

What if We Were United
Fifth in a Series
Try your best to let God's Spirit keep your hearts united.
Eph. 4:3 CEV
Oct. 4, 2020
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer - Dear God, show us now, through your word, wisdom, and truth, that unity is possible. And that it begins with us. Amen

Message

Sports Broadcasters, News Anchors, Late-Night Television hosts and preachers all have something in common - they are rarely at a loss for words. I have to say however, I spent days trying to figure out how to start today's message. It is difficult to know where to start. I stand before you with just as many questions, doubts, and concerns as you. I stand before you somewhat broken and discouraged at the state of our world today; the political arena, the natural disasters, environmental devastation, the pandemic and its domino effect on schools, businesses, economy, employment, the violence and hatred, the expressions of distrust and protest, the us vs. them mentality, and now the news of our president testing positive for Coronavirus.

My heart hurts and carries the weight that all of us feel regardless of where we stand on any given topic. We feel the weight of it all. We feel the burden of conflicting information, uncertain times, and the collective weariness, frustration, and sadness. I hear it in your voices. I see it on your faces. Is it the end of the world, beyond repair, throw in the towel kind of times? No, but it is emotionally draining and mentally challenging to navigate, for all of us.

And yet, it is my charge to stand before you today asking our next "what if" question. We explored "what if God is for us?" "What if Moses

didn't look?" And "What if we seek God first?" Today, I think we ask the hardest one of all: What if we were united?

Do I dare ask such a thing with all that is going on around us in the world, in our nation? Do we dare consider such a thing with all that confronts us, challenges us, demands our attention, and vies for our devotion?

As hard as it is, I think we have to. We have to be willing to ask the question if we are to live into any kind of answer. We have to consider what our role is in finding, creating, and being the answer. We have to reflect on what it will take to at least try.

I say try dear friends because there are times that I don't know if unity can exist. Times when I don't know if we can be united. Is it possible? Is it more than a title: United Methodist Church, United Nations, United States, United Federation of such and such, United Coalition of so and so?

What did Jesus mean when he told us to be one body? One spirit?

I look at our world today. I listen to all the voices shouting, crying, beckoning, demanding, weeping, bullying, and blaming, and I question if being united is possible. And as a pastor it is sometimes difficult to find the words of comfort, encouragement, and hope; words of light in such darkness.

There are 195 recognized countries in the world today. As of July 2020, there are eleven different "nations" within the United States. As of Feb. 2017, there were between 6,500 and 7,117 identified spoken languages in the world. In 2019 there were 576 antigovernment groups within the US, and 1,020 recognized hate groups. Lastly, there are some

45,000 denominations, 350,000 congregations (2010), 84,000 of which are considered non-denominational.

It doesn't matter how you count it, that is a lot of lines in the sand, walls around the city, and deadbolts on doors. That is a great deal of divided households, conflicting beliefs, and "us versus them" opinions. It seems clear we live among a "he said - she said," "we're better than you" "the other doesn't count" kind of society. It seems clear, that is the world - our world; and guess who sits in the middle of it all?

Who sits in the hard, messy, unpredictable, uncomfortable, broken middle? We do. You and me. The church. That is the world, our world, that we, the church are called to love. That is our world that we who claim to believe in Jesus and seek to live his ways, are called to feed the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. That is the world we are called to show what unity looks like.

So, I ask you church, "What if we were united?"

We are not the first to wrestle with such a daunting call. Not the first to feel the struggle, and I am certain we will not be the last. But that doesn't mean it isn't damn hard. Unity is both a gift and an action. It involves receiving and giving. It takes grace and grit. And I don't need to elaborate on all the things that push against unity today.

If anyone knew how hard it was to live in unity, it was the apostle Paul. And if there was anyone who wrote prolifically on the topic, it was the apostle Paul. He wrote multiple letters that now make us what we call the New Testament. Most of them addressed churches he had started, mentored, or visited throughout his life of ministry. Some are believed to have been written to churches he had heard about but not personally

visited. For his live out loud faith and teachings of Jesus, he was imprisoned. It was from his prison cell he wrote some of his best work.

One such letter is the book of Ephesians. Sometimes called the “Queen of the Epistles” (Barclay 71). The first three chapters speak to the unity of the church and the second three chapters to the place or role of the church in God’s plan to restore such unity. It is here in Ephesians that Paul strikes out one of his greatest phrases. *The church is the body of Christ*. The Church is to be hands to do Christ’s work, feet to run upon his errands, and a mouth to speak him. What we have then is a double declaration presented by Paul: First Christ is God’s instrument of reconciliation. Second, the Church is Christ’s instrument of reconciliation” (Barclay 67). How do we do that church? We become united. We seek unity in Jesus.

Text - Eph.4:1-6 CEV

Why does such a message matter to the early church? Because they too were dealing with multiple forces pressing them from all sides. They too were confronted with false or contradicting teachings and information from those in power, various religious groups, those who pursued idol or bal worship, and those who practiced what was considered pagan beliefs. Those who stood against the government and those who fought for peace.

In other words, these were believers trying to live out their faith in the face division and while standing in the messy middle. And sometimes those divisions were within the church. Who was right / wrong? Who had more / less faith? Who was more / less important in the structure of the church? They were trying to figure out what it meant to follow Jesus and show those around them there was a different way, a better way, a united way.

Are we not doing the same thing today church?

Paul's message was simple. Keep it about Jesus - the end. Work, live, act, serve, and love like Jesus - period. No one is better than someone else. No one is higher or holier than anyone else. No one person, organization, or institution has all the answers. Jesus Christ is to be the common thread - the shared goal - the mutual and overall purpose. And it must start in the church. If we were united, as a church, we can show our world what is possible.

Because you see, as ambitious as I am and as eager as my colleague is, and as much as we hope each and every one of you would become active and engaged in the church, we do not have to unite all 195 countries of the world! We do not have to bridge the gap for all eleven different nations within the US, or all 576 antigovernment groups and the 1,020 hate groups. Only God can do that!

We are called, like the believers in Ephesus, to unite as a church - as the body of believers right here where we are. We start there. We start with claiming that as our call; recognizing Jesus is our common denominator, the rest is fluff. Yes, I said that - the rest is fluff.

We start with knowing who we are - children of God, people who believe in God and long to follow Jesus. We recognize who we are as Grace Church in Franklin, Indiana and how we live, serve, grow and care together. I need you. I cannot live out my faith fully without you. You need me. We need those inside and outside these walls.

A funny thing happens when we start with that - we begin to see with fresh eyes how Jesus loved. We start to understand how Jesus served those no one else would and those who were different, marginalized, and considered outsiders. We come to know what it means to accept differences because we know something and someone far greater holds us

together and that is more important than what tries to drive us apart. We soon find that we are able to love not because of who we are or what we do or have, but because of who God is.

In other words church, we answer the question “what if we were united” and we watch as that answer unfolds in the living of our lives. We find hope scattered in the debris of division. We uncover a peace once thought to be buried beneath egos, power, and control. We begin to believe we can get through even this and that there is good in our world. We find hope. We find encouragement. We find freedom.

On this World Communion weekend, we celebrate our unity with believers here and around the world. Believers who are different yet the same because we all love and want to follow Jesus. Let’s not make it harder than it has to be, dear church, because what if it really is that simple. What if our response to all that pushes against unity today could be stopped with the simplicity of: love Jesus - love others.

That is what this table is all about. Loving God. Loving Jesus. Loving others. It is not about the how, the when, the why, or the where of our faith and religious practices. It is not about the details of organized religion and institutional worship we tend to get bogged down in.

Here we are simply God’s family sitting down to share a meal together. You know what happens when family gathers at the table? You always have the uncle who thinks he’s funny but he isn’t, the aunt who drives everyone crazy, the in-law who pushes everyone’s buttons, the brother who thinks he knows it all, the sister who complains all the time, the one who argues no matter what, the one who points the finger but it’s never their fault, the martyr, silent one, the troublemaker, rebel rouser, and the peacemaker. They are all there in some form or fashion.

That's ok. That is what this table is for. To remember what matters most. It is where we find the answer to the question, "what if we were united" and it is where we prepare ourselves to actually mean it.

AMEN

Sources Consulted

N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*

William Barclay *DBS*

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