

## *Sermon Text for December 28, 2014*

*by*

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Isaiah 42:5-9, Ephesians 4:1-6

“We are family”

I am often amazed at how I think I pick the topics to preach on Sunday and then an event happens that reminds me of God’s providence and that he knows exactly what is needed and when. Just this past week we have begun organizing an event with all of the churches in Strasburg a Day of Appreciation for our police officers and the support staff in the Borough. All of us working together because we recognize that we are the church. And here I am today about to preach on Christian unity and how we are a family, I’ve got all my denominations with me. My whole life I have seen as my passion that of unifying the body of Christ. I have worshipped in dozens of different churches and denominations worldwide and I have heard the name of Christ proclaimed in each place.

Today as we look at one of the final statements of the Apostles’ Creed we come upon a statement that I know for many of you has caused much confusion. I believe in the holy catholic church. If you think this part is confusing to you just think of the Protestants in Italy who face a nearly identical reality especially in the small villages. In the small mountain church that we had the priest there described us as a theater and not a Christian church because we had so many young people who were involved. But still every Sunday we would say: Credo nella santa chiesa cattolica. Some explaining needs to be done.

Today we are going to look at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians where he beseeches the church to be one. Seven times in these verses he uses the term one to signify how serious he is about it. Paul gives us a formula on how we can be unified not only with other denominations, but also with each other and that is through humility, gentleness, and patience. I am convinced that there is no greater sin that we as Christians are guilty of than disunity. Paul stresses that, but he also provides us with a remedy for that disunity. Let’s discuss it together.

## **READ**

Ever since I can remember my family and my home was involved and filled with people who were involved in ecumenical work. For some people the term ecumenical is a bad word because they do not know what it means. Ecumenical comes from the Greek word in Scripture that means the whole inhabited earth. But recently a movement has taken it to mean the uniting by confession of faith and action all those churches who call themselves Christian.

As I was growing up names such as Desmond Tutu, and others would come to our house and discuss there issues of how Christians can be more unified. I was born in Portugal while my dad was starting up an ecumenical center where Catholic and Protestant theologians would gather to share ideas on faith and action. As I got older I became involved through the European Conference of Churches and as a result I had a chance to meet with and work with 2 different Archbishops of Canterbury, a couple of heads of state, Patriarch Alexi and Kirill from Russia, others in meetings where the focus was the unity of all Christians. For what purpose? And this is key, to give a consistent, credible witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Unity among Christians is one of my passions. I believe that it was one of Jesus' main concerns as well. The week before he died we find him concerned that his disciples would splinter and fragment and form the church of John, or Andrew, or Matthew, or Nathaniel, and each would teach different doctrines and insist on separate non-essentials so that at the end he was afraid that there would be left a variety of churches instead of one unified church. In John 14 we find Jesus praying for a whole chapter, his longest prayer in all of Scripture, and do you know what he was praying for? That we would be one, just as he and his father were one.

But we are not one. As Christians we are not unified, we are not one in Strasburg, Lancaster County, the United States and the world. This disunity is seen around the communion table as Christians are not able to celebrate together, but we made a huge step in our witness here in Strasburg as our Thanksgiving service contained communion and we were all able to celebrate around the same table. That was huge. Our disunity is seen around the baptismal font as Christians feel the need to be rebaptized. But we say that we believe in the holy catholic church, so why does this happen?

First of all what does it mean when we say that we believe in the catholic church? There are three words in the current Apostles' Creed that should be changed. In fact if you look at the beginning of your hymnal in the ecumenical section two of the three words are changed. Quick is changed to living, ghost is changed to spirit, and catholic should be changed to universal or Christian. This term catholic comes from the Latin *cattolicos* which means universal, or worldwide, it means literally, the one holy worldwide, ecumenical body of Christ. It has nothing to do with Roman Catholic, a Christian denomination that did not come about until after the Council of Trent in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century.

But if we profess to believe in a single church which church is that. Do we believe that one day every church will join a single church, that would be the ideal. Then which one should it be? The Presbyterian? Let's begin by just recognizing each other as Christians, in the sense that we recognize each others' baptism, communion, and ministers as being called by God.

This is a start. This is where Paul comes and helps us and tells us how we can best understand that we believe that the body of Christ, the church universal is composed of Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, Mennonite, nondenominational, Church of God, etc. and that as a single family what happens to one member affects us all.

Paul's message in Ephesians is one of unity for the Christian church and it is a message that the church in its current fractured state needs to hear. Paul in Ephesians 4 begs us to live a life that is marked by unity. We are encouraged to live a life, vs.1 states worthy of our calling, or worthy of the name that we carry. And the name that we carry regardless of our denomination is Christian.

Paul gives us three ways to live that life of a Christian among each other so that we can reflect our calling. The first is with all humility: I understand humility as knowing your limits. Another way of seeing humility is that of a servant and the example we get in Scripture of humility is that of Christ washing his disciples' feet. So a step toward unity is found in humility as expressed through servanthood. If we treat the other Christian as someone I am to serve things would change then.

The second is that of gentleness: This is a hard one because many see gentleness as weakness. Some people feel that the only way to let people know about the love of God is to get in their face and constantly telling them about Christ. II Timothy 2:25 tells us to correct people with gentleness. Jesus also states I am gentle and humble in heart. Gentleness is often lacking in dialogue among the church.

The final one is patience: in this context Paul can also mean long-suffering or holding up in times of difficulty. There is an ancient Greek saying that goes: never ask from the gods not to suffer, but rather to know how to persevere. At the core of patience is the knowledge that all things work for the good for those who trust in the Lord. You can be eternally patient with that in mind.

Christ is the bond who links us in unity. Through humility, gentleness, and patience we are able to be unified in Christ. The church is a human institution, we are not perfect, and we fail at times, and when we do, it reflects upon Christians everywhere, upon the whole body of Christ. Paul tells us in verse 3 to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. In Isaiah we read that we have been called as a light to the nations and our unity needs to be the main light, but instead it has become our greatest liability.

Paul reminds his readers what they have in common and it is what we have in common with all Christians. One body of Christ, one Spirit, one hope in the resurrection, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. This is what unifies us and makes us one. The reason I am so passionate about unity in the churches is because I know that is what the world is seeing. When there is disunity it not only affects the people in the church but it also weakens the witness of every single Christian in the community. If God is love, then why do you Christians not get along. The problem with that argument is that they are right. Why be a Christian if a Christian means turmoil and strife. It is not supposed to be that way.

Paul calls us today to unite for the sake of the church universal. We are family and when one member of our family is sick, we are all sick, when one is hurting, we are all hurting. At times the churches in Strasburg have seen each other as competition or even worse enemies. I think much of that blame falls on us pastors, but not all of it. We should instead see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ who have the same purpose

in mind. And that is to shine our light to all the nations as Isaiah tell us. Paul calls us to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. May God bless us and keep us as we strive toward that goal.

Amen.