even when we get on each other's nerves.

Right now, we've got nothing but space. Right now, we have that experience of "the Church without walls", committing ourselves to "essential services" such as reconciliation, healing, caring, seeking justice, without coming together. Bishop-elect Deon K. Johnson, of the Episcopal Church in Missouri, wrote a wonderful piece on this that you'll find posted on our website & Facebook page, underlining the truth that we are the Church, whether we can gather or not.

Yet in our bodies, we know that there is something important about embodiment. I am so thankful for everyone whose phone calls and emails and Zoom get togethers are expressing the love of Jesus Christ, and for the creativity that is keeping us as present to one another as we can safely be. But we do miss one another, we do miss gathering in that little, spirit-filled, well-loved, well-cared-for physical space that houses this Church family. I've often said that I have the best view in the house, looking out at all of you from the pulpit, and I miss that. No, we aren't close to being back, but I invite you to wonder with me, for a bit: in that space, once we are back, how will we express our support and care for one another, even those who are VERY different from you? How will we open ourselves even more fully, to the full breadth of people who live in Canmore and surrounding area, really leaning into the Affirming Ministry commitments we have made? And perhaps most important, as we start to hear the breathless voices of those whose yearnings are seldom heard: How will we respect and invite the voices we seldom hear, to be truly heard?

And the final section of Ephesians 4 that pops off the page for me today, is verse 15, words that are way harder to do than to say: the importance of "speaking the truth in a spirit of love."

Remember, this whole passage, is about unity. So "speaking the truth in a spirit of love," which will often include saying something that the recipient really doesn't want to hear, is not done with the goal of winning an argument, or basking in self-righteousness, or getting lots of thumbs up on Social Media. Truth is told, in love, in unity, because truth builds up the body of Christ.

We've heard a lot of truth lately, and not much of it is easy to hear. We have heard the truth of racial brokenness, in the stories of our neighbours to the south and from people of colour across Canada. Two years ago, our United Church General Council ended with an extremely difficult afternoon, in which people of colour, and Indigenous people, and people with disabilities, spoke of feeling both invisible and voiceless: in that meeting space, in this United Church of ours, in this nation called Canada. LGBTQ folks have similarly been deeply wounded by the Church, and we know full well that it's not just "other" denominations that have done that. And the inadequacy of supports for many vulnerable populations, from low-wage workers in densely-packed workplaces to persons living in care homes, has revealed additional uncomfortable truths about who we do and do not value in these days of pandemic.

Many of the hard truths that surround us right now, are about discrimination and racism, and as much as I want to turn that into a nasty little jacket that I can put on someone

else who has exhibited reprehensible thoughts and actions, and zip it up and say, “there – that person is racist,” the reality is that we live in a land and a world where some people are guaranteed to have less safety and lower earnings and greater risks than others. I know that my chances of being treated with suspicion are way less, than if my skin were a different hue. My ethnicity gives me benefits and freedoms that I wouldn’t have if my ancestors had come from places other than Ireland, Scotland, England and Germany. The truth, told to me in love, names those advantages and spurs me to be part of a movement for change. Changes, that are consistent with the words and actions and person of Jesus Christ.

When we think of being united – whether that is the ways we relate to one another as Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, or our ongoing life as The United Church of Canada, or the kind of nation we want to be, going forward – the key concepts of today’s reading can shed light on our path. If we have are to have any sense of unity at all, it begins with the deep respect that acknowledges that we are all children of one God, equally beloved, equally called. This unity from the Spirit doesn’t rely on following the party line or only acting in approved ways, or all being of one ethnicity; no, if anything, that sense of common purpose is strengthened and refreshed as diverse voices are heard, as power structures are re-shaped to be of service to all people. Unity is, at the same time both vulnerable and resilient, able to receive even the hardest truths, and brave enough to move forward with tolerance, humility, gentleness, patience... and a commitment to a peace founded in justice. (Not just the “peace” that we experience by being silent about hard realities). We live with brokenness, we live with pain, and in the middle of that, God’s constant loving presence assures us that a new day will dawn.

People of Christ, such is the gift of unity offered to us. Does it mean we will be uniform in our approach? Not necessarily. Does it mean we will be unanimous in our decisions? Not likely. But a desire to seek the wisdom of unheard voices, to hear the fatigue and trauma of those who have faced one injustice after another, to open ourselves to grace because we are more fully unified when we do so, brings us closer to God’s loving intention. May that yearning for healthy, honest unity guide our steps, in the short term and the long term, as a community of faith and as participants in the journey of humanity. Amen, and Amen.

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