

WELCOME

- Introduce myself:
 - an Elder at MACC
 - a Detroiter for almost ten years, and a proud Pingree Park homeowner
 - married to Laura, and father to two incredible boys (Martyn and Will)
 - an attorney...and that will probably come through :)
- Re-introduce the series on Philippians
 - Mention Pastor Leon's past two sermons briefly, emphasis on joy in struggle.
 - Remind that we are headed for Easter. Explain how this sermon bookends two of the holiest weeks of the year...intentionally.
- Explain that today's focus is on **UNITY**.
 - Critical topic given all that has happened this past year, and all we will continue to face as a church.
 - The follow-up sermon will be on cruciformity--a humble, cross-shaped way of living, where the cross isn't just the source of our faith, but the *shape* of it.
 - Unity and cruciformity go hand-in-hand; both are seen in Jesus at Easter, so it is appropriate these sermons will bookend Holy Week.
- Reminders:
 - **You are welcome to ask questions at any point during the sermon.** If you are watching at home, post questions to the chat, and I will try to answer them.
 - **Please know that my full notes will be made available afterwards.** You're still welcome to take your own notes, of course, but my hope is that some of you may be freed to simply listen and contemplate the message as I share it.
 - **Afterwards, I will be available to talk with you about the sermon, or anything else.** I'll be here at the building, and I'll also be available afterwards. I would love to discuss any questions you have, as well as any concerns or areas of disagreement you may have. I enjoy learning from you all--and have over the years--and I welcome your insights.
- Pray:
 - EPHESIANS?

INTRODUCTION

One year ago, almost to the day, I can remember exactly where I was. We were all one week into nationwide social distancing and quarantining, I was spending my morning on the walking portion of my self-managed physical therapy routine for my recent knee surgery. I walked the Burns-to-Jefferson loop, a 3-mile route that took me about an hour on my gimpy leg and provided plenty of time for reflection.

Like most of us, my idle thoughts frequently turned to the pandemic. There was so much to learn, so much to process. You might be surprised to hear that I was actually energized by the whole situation. Already at MACC, we had begun rethinking the ministry and brainstorming efforts like 48214C CARE. As Pastor Leon has said, our Harding building had closed, but the church never did. I was proud to see many of us looking for creative ways to protect and provide for each other and our neighbors. It seemed to me that the church at large might be able to really rise to the occasion presented to us the tragedy of this pandemic.

It seems silly in retrospect, of course, but I had in my mind the reputation and testimony of the first-century Roman church. What a powerful, genuinely Christlike representation of God's presence on earth! This was the church whose members refused to retaliate against violent persecution with violence of their own. The same church that rushed into abandoned Roman cities suffering plagues, imaging the good news of Jesus to the sick and dying by offering their own bodies as living sacrifices.¹ And the thing is, there's *nothing* fundamentally different about those Christian men, women, and children than you and I today. Nothing. The same Spirit that rose Jesus from the dead, Paul says, lives in our mortal bodies...and theirs.²

And yet here we are, disunified as ever. I think we can all agree that, unlike that early expression of the church, today's American church didn't exactly cover itself in glory during the COVID-19 pandemic. The steady exodus of Black Americans from predominantly White evangelical spaces and denominations has accelerated,³ and #LeaveLoud, a hashtag used by Black Christians to share their exit stories, has been a trending topic on Twitter much of this month. American Christians remain some of the most likely subgroups to embrace conspiracy theories⁴ and question the usefulness of COVID vaccines.⁵ High profile Christian leaders have fallen, one by one, to massive moral scandals. And most recently, a 21-year young White man, raised and baptized in the Southern Baptist church, killed 8 people, including 6 Asian women:

¹ Romans 12:1-2

² Romans 8:11.

³ "[A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshipers Are Leaving White Evangelical Churches.](#)" Campbell Robertson. *The New York Times*. March 9, 2018.

⁴ [January 2021 AMERICAN Perspectives Survey](#), Survey Center on American Life, February 2021.

⁵ Black Protestants aren't least likely to get a vaccine; white evangelicals are. A new survey by Pew Research shows that 64% of Black Protestants 'definitely or probably' plan to get vaccinated, compared to 54% of white evangelicals. "[Growing Share of Americans Say They Plan To Get a COVID-19 Vaccine--or ILready Have.](#)" Cary Funk and Alec Tyson, *Pew Research Center*.

Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong Ae Yue, Xiojie Tan, and Daoyou Feng. The shooter's rationale? To "eliminate temptation."⁶

If you aren't lamenting, if you're not itchy to beg for God's mercy, then you aren't listening. And yet for some, even calling attention to the church's dirty laundry in this way is problematic. "What of the church's unity?" they will ask. Others reply: "Does Christian unity mean the rest of us just need to put up and shut up? Is there no place in the doctrine of Christian unity for public a prophetic word of lament?" Consider the words of Pastor Jon Onwuchekwa, an African American pastor formerly of the Southern Baptist Convention who recently facilitated his church's split from the denomination:

Unity is a worthy and God-honoring goal, yes, but unity in and of itself is not a vice or a virtue. Unity is a vehicle. The most important thing about a vehicle is who or what's driving. Bad guys are unified—but their unity doesn't do much good! To solely emphasize unity without addressing the sources of disunity (i.e., racial injustice and inequality) is to confuse the goal with the pathway. If unity is the goal, then fighting for racial equality is a pathway to achieving it. The Civil Rights Movement was a unified and diverse movement, not because they took up a fight against disunity. Rather, they were fighting inequality of a societal and structural nature. A diverse group of people found solidarity around advocating for the equality of the disenfranchised. ***Where you have a diverse group of people sharing solidarity around a worthy concern, you'll end up getting both unity and equality. Where you merely aim for being undivided, you'll get neither.***⁷

Family, the unity of the church, of Christians, is *supposed* to be the way the world's attention is redirected to Jesus. It is supposed to be the closest thing to the majestic, Trinitarian presence of God on earth, tabernacling among his creation. That isn't our collective testimony today, but it can be. It can start here, with us. If we want to get back to displaying that powerful representation of God on earth, we need to get back to the basics. We must confront the insidious lies ripping the church's witness apart. We need to remember what we have forgotten.

Fortunately, Paul is here to help us do just that. He wrote this letter to a church plagued by suffering, wrapped up in its own cultural idols, forgetful of the holy power that had fueled their own community's transformation and forged their righteous unity. Paul spends almost all of chapter 1 setting the stage for a series of encouragements and instructions on unity....a unity founded in *humility*.

Today's sermon is the first in a two-part series bookending the two holiest weeks in the Christian calendar. Each sermon is focused on two defining features of the Easter season: our ***unity*** in Christ, which is made possible by the ***humility*** of Christ. The first helps us understand what Jesus came and died for; the second helps us grasp *why* he did it.

⁶ "[Christian leaders wrestle with Atlanta shooting suspect's Southern Baptist ties.](#)" Sarah Pulliam Bailly and Teo Armus. *The Washington Post*. March 17, 2021.

⁷ "[4 Reasons We Left.](#)" Jon Onwuchekwa, *The Front Porch*. July 9, 2020.

I. TWO ENCOURAGEMENTS: Philippians 1:27

Paul ends chapter one with TWO ENCOURAGEMENTS and then begins chapter 2 with THREE INSTRUCTIONS. Each are designed to draw the church back towards unity in Christ. We'll begin by reflecting on the encouragements found at the end of **Philippians 1**. They lay groundwork for the instructions to follow.

First, Paul encourages the Philippians to “*live in a manner worthy of the gospel.*”⁸ (1:27)

Paul stresses this singular focus on faithful, gospel-guided living throughout his epistles,⁹ and he references the gospel in this letter to the Philippians at least eight different times.¹⁰ It doesn't take a scholar to recognize that Paul's driving passion in ministry is this *euangelion*, translated as “the good news” or “the gospel.” In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul defines this “good news” outright as the *story* of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and reign.

What I want to focus on, however, is the verb phrase translated here as “live” or “conduct yourselves” in your Bibles. That's a pretty flimsy, shallow interpretation of the Greek verb Paul actually uses: *politeuomai*. Paul only uses this term once in all of his letters, implying his use here very deliberate. Translated literally, *politeuomai* means “to live as a citizen.” Paul calls on similar politically-shaped language in the very next chapter, when he states that he and the Philippian Christians are “citizens of heaven.”¹¹

Why speak in terms of political citizenship? For one, it was incredibly common for first century political bodies to urge their citizens to “walk worthily” of their monarch or city-state. And in that sense, Paul is using a familiar political concept to help the Philippians recognize that their primary allegiance, their identity, their *citizenship* rests in the Kingdom of God. Beyond that, Paul is also communicating the corporate, communal nature of their “living” with this term. Using *politeuomai* prevents the Philippians from thinking so individualistically, and becoming caught up in their own *honor* and status (more on this to come). It goes far beyond the every-day decision making of a private individual--Paul is getting after the notion of structuring one's *entire* life around the shared principles and values that form a community identity, specifically in this case the Kingdom of God. He isn't talking about merely “living”, but an abiding¹² allegiance to Jesus.¹³

Putting it all together, Paul's first encouragement is: “***display your citizenship, your allegiance to God's Kingdom, by reorienting your whole lives around the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.***”

⁸ Philippians 1:27.

⁹ Colossians 1:9 (“that you may live a life worthy of the Lord”); 1 Thessalonians 1:8 (“...obey the gospel”); Galatians 2:14 (“walking according to the truth of the gospel.”).

¹⁰ Philippians 1:3-5, 1:7, 1:12, 1:16, 1:27, 2:22, 4:3, and 4:15.

¹¹ Philippians 3:20.

¹² John 15.

¹³ See also Acts 23:1, where the verb is used by Luke in recounting Paul's confrontation with the Sanhedrin. “Brothers, I have *politeuomai* my life before God in all good conscience to this day.”

Second, Paul encourages the Philippians to “*stand firm in one spirit*” and “*strive side by side*” in the face of suffering, conflict, and adversity. (1:27-30)

This encouragement links back to the first one. It is the “*why*” behind Paul’s exhortation to live as Kingdom citizens: so that they could not only withstand, but recognize and even embrace their trials and struggles *together*. Paul is invoking the image of a Roman phalanx, the epitome of unity in the face of adversity.

Paul is also reinforcing a central conviction found throughout his epistles: encountering opposition is the *rule*, not the exception, to the Christian experience. Throughout his epistles, Paul characterizes hardship as inevitable, sometimes even necessary.¹⁴ In Romans, Paul goes so far as to say that the pathway to glory travels through trial and suffering.¹⁵

In verses 27-30, Paul directly associates the Philippians suffering with hostile “opponents” whose animosity certainly stems from Christians’ newfound faith. Historians believe that early Christian suffered persecution in the form of slander, discrimination, social isolation, accusations of impety and superstition, thefts of property, verbal and physical abuse, and imprisonment, all because their faith was considered an “affront to the majesty of the Roman state and its Gods.”¹⁶ Consider this historically-informed hypothetical from biblical historian Peter Oakes.¹⁷

Jason is a Greek of Macedonian descent, married to another Greek woman, Chloe. They have four young children, and both are Christians. Jason’s family farmed near Philippi, but Jason’s profession is in goldsmithing for his cousin at the nearby temple. Whatever guilt Jason felt for working at the site quickly vanished after his cousin fired him for publicly professing Jesus’ name. For the last 18 months, Chloe and Jason have faced a desperate financial struggle, keeping their family alive through poorly paid work (usually from other Christians). Six months ago, Jason was caught up in a fight with some old friends, and since, he has struggled to get any work, even from other Christians (worried about the effect of his reputation on their own). To their great regret, Jason and Chloe could not manage to send any money to Paul.

This is the sort of daily struggle that Paul is writing into. And yet, note Paul’s frame of reference: he states that his solidarity with the Philippians in their suffering has allowed him to embrace his trials and tribulations, and he desires that the Philippians to recognize the same truth for themselves: “God has graciously granted you the *privilege* of not only believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.”¹⁸ He restates this again later in the epistle: “My aim is to know Jesus, and to experience the power of his resurrection by sharing in his sufferings.”¹⁹

¹⁴ 1 Thessalonians 2:14, 3:3-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-7; Acts 14:22.

¹⁵ Romans 8:17, 28-30.

¹⁶ For example, see 2 Corinthians 8:1-2.

¹⁷ Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, Society for New Testament Studies, p. 156. The example included in my sermon is paraphrased for brevity.

¹⁸ Philippians 1:29.

¹⁹ Philippians 3:10.

What Paul is getting after here is what other writers and scholars have described as “**cruciformity**”,²⁰ or *cross-shaped* living. It means living in a way that retells the death and resurrection of Jesus by voluntarily renouncing our rights and selfish gains in order to serve and embrace the needs of others. It looks like walking the extra mile, turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, and blessing those who persecute us.²¹ It means dying to ourselves, identifying with and carrying our cross in all manners of life and conduct. “I have been crucified with Christ” Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, “and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”²² Though appearing weak in the eyes of the world, *cruciformity* is a participation in the true power that Paul describes later in 3:10, a power from Christ that liberates us from the hostile Powers that rule this world and deceive us into habits of coercion, violence, and control. Cruciform living guides believers away from these cosmic deceptions and into the sphere of Christ’s benevolent Kingdom, tuning our hearts and souls back to the song of God. This idea will be the focus of my next sermon on Philippians 2:5-11.

Taken together, Paul’s second encouragement to the Philippians is this: “***by standing together, you will be able to face and even embrace your trials as a privileged, cross-carrying opportunity to participate in Christ’s story.***”

II. THREE INSTRUCTIONS: Philippians 2:1-4

These two encouragements set the stage for the three instructions Paul offers in **Philippians 2**.

First, Paul tasks the Philippians with remembering the divine grace that transformed them, and then urges them inhabit it themselves. (2:1)

Having set the table--*be unified in your Kingdom identity so that you can face and embrace adversity together!*--Paul charts a course toward supernatural unity by reminding the Philippians of the very community habits, shaped by God himself, that transformed them into disciples of Christ in the first place. Habits, it appears, the Philippians have either forgotten or abandoned.

Notice the terms: *encouragement, sympathy, fellowship in the Spirit, compassion, and love*. All of these terms aren’t meant to be differentiated--Paul is stringing these concepts together to demonstrate the multi-dimensional features of God’s graciousness as *expressed through the church*. He is blowing back the fog and reminding the Philippians to live cooperatively, stifle any sense of rivalry or individual superiority, celebrate humility and service, and reject any self-promotion and boasting. In that sense, Paul is using the gracious work of God to stand as an exemplar before the Philippians, pricking their conscience with memories of their own supernatural evolution: “If you were once so inspired and transformed by the gracious love of God revealed by his people,” Paul is saying, “ought you not imitate and then reflect that same love and other-regard back ?”

²⁰ *Cruciformity*, Michael J. Gorman.

²¹ Matthew 5-7.

²² Galatians 2:20.

Briefly, think back to your own spiritual journey and consider what it was that drew you to Jesus. What was the “good news” to you? I expect that for many of us, it took the form of a person: a parent, a partner, a mentor, a teacher, a co-worker, a child. *Someone* manifested to you, and made real in a way you had never understood before, the love of God that’s described throughout scripture.

Consider Paul’s instruction in the same way: are you eager to exhibit the gracious love of God that you have received back out to others? Or have you forgotten about the very habits, shaped by God’s character, that brought you into the Kingdom? May we never forget that God’s good gifts are *restless* in the hands of the receiver until they are given away, again and again.

Second, Paul instructs the Philippians to recalibrate their minds’ eyes, *together*. (2:2)

In verse two, Paul draws on the exhortations from chapter one²³ towards a specific kind of unity: a *unity of the mind*. Notice how deeply Paul cherishes the thought of the Philippians embracing this shared perspective--it isn’t the removal of his chains that will bring him joy, but the Philippians being unified through and through.²⁴

The Greek verb Paul uses here, *phroneo*, translated as “being of the same mind” or “being like-minded” refers to the way one’s mind “sees” reality and responds accordingly to that vision of the world. Paul is using that verb very deliberately; his instruction implies that the Philippians lack this shared vision of reality. Paul is apparently concerned about the Philippians’ outlook on life, their “worldview”, and how it was interfering with their ability to properly digest--as well as recognize and even see the value in--their shared suffering. There’s something in the way, and he begins to confront it in the next instruction.

Third, Paul commands the Philippians to relinquish Roman honor-seeking and embrace Christlike cruciformity. (2:3-4)

Having reminded the Philippians of the need to be unified to face adversity, having reminded them of the forgotten values that welcomed them into the Kingdom, and having exposed the fact that they lack a shared, gospel-guided lens for seeing the world, Paul launches into the application of his teaching: ***confronting Roman honor culture with God’s cruciformity***.

Consider the verses: “*Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself, looking not merely to your own interests, but treating the interests and needs of others with even greater importance.*” These verses recall other passages where Paul writes with blunt, searing conviction and practicality, such as at the end of Romans 12. “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Do not be conceited. If possible, so far as it depends on you, life at peace with all.”²⁵

²³ Philippians 1:9, 1:27.

²⁴ Philippians 2:2.

²⁵ Romans 12:9-21

Note that Paul isn't criticizing *ambition* per se--he is criticizing the "*kenodoxia*." This is a Greek term used during this historical era to refer to the Greco-Roman cultural obsession with obtaining recognition and honor. Paul's world centered around patron networks, where an ambitious person would leverage the support of his friends, family, clients, neighbors, and extended household to get ahead. Becoming preoccupied with obtaining social advantages naturally led to factions and rivalries. One Roman historian, Philo, described *kenodoxia* as a kind of a blood-thirsty beast that consumes its prey through gradual deception.

Paul contrasts the *kenodoxia* obsession with *tapeinophrosyne*, most of translated as "humility." And while Romans respected moderation and even gentleness, they thought little of those that manifested humility, as being humble was most closely associated with shabbiness and low status. But that isn't what Paul is communicating here, especially since many of the Philippians had already been forced into a diminished social status. The Greek term is more concerned with a humble *attitude* that leads to what Paul says: "thinking of others' interests as *superior*" or "*higher in status*" than you.²⁶

Again and again in these two verses, Paul contrasts the *kenodoxia* beast with the humility of Jesus. When Paul speaks of Jesus' status and honors, he emphasises how Jesus *emptied* himself of those things, and didn't consider his divinity something to be taken advantage of.²⁷ And then in the next chapter, Paul uses his own life to further reinforce this self-emptying confrontation with Roman honor culture, first rattling off and then quickly discarding his hard-earned honors, titles, and accolades...all in exchange for sharing in Jesus' sufferings.²⁸

I will add this important caveat: Paul is not teaching a kind of "doormat humility" that has been used and abused throughout church history. It would be easy to conclude that Paul's vision for humility prohibits advocating for yourself in any sense, or even asking for help. But that *isn't* humility. After all, even the famous "love command" carries the expectation that you love your neighbor as yourself,²⁹ not *instead* of yourself. No, for Paul, Christlike humility meant considering social status as irrelevant when assessing yourself and others. And if everyone lived in that way, the entire Roman honor system would be subverted. The church was supposed to be an enclave for that kind of subversion, a place of relief from the constant honor-chasing and ladder-climbing that consumed the Romans and their colonies.

Choosing this humility over honor seeking results in Paul's final instruction before the Christ Hymn: "**Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others.**"

> > Having studied these the two encouragements--(1) *live as worthy Kingdom citizens and (2) embrace adversity together*--as well as these three instructions--(1) *inhabit the grace that transformed you*, (2) *recalibrate your mind's eyes together*, and (3) *given up honor-seeking for*

²⁶ See the Greek term *hyperecho* used here.

²⁷ Philippians 2:5-11.

²⁸ Philippians 3:4-11.

²⁹ Romans 13:9.

Christ's humility--I think it is worth asking: why does Paul go to such great lengths to say something seems pretty straightforward: "if you want to be unified, be humble"?

Because the deceptive quality of sin is *insidious*. Deceptions aren't obvious, or they wouldn't be particularly deceptive. I am convinced that you and I routinely go about underestimating the trappings of sin, and the ways in which it has reached into and tainted our minds and motivations. To get after something as simple as "be humble," Paul knew he had to deploy careful insight, deliberate language, and powerful illustrations drawing on the Philippians' past successes and current sufferings. Paul wrote and taught in these dynamic ways to peel back the layers of deception that clouded the judgment of the Philippians; he knew that getting after and confronting something as pervasive and familiar as Rome's honor culture would require an enormous effort. Convincing fish that water is wet is no easy task.

In that vein, we must ask ourselves, constantly, daily: **what are the insidious lies taking root in my life? And in our shared life?** If we want to be people who are serious about putting sin to death,³⁰ and if we want to be consistent when it comes to ideas like "total depravity,"³¹ then we must be willing to do this kind of spiritual heavy lifting. Doing so requires discernment, perseverance, steadiness, and constantly soaking and washing ourselves in the word.

I encourage you: step back and ask yourself, "what are the *insidious* sins and deceptions in my life? Who can help me see what I may be missing? What are the dynamics at play that require more from me, from us, than my mental table scraps in order to identify and confront them?" We have to get after these deep-rooted, subterranean deceptions that shape our minds and imaginations away from the values of God's Kingdom and towards the deceptions of the Powers. It's the only way we can begin to achieve the kind of UNITY Paul speaks to here.

III. FOUR IMAGES: New Testament Portrayals of Christian Unity

Paul's exhortations and instructions were intended to lead his readers to consider the supernatural reality tying all of his teaching together: **UNITY**.

Of all the themes in Paul's letters, unity is first and foremost. Pauline Scholar N.T. Wright has said that for every verse in which Paul speaks about salvation, there are between 6 and 8 passages about unity.³² "If Paul could come back today and see the contemporary church, I think the thing that would astonish and even horrify him would not just be our lack of unity,"

³⁰ Romans 8:12-13.

³¹ 1 John 1:8-10.

³² "One of the great paradoxes is that we have failed to emphasize Paul's teaching on the unity of the church...many passages in many letters are devoted to [salvation]. But, by comparison, his teaching on the unity of the church, and the work to make that unity a reality is an even greater theme. For even passage discussing justification by faith, there are 6 or 8 passages talking about the unity of the church." See "[Paul on the Unity of the Church: Session One](#)." NT Wright. November 2014.

Wright suggests, “but the fact that we mostly don’t care about our lack of unity. Every single letter he writes is about unity.”³³

Unity is also a theme that spans both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The historical texts will sometimes speak of God’s granting his people “unity of mind” needed to heed his word.³⁴ “And how good and pleasant it is,” the Psalmist declares, “when God’s people live together in unity!”³⁵

What I want to do, now, though is meditate on the New Testament’s illustrations of Christian unity. My prayer is that by doing so, these images will rekindle within us a deeper understanding and a renewed desire for that supernatural unity, building further on the foundation laid by Paul’s exhortations and instructions in Philippians 1 and 2.

A. John 17:20-23 | Unity and LOVE

Consider this first image from John 17. These famous words are Jesus’ final prayer before the beginning of his crucifixion story:

²⁰ “I am not praying only on their behalf, but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their testimony, ²¹ that they will all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. I pray that they will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. ²² The glory you gave to me I have given to them, that they may be one just as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—that they may be completely one, so that the world will know that you sent me, and you have loved them just as you have loved me.

Here, we see Jesus pour his heart out to Father, praying for himself, his disciples, and then all future followers--you and I. Just hours before his death, Jesus’ heart and soul are consumed with visions of you and I worshipping together, imaging to the world a glimpse of the trinitarian life of God that is marked by radical, self-giving, totally unified love for one another. When we experience Christian unity, we are swept up into that love and life in God. This is what Jesus means in John 15 when he talks about “abiding” in him, like a vine to the branch.³⁶ “Apart from me,” Jesus says, “you can do nothing.” That includes, of course, achieving unity.

We also see in this passage that when we participate in that divine unity, we bear missional fruit. “As you have sent me into the world,” Jesus prays, “so I have sent them into the world.”³⁷ The disciples’ unity with one another, and with God, is intended to make the world know that the Father sent Jesus. This isn’t an *intellectual* kind of knowing, like memorizing science terms for a final exam. This is the *relational* kind of knowing--the unity of God’s people is intended to sweep

³³ “[N.T. Wright: St. Paul was an ‘extremist’ who would despair at our church disunity.](#)” Joseph Hartropp, *Christian Today*.

³⁴ 2 Chronicles 30:12.

³⁵ Psalm 133:1.

³⁶ John 15.

³⁷ John 17:18.

others up and into the same life and love of God his people enjoy, “transferring them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved son.”³⁸ That saving love, flowing from our shared unity with God and one another is what will testify to the world that Jesus is Lord and draw even more into his Kingdom. “So that the world may know.”³⁹

What is this love that we are drawn into? What does it look like? First and foremost, it is the self-giving, *cruciform* love of the triune God that is seen most clearly in the death of Jesus on the cross. “When I am lifted up,” Jesus teaches earlier in John’s gospel, “I will draw all people to myself.”⁴⁰ This love is also revealed in the foot washing scene of John 13. After kneeling and washing his disciples’ dirty, blood-stained feet, Jesus teaches that they too must “wash one another’s feet.”⁴¹ Jesus uses footwashing to illustrate Christian love in action--the posture of the footwisher should be the default way of living for every person who claims to follow Jesus. John 13 is almost certainly connected back to the Christ hymn back in Philippians 2, where Jesus is described as self-emptying and self-humiliating.

So what can we take from this first image of unity? In short: unity requires love, and love requires humility. Jesus considers unity of paramount importance, and both a few chapters earlier and a few chapters later, Jesus’ feet-washing and crucifixion manifest a love that stems from his supernatural unity with the father. Participation in the life of God, and discipleship to Jesus, involves and will produce this same kind of self-giving love. “They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.” Not our doctrine, not our programs, not our accomplishments. But by our LOVE. And what is required for Love? Humility.

B. 1 Corinthians 12 | Unity and DIVERSITY

Read the passage. “*For just as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body—though many—are one body, so too is Christ.*” Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians carries strong themes of unity, beginning with 1:10: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree together, to end your divisions, and to be united by the same mind and purpose.”

Paul is dealing with a community in turmoil, plagued by factions. We see a similar situation today: pastors believe preaching and evangelizing are the most important thing a Christian should do. Teachers consider education and study the most important. Social activists argue for the priority of making the world more good and just. And still others insist that internal spiritual renewal is the key to it all. St. Paul, however, reminds the Corinthian church at the beginning and end of chapter 11 that it comprises a variety of gifts that serve to build up the Church’s common good--for preaching, teaching, renewal, and the enacting of justice. “For just as the body is one and yet has many members, Paul goes on to state, “so too is Christ.”⁴²

³⁸ Colossians 1:13.

³⁹ John 17:23.

⁴⁰ John 12:32.

⁴¹ John 13:1-17.

⁴² 1 Corinthians 12:12.

Paul's remedy for the Corinthians' divisions is making it clear that Christian community doesn't have to be fragmented into factions: it can and must be *both* ONE and DISTINCT. Paul wants them to understand that unity *does not* mean uniformity. In fact, for Paul, uniformity is in many ways the antithesis of Christian unity. It is God who "placed each of the members in the body"⁴³ together, differences and all, and not unlike how he drew together uneducated fishermen, political activists, a Roman collaborator, and other unlikely people among his first disciples.

C. Ephesians 2:11-22 | Unity and RECONCILIATION

Read the passage. "For he is our peace, the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility." We humans love to build walls. Perhaps the most potent, symbolic wall known to early Christians was the wall that separated the Gentiles from the inner precincts of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem precincts. If a Greek walked beyond the court of the Gentiles, he could face the penalty of death. Beyond the actual, physical wall, various first-century Jewish texts described the law itself as a kind of wall safeguarding the Jewish people from gentiles.

However, here in Ephesians, the dividing wall of partition and hostility *has been torn down*, bringing those who used to be far off, those split into factions, together as one.⁴⁴ Christ's death is the supreme act of peacemaking, reconciling us both to God (vertically) and to one another (horizontally). The church believes that by his cross, Jesus reconciled all things and all people to himself.⁴⁵

For Paul, the church of Jesus is for all people--Jews and Gentiles together as equals at the fellowship table. And yet, while this conviction about unity between Jews and Gentiles is the focus of much of the New Testament, the mission of reconciliation goes beyond that particular division. Indeed, wherever humans create binaries--Gentile and Jew, Male and Female, Slave and Free, Black and White, American and Mexican, documented and undocumented--God in Christ creates unity without denying difference. In that sense, the Christian mission is a mission of wall-deconstruction, tearing down walls of hostility and division. This mission is beyond our wildest dreams, greater than anything we can ask for or even imagine (Ephesians 3). And herein Ephesians, that mission leads to a supernatural kind of unity and shared purpose.

D. Revelation 7:9-12 | Unity and WORSHIP

Consider this final image from the book of Revelation:

⁹ After these things I looked, and here was an enormous crowd that no one could count, made up of persons from every nation, tribe, people, and language,

⁴³ 1 Corinthians 12:18.

⁴⁴ Ephesians 2:14.

⁴⁵ Colossians 1:20.

standing before the throne and before the Lamb dressed in long white robes, and with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They were shouting out in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ And all the angels stood there in a circle around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they threw themselves down with their faces to the ground before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying,

*“Amen! Praise and glory,
and wisdom and thanksgiving,
and honor and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”*

This is one of the most powerful images of Christian unity in the NT. Paul speaks of a similar reality in Romans 15—a vision of different people united in the very thing we were created to do: worship God. In this vision, we see all the manifestations of unity we have seen in the prior images: a powerful expression of love for God and one another, diverse voices and people unified in worship yet distinct in voice, and reconciliation between God and each other. This is what Paul means to “offer your bodies as living sacrifices” in an act of worship; God is glorified in majesty by the self-emptying, diverse, reconciled unity imaged by his people.

What is so tremendous about this glorious picture of redemption is the worshipers. At this long-awaited Resurrection, the moment when all wrong will be righted, all evil will be silenced, death will be defeated, and hopes and dreams will finally be vindicated...resurrected bodies of all cultures and colors will stand together as God’s ultimate affirmation. As Esau McCaulley says, “When God calls the dead back to life, he calls each of them with their ethnic identity intact.”⁴⁶

For now, when we love across difference, and we worship a diverse people gathered together by our shared bond in Christ, we provide a glimpse into that future hope. Testifying to that future reality in the present is a powerful display of unity, both to each other and to the world.⁴⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

Love, diversity, reconciliation, and worship. This is how the New Testament portrays God’s people swept up into the life and love of God. They are also the healthy markers that will fuel and follow from a unified Christian community, the same sort of community Paul longs to rebuild through his words of encouragement and instruction in Philippians 1 and Philippians 2.

In contrast to those images, we know that violence, uniformity, boasting, and honor-seeking are the sights of smoke that should lead us to immediately extinguish the flames of disunity before it spreads. If we don’t, we will find ourselves prey to our own desires, impeding the witness of the

⁴⁶ Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black*.

⁴⁷ An image that comes to mind is [this photo](#) from the June 2020 “Lament D.C.” protest trip by MACC members.

gospel, and otherwise saying in our words and deeds “that the Messiah has been divided and broken up into little bits.”⁴⁸

How can we do this? How do we begin to navigate this challenge, particularly in the shadow of the past 12 months? We know the American church didn’t exactly emerge looking like the majestic manifestation of love, diversity, reconciliation, and worship Jesus prayed for all those 2,000 years ago. But I know we want to--we desire to be that supernaturally unified presence, fearless in the face of opposition, and loving our enemies with the peacemaking power of Christ.

Well, I think we can begin to work towards that kind of unity by embracing the EMPATHETIC and PROPHETIC posture we see in Paul. He imitates Christ by balancing GRACE and TRUTH.

One the hand, Paul offers us a deeply empathetic, patient, and caring voice that pursues solidarity and brotherhood with the Philippians and reiterates his love and care for them over and over.

There is a magnetic temptation today to adopt the smashmouth tactics that are celebrated in culture today--returning back to “them” whatever is being done to “us.” This false teaching seeks to convince us that our battle is against *earthly* powers, even though Scripture explicitly tells us that we are in conflict with spiritual powers and principalities⁴⁹ In the midst of relational conflicts, we can quickly forget this, and forget that the Bible presents other humans as gifts to each other. The way forward--through those conflicts and toward flourishing, healthy community dynamics of mutual enjoyment--is setting pride aside and re-discovering *together* how we are gifts.

In U2’s song “One”, the lyrics talk about how we “get” to carry each other. It’s a helpful reminder of how we need to teach ourselves to see bearing each other’s burdens as a privilege. And there’s perhaps no better illustration of this truth than in Mark 2:1-5:

“A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.””

Obviously, the paralyzed man is *literally* being carried by his friends here, but what resonates with me is how the nature of the man’s delivery to Jesus--literally carried there by his community--is essential to his forgiveness and healing. Jesus says *after* Jesus saw the faith of the man’s friends, he said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:13 (KNT).

⁴⁹ Ephesians 6:12.

⁵⁰ Mark 2:5.

As Christians, the bonds we share are greater than any other bond that exists. We belong to each other, and we're given to one another as gifts. It is easy to lose sight of this, whether in a single conversation or in a particularly challenging relationship, and in those moments and seasons we are tempted to see each other not as gifts, but as obstacles to our own flourishing. What is needed is clarified vision--the unity of the mind Paul spoke of--so that we can see once again that we're one, not the same, and we *get* to carry each other.

On the other hand, Paul is a consistent, firm, truth-telling, and prophetic voice, challenging the Philippians to return to the principles of the calling they first received.

Unity doesn't mean feathers never get ruffled. If you're not convinced, then look back at Paul! In Acts 2, Paul publicly confronts Peter over his unwillingness to share life with the Gentiles God had welcomed into his Kingdom at Pentecost.⁵¹ "When Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong."⁵² Throughout his epistles, Paul offers harsh and blunt words of rebuke.

German pastor, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer maintained that in situations of rampant injustice, Christians are *commanded* by Christ to love their neighbor by standing up against evil, casting down strongholds, and engaging the "principalities and powers" through prayer and prophetic engagement. Bonhoeffer walked that talk by opposing Hitler's regime, returning to Germany from the safety of the United States, organizing an underground seminary, and leading a new generation of Christians to stand against Nazism. But his fiery nature wasn't reserved for those outside the church; Bonhoeffer openly confronted Germany's Confessing Church, the institutional body that endorsed and upheld Nazism. And he *died* for it. Bonhoeffer's life and legacy remind us that Christian compassion is rarely tidy or neat; it is obligated in some measure to stand and speak prophetically against the wiles and schemes of the Devil.

For many in our congregation, I think this second response comes more instinctually, particularly on matters of race and social justice. We have little hesitation publicly condemning racism, and for good reason. For those whom this is true, I want to encourage you to reflect and meditate on the first exhortation to humility and grace. We who fall in that category are often quick to speak, slow to listen, and certain in our convictions. We struggle to first consider the perspective of the other; in short, we don't see our brothers and sisters in Christ as gifts. This behavior wounds our brothers and sisters in Christ who need to know that you love them and stand in solidarity with them, even and perhaps especially when they stumble and fall.

Esau McCaulley has noted that the way in which the vision for Christian social justice is distinct from the world's conception can be boiled down to this: it does not leave anybody outside the

⁵¹ Acts 2:14.

⁵² Galatians 2:11-13.

sphere of possible redemption. That is because Christian social justice is based on the belief that all are made in God's image, and therefore, none should be abhorred or dehumanized. "If you tell us you are trying to change, we will come alongside you," McCaulley says. "When the church is at its best it opens up to the possibility of change, to begin again."⁵³ This is at the heart of the Old and New Testament messages of salvation, liberation, and reconciliation. When we fail to cultivate this kind of empathetic thinking, we are admitting to be true of ourselves what Dr. King famously warned against: "'He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love," King wrote. "We can never say, 'I will forgive you, but I won't have anything further to do with you.' Forgiveness means reconciliation, and coming together again."

Meanwhile, there are others of us in this congregation who need to ponder and respond to the second exhortation to prophetic truth-telling. Our non-confrontationalism and preference for stability prevents us from building a unity based on the truth, not the mere absence of conflict. And our tendency to diminish the real and felt pains of our brothers and sisters in Christ tears at the very fabric of our bond. A failure to speak the truth, a reluctance to "air the dirty laundry", wounds the brothers and sisters in the body who need to hear from you, know that you see their pain, and condemn the pain-giver.

Humility and empathy, as well as prophetic truth-telling. Grace **and** truth.

Next week is Palm Sunday, the day we celebrate Jesus' subversive "victorious" entry into the City of Jerusalem. His victory is sure, but not by might nor by power, but by the ultimate act of self-giving, self-emptying love, an act which set in motion a church meant to manifest the supernatural unity for which Jesus prayed. We share in Jesus' victory, and we are promised an ultimate victory that will itself be so glorious, so redemptive, so all-consuming that it will make right all that has been wronged. "And behold," says the Lamb seated on the throne, before a unified Kingdom of diverse disciples worshipping him. "I am making all things new."⁵⁴

As you prepare your hearts for Easter and reflect on both the love of Christ and his prayers for a unified church, **pursue unity by practicing humility**. That is where we will return to Philippians in the "new year" after Easter--an extended meditation on the self-giving, humble love of Jesus.

Let's pray.

⁵³ "[A Christian Vision of Social Justice](#)." David Brooks. *The New York Times*. March 18, 2021.

⁵⁴ Revelation 21.

BENEDICTION (End of Ephesians 3)

Paul, speaking of unity and tearing down the dividing wall of hostility:

“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. I pray that according to the wealth of his glory he will grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner person, that Christ will dwell in your hearts through faith, so that, because you have been rooted and grounded in love, you will be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and thus to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you will be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power that is working within us is able to do far beyond all that we ask or think, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”