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Ephesians 4,1-6

Trinity 17 — 27 September 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We again hear the Epistle lesson from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which was read earlier:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, ³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling: ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Today's Epistle lesson speaks about Christian unity. The Church has always spoken about unity. For example:

In AD 49-50 the Jerusalem Council met to discuss how Jews and Gentiles could co-exist in the Church. It rejected the demand to impose Jewish Law on the Gentiles.

In AD 325 the First Council of Nicea met and began work on what became known as the Nicene Creed. It also condemned heresy. It was the first of seven ecumenical councils accepted by both the Eastern and Western Churches.

In 1530 the Diet of Augsburg met to deal with those "upstart" Lutherans. The Lutherans submitted the Augsburg Confession, which was rejected by the emperor and condemned by the Catholic Church. One must say, however, that both sides took Scripture seriously and

based their differences on different interpretations of Scripture.

In the past century or so, it seems that the pace has picked up. In our country, we see various denominations saying that they are in pulpit and alter fellowship with one another. We recently saw the Lutheran World Federation — by the way, an organization to which we do not belong, and with good reason — and the Vatican announce that they had seemingly reached an agreement of the Doctrine of Justification — I say seemingly, because when you read the footnotes to the document you see that the two sides disagree on the definitions of all the major terms and are still miles apart from reaching a real understanding.

In mathematics, when one divides fractions, one looks for the lowest common denominator. Usually the quest for Christian unity in the past century, however, has been based on seeking the lowest common denominator.

But in seeking the lowest common denominator in spiritual matters such as Christian unity, what happens is that fuzzy emotions replace the sound teaching of Scripture. The best analogy I can think of is that of putting up wall paper on the walls of a house whose foundation is faulty. There are cracks in the walls. But those seeking unity are content in papering over the cracks in the hopes that no one will notice the faulty foundation. But what happens over time? The foundation continues to be faulty, the foundation shifts, and the cracks reappear and the wall paper tears.

This brings me to today's sermon theme, "**Christian Unity.**" I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Christians Have A High Calling;**
- 2) Christians Have A Unity Of The Spirit;** and,
- 3) Christians Have A Oneness In Christ.**

1) Christians Have A High Calling. Paul begins this part of his letter by reminding his readers — which includes us — that they have a High Calling.

The first thing to note is that it is Jesus is the One Who calls us to be

His.

If we are called by Jesus through the Gospel, then this is not something that we have done. Rather, Jesus has done the calling. This is not a question of “I have decided to follow Jesus,” rather, through the Gospel message that Christ died and rose again to win for us the forgiveness of sins, we have been reconciled to God as forgiven sinners.

The question of our Call in Christ is a matter of correct teaching, or in that word which so many hate because it sounds so “cold” and “abstract,” of correct doctrine.

The second lesson that we can take from this, is that correct teaching, or correct doctrine, precedes correct behavior. Paul laid the correct doctrinal foundation in the preceding chapters of Ephesians, and now continues. It is only through Jesus that we as called and forgiven children of God have been empowered to walk with Jesus.

This walk, then, is characterized by lowliness, gentleness, longsuffering, and bearing with one another in love.

To walk with lowliness and gentleness was completely alien to Greek and Roman thinking. It is seemingly alien in our world as well. I am reminded of a cartoon in which a church elder tells a parishioner, “Brother, you ain’t confessin’, you’re boastin’!” I’m sure you can supply current examples.

Jesus’ walk, however, was characterized by lowliness and gentleness. This is Jesus’ humility, that even though He was God, He became man, to live among us, but more than that, to die for us.

Our patience and our lowliness reflects that patience and lowliness of forgiven sinners. We deserved nothing from Jesus, but He gave us everything. His is the voice of the Good Shepherd Who goes after the lost and straying. His is the voice of the Good Shepherd Who never goes too far ahead of the sheep, but calls them in a loving voice – loving in that He lays down His life for the sheep, but also takes it up again.

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus promised His disciples that He would send them another Comforter, One who would be with them and guide them into all Truth. Thus we see that:

2) Christians Have A Unity Of The Spirit. Paul exhorts us to “endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit.”

In the New Testament, “to keep” means “to preserve” or “to guard.”

Thus, the unity of the Spirit is not something we create, but something which has been given to us to keep, to preserve, to guard. It is the work of the Spirit Himself.

The Holy Spirit has created unity in the Church through the Gospel and the Sacraments. This is what we are to guard and keep.

It means guarding a correct understanding of the Gospel and a correct administration of the Sacraments according to the Gospel. This is what our Augsburg Confession teaches. It means that unity is based on God’s Word; it works from the inside out and not the outside in.

What do I mean?

A correct understanding of the Gospel produces unity. This is the solid foundation. Anything else, any lowest common denominator merely erects a structure on a faulty foundation, and sooner or later the cracks will appear.

Let me use an example. Even though I see a program such as Habitat for Humanity as doing good and worthwhile things, I do not support it, nor do I recommend others support it. At this point, the hairs on the back of your neck may rise. People may think, “What a cold, loveless individual.” And also by implication, “What a cold, loveless synod.”

But what does Habitat for Humanity say about itself? It says that through works of love it will promote Christian unity. What’s the problem? The problem is that this is putting the cart before the horse, so to speak. This is the same as saying that carpentry will promote unity among Christians. Put like that, it just sounds silly.

What it is really saying is that you are free to ignore God's Word and concentrate on a warm, fuzzy Christ.

This fuzzy Christ does not give His true Body and Blood for you.

This fuzzy Christ does not save you through the washing and regeneration of Holy Baptism.

This fuzzy Christ is someone that you have chosen to follow instead of calling you.

This fuzzy Christ is detached from His Word and ultimately you are earning forgiveness through works of love.

Unfortunately, this fuzzy Christ is not the Christ of the Scriptures. And if He is not the Christ of the Scriptures, then any unity is a false unity, a unity based on human works and not the Call of Jesus.

Only a correct understanding of the Gospel produces unity. That correct understanding, correct doctrine, is the solid foundation. It is as Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep My Word." Anything else, any lowest common denominator, merely erects a structure on a faulty foundation that papers over cracks which ultimately endangers faith itself.

But on the other hand, unfortunately all too often an emphasis on correct doctrine is a cover for doing nothing. God has some pretty harsh things to say about that kind of loveless faith, a faith that seemingly exists only in the head and not in the heart, a faith that is sterile and in reality no faith at all. For example, if Habitat for Humanity was not concerned about carpentry promoting Christian unity, I'd have no problem with it.

But with a correct understanding of the Gospel,

3) Christians Have A Oneness In Christ. This oneness is shown in the following:

There is one and only one body. The Church on earth is invisible, in that all who have been called and truly believe that Christ died and rose

for them for the forgiveness of their sins are one body in Christ.

There is one and only one Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, imparted through the Gospel, is the One who works faith in our hearts.

There is one and only one hope. As Paul puts it, we walk by faith and not by sight. In this world we have trials and tribulations associated with the world, our flesh, and the devil. But we have an unshakable hope that Jesus is with us and that He has prepared a place for us in the heavens, untouched by human hands, where we and all believers shall dwell securely forever.

There is one and only one Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” All Christians have only one Lord, Jesus Christ.

There is one and only one faith. Here faith is used in the objective sense of teaching or doctrine. There is only one faith, and Christ is the bedrock, and this one faith is based on the foundation of the teaching — the doctrine — of the apostles and prophets.

There is one and only one Baptism. This is Baptism in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection.

There is one and only one God and Father. We are not like the pagans, who had a separate god for every nation and tribe and tongue and even household. The one and only true God has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This teaching of the Trinity has been held by the Church since the time of the Apostles and is based on the clear teaching of Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments. The only way to God is through His Son, Jesus.

All of this oneness is God’s doing. His Spirit is the One Who creates this oneness through the Means of Grace. It exists regardless of denomination. It is not the creation of human hands, but rather, it is the creation of our gracious God.

In dealing with other denominations, other churches if you will, we can only deal with them on the basis of God's Word. This has always been the case.

Paul spoke in the same manner to the early Christians. He told them that if any preach another Gospel to them, if anyone take away from the grace offered us by Christ, let that person be anathema, that is, condemned. If anyone add to the Gospel, let him be anathema.

In the Old Testament, Moses says:

And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and rules I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live. . . . You shall not add to the Word that I command you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you. (Deuteronomy 1-2)

We are not to add nor to subtract from the Gospel. If we add or subtract, what we are left with is not God's doing, but man's.

Another example. Many of us must take medications for certain ailments or conditions. Often, the insurance company asks that if possible we take the generic brand instead of the name brand of the medication. A while ago, I came across the fact that according to FDA requirements, generic brands are permitted to have different standards in regard to efficacy than name brands. Generic brands are allowed to have a "bioequivalence standard of 80 to 125 per cent." That's quite a range.

What it means is that if the efficacy of a generic brand is 20 per cent below normal, that can be a bad thing. Likewise, if it is 25 per cent above normal, too much of a good thing can turn out to be bad as well.

So in spiritual matters. Any deviation from God Word, too much or too little, can be spiritually bad. The bad things that result are the cracks in the body of Christ, cracks in the faith that can endanger the spiritual lives of all concerned.

Conclusion: God has given us a unity in Christ, but it is always a unity that

is measured against His Word.

In the early Church and even in the time of the Reformation, people were not afraid to seek unity on the basis of agreement on the correct understanding of God's Word. This is the basis for our Lutheran Confessions, seeking unity on the basis of a correct understanding of the Word of God.

In our day, however, people go after unity for the sake of unity, putting the cart before the horse. They seek unity on the basis of the lowest common spiritual denominator, which replaces agreement on the basis of the Word with agreeing to disagree. This is papering over the cracks, cracks that are the result of a shaky spiritual foundation of something other than God's Word.

We are not afraid to seek unity on the basis of God's Word. Jesus said that we are to teach all that He has commanded us. Jesus said if we love Him we will keep His Word. This is the Word that gives us one Lord, one faith, and one Baptism. This is the Word that gives us life only in Jesus, Who through His death and resurrection won for us the forgiveness of sins, which gives us life and salvation. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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