

Sunday, July 9, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown

Nurturing Your *Spiritual Gifts*: UNITY

Ephesians 4:1-7 New International Version (NIV)

INTRODUCTION:

The Apostle Paul did not play nicely with the Roman Empire. It was a dangerous game because under the tyranny of the Emperor Nero, Rome was quite literally a reign of terror. Paul's vocal and public insistence on the Deity of Jesus subverted the Empire's insistence that the Emperor was the supreme Deity. For this blatant subversion Paul was arrested and became a political prisoner in Rome. Even while imprisoned for preaching the Gospel, Paul continued his ministry by writing letters to the churches he had established. The letter to the church in Ephesus is one of Paul's prison letters.

Even here, facing execution Paul writes about God's blessings, wisdom, and purpose. He emphasizes that we have been saved, **not** only for our own personal benefit, but *also* in order that we might be united with all things in the universe, under Christ's rule and to the glory of God. **Unity** is God's ultimate goal for the Church.

The way church unity is reached, writes Paul, is first through individuals being reconciled to God and also one another. Because of Christ, all cultural and social barriers should disappear. In Christ, all religious divides are bridged.

In Chapter 4 of his letter to the Ephesians Paul tells us how followers of Jesus are to live out God's plan for unity here on earth as part of our practical daily life.

Listen carefully to Paul's instruction to us for increasing our unity and maturity as God's church.

4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

This is our third installment of our summer sermon series entitled *Nurturing Your Spiritual Gifts*. Whenever I think about “gifts” in this way I’m forever reminded of my grandson, Blake, because as everyone knows, my 20-month-old grandson Blake is most certainly “gifted”. Seriously though, Blake was born into this world with very specific qualities that continue to emerge and develop as he matures and grows. It’s easy to see that God has placed into this boy an uncanny compassion for others. He is also deeply discerning in his choices and craves understanding of every toy he uses. It is adorable to watch. And I also notice that this is true with all of us. From the very beginning of our lives we have these inborn gifts rooted into our personality, regardless of our religion, parents, political ideology, or social status. These innate abilities and interests are what form us into who we are. Certainly there are other factors that come into play, but these original spiritual gifts, bestowed on us from birth, never leave us. We, however, do get to decide how and why we use them, and in doing so, we give back to God.



Let us pray...

God of all unity, harmony, and oneness in plurality, guide us this morning to grab hold of your call to us to be one as you are one. Awaken in us our individual gifts and help us to find ways of serving one another through our distinctive gifts.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In part one of our series, Jean talked to us about how the indwelling presence of God’s Holy Spirit has allotted each of us with certain gifts. Scripture teaches us that we are in fact one body with many members and many functions. (Rom 12:1-8) God has given us each different gifts so that, in relationship with one another, we will create a Divine reflection, a harmonic convergence, just as different notes unify in the creation of one excellent chord.

We have also learned that the way we measure our success or excellence, as individuals and as a body, is not fame, affluence, membership numbers, fruitful capital campaigns or even souls saved. “Love is our [only] measuring stick” for excellence, LOVE for one another and *the* other is how we measure our shared

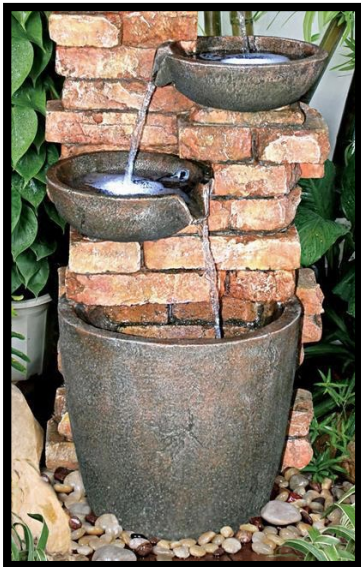
success. Every day we should be asking ourselves, “How have I loved today?” And just as each note adds to the perfection of the chord, each of us must identify and offer our critically needed note for the perfection of the harmonic chord that is the church.

(I ask music director Victoria Wagner about the role of dissonance being essential to music. She says it's not harmony without dissonance and adds that when singing your own note, the singer must listen even harder to the other.)

Offering our particular gift to one another is the only way that the realm of God comes into being, both in heaven and on earth. Paul writes in chapter 2 of Ephesians, “*In [Christ] the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.* (Eph 2:21-22)

Today I want to focus on why God has made unity in diversity so critically important in the Christian culture and why we urgently need to lift up and honor one another’s distinctive and unique giftedness in order to function as the incarnation of God’s presence on earth.

Firstly, unity begins with the idea of the Trinity. That illusive abstract idea that gives us brain-freeze when we think too much about it. But when we work our way



through the idea of a Trinitarian God, it becomes clear that God’s very being exists in relational unity. Each part distinctive and yet the three are one. This fountain here serves as an excellent metaphor for this concept of three in one. Each vessel is filled with water. The water spills over and empties out to the next one filling it up to overflowing into the other. God’s self is continually outpouring life, goodness and wholeness even while being filled up with life, goodness and wholeness by the other, from Creator/Parent God, to Incarnate – flesh and blood, human Jesus God, to Spirit, breath-of-life God. This is three in one, our Trinitarian God living in an eternal dance of relationship, unified in the emptying out of self and simultaneously filled up by the other. The Trinity serves as God’s model to us for our

complete wholeness and existential purpose as well. We can empty out only what we have been given. No more, no less. And as we do that in unity we connect to the Divine flow of all creation.

There is an enormous paradox here however because we are not used to the idea that true unity can be grounded in diversity, quite the opposite in fact. Our nation seems

to be entangled in ideological civil war. Moral outrage, negative identity, and tribalistic loyalty demands that we choose and conform to a side. To bolster our position we then find others who agree with us, polarized groups form. We resist and ridicule any information that does not comply with the party line. Then, we seek out alternative information that supports us so we can reject all that would threaten to undermine it. There's even a name for it now. It's called the *echo chamber effect*. An *echo chamber* is easily seen in online communities that seek out others to reinforce their own opinions. Whatever your world view, the Internet can be relied on to echo it back to you. Truth and falsehoods are evaluated not on factual integrity but rather on your preferred narrative. And then, once entrenched, the *us-verses-them* divide hardens like concrete in the desert. People with opposing views are systematically depersonalized, demonized and dismissed. Worst of all, once in the echo chamber it becomes comfortable and safer to agree with your tribe and stay connected than disagree and risk isolating yourself.

This is nothing new to churches and religions. We are infamous for creating deep divides. Rigid religious ideologies produce their own echo chamber effect and lead reliably to the same results. Too often religion tries to systematize and categorize "right practices". In attempts to create certainty, religion can neatly package God. You will know this is happening because the followers will viciously defend themselves against any threat of dissent. When any religion demands strict conformity, it will always lead to isolation and tribalism. Uniformity is tragically mistaken for unity.

However, don't worry. If you are caught in any echo chamber, the antidote was written down two thousand years ago. When Jesus prayed that we all might be one as he and God are one, (John 17:11) he was not praying for homogenized uniformity, he was praying for a radical unity that **seeks out** diversity and difference. In fact our differences are essential, vital and necessary. Each distinction, your particular spiritual gift is a single note in the cosmic chord. But this is an not easy piece of music. In fact, this kind of unity can *only* be achieved through the outpouring and indwelling of God's Holy Spirit. Hard as we might try to create unity through our own religious constructs, programs and study, we seem to always lean toward the tribalistic comfort of uniformity.

It is only by receiving the Spirit of the Living God that we each find our single note to sing. If we want true robust harmony among us, we must sing our distinctive note like a robin in spring, even while making room for more and more discordant notes. God has gifted each one of us with our Spiritual Gift for one purpose. Our gifts and unity is exclusively for the sake of perfecting the whole.

Ironically, in true Spiritual unity we often discover that variety and diversity will create conflict at first, but when we stick with this discomfort and “bear with one another in love” (Eph 4:2) the inevitable path will always yield toward spiritual growth, astounding creativity, liberating openness toward God’s still speaking voice and ultimately reconciliation. Reconciliation does not mean obliterating the distinctions between us. It means that we merge our distinct qualities like tributaries along the same river. As a whole unified church we come to fully live in this ongoing flow that is saturated in the wisdom of God.

So, TriCon Church, shall we flow into the river? Where will we find our unity and to what purpose? This is our current work and we are discovering that TriCon is really quite a diverse community. We are socially diverse, politically and theologically different. Some like stillness and quiet in worship while others find holiness in the vibrancy of the chatter. Some find connection in small groups and others prefer the solitude of a personal spiritual practice. Still, I hope you agree, that here in this place we seem to transcend the uniformity of like-minded politics, social status, wealth and theological conformity. I love this about TriCon Church and the UCC. It’s amazing!

But, how will we find a unified agreement in our vision and purpose together? Well we’re still writing but I am certain that this magically beautiful harmonic convergence of our gifts that we’ve been abundantly blessed with is not just for TriCon. As glorious as this church is, it has not been given simply so we can feel better about ourselves. The Church has been and always will be for the sake of the world out there. God madly loves this wild, weird, snarky, irritating, challenging, world – in all its colors, abilities, deformities, and imperfections and the church has been created and empowered to actually dispense God’s love and justice outward and with courageous abandon.

So the question we’re asking each other is, “Where are the winds of the Spirit blowing and how might we set our sails to catch hold of it?” How do we harness our gifts, resources, and privilege together so that we can have more of an impact together out there than apart? I’m sensing that God wants to expand what is possible among us, not by might, wealth, power or influence, but by connecting us to the continual indwelling and outpouring of the Holy Spirit mingling with our spirit and working through us as one spirit, opening us to the work ahead. One thing I’ve learned is that nurturing our Spiritual gifts and encouraging the gifts in others is exceedingly important to God because it creates and fosters loving relationships, and relationships are what lead us toward unity of purpose. Unity of purpose manifests as a mutually agreed direction that supports our reason for being, but it is our diversity that makes us whole and strengthens us for the purpose of serving others.

In this uncivil, polarized, violent world, the Church is called to be the antidote, a refreshing, radical paradigm of extravagant civility; a gracious and welcoming community that values and encourages dissenting opinions, differing worldviews and a full spectrum of ideas, abilities and giftedness. Diversity and difference are the vital ingredients in the alchemy of unity.

People of God, this is the good news of the Gospel. Named or unnamed, the life giving Holy Spirit is more at work in our individual lives and this beloved community than we may realize. No matter who you are or how special or ordinary you might feel, God's invitation to all of us is to find our oneness, so that together we will discover the Holy, Divine Presence in all things and all people. The Spirit winds are already present here, blowing in and through and between us. Scripture does not tell us to become one...know it or not, we already are one. We just have to act like it.
AMEN