

“ONE IN CHRIST”

Ephesians 3:14-4:6

November 25, 2018 – Christ the King Sunday

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These opening verses of chapter four have a very nice sound. Every time I read them, I feel like they should have been written in poetic form. They're short phrases with some alliteration and repetition. The rhythms just flow off the tongue: lead a life worthy... with all humility and gentleness... the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace... one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. It's just a beautiful meditation on the unity we have in Christ.

If only it were true! A quick glance around the church today reveals a faith more divided than ever. We've been exploring some of these differences in adult education with Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins*. Some believe that most people will make it to heaven while others insist that only a select few will inherit the kingdom of God. Some see the crucifixion as an atonement for our sin while others see it as a demonstration of God's love. Baptists view infant baptism as illegitimate while Catholics believe that only their celebration of communion is authentic. The church separates itself over issues of sexuality, abortion, patriotism, social justice, social services, politics, war and peace. Some will argue that "They'll know we are Christian by our love" should really be "There's no love lost between us." The hate spewed by some Christians against other Christians leaves one speechless. It's the chief complaint I hear about Christianity.

At one point "liberals" were defensive and apologetic almost about their views, while conservatives went on the attack. But today both ends of the spectrum can occupy either pole while "moderates" just want us all to talk nice to each other.

The problem of Christian unity is real. Attempts to resolve these differences have always struck me as artificial. Yes we all see ourselves as disciples of Jesus, but the Jesus I follow seems very different than the Jesus other Christians follow. The God I pray to seems incompatible with the God some others pray to. The contradictions within the Christian communion are unsettling to those taking an honest look at the church. And yet my own spiritual journey within the church has shaped my faith into what it is today.

I grew up in the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, a church for whom the liturgy, very specific liturgy, was all important, some would say idolatrous. It is a church that continues to restrict the role of women in leadership. And yet it was there that I first learned Bible stories and memorized verses. It was there that a certain Sunday School teacher awakened me to the centrality of Jesus to the gospel story.

His faith gave shape to the first Bible Study I led on the importance of commitment to Christ, not just what God has done for us in Christ, but how we respond. That community of teenage believers regarded homosexuality as a sin and some of its members continue to regard welcoming Christians as apostate. But my love of scripture deepened with that

group even though we tended to be too literal in our interpretation. And that group taught me that prayer could be more than memorized words, that it could express the emotions of the heart, and that anyone can pray.

My first exposure to African-American culture and the reality of poverty came with Friendship Presbyterian Church. I loved the diversity and their heart for ministry and engagement with the community despite a patriarchal bias and what now seems to me a too-narrow evangelicalism.

Seminary introduced me to more sophisticated tools for interpreting the Bible, to feminism, and other liberation theologies rejected by large sectors of the church even today. We pastored a church at that time largely composed of Italian-Americans, whose unconscious racism led to some uncomfortable moments. But those folks also taught me how to do pastoral ministry, the importance of listening, and just how able people with a variety of disabilities could be.

This church is considerably more timid about public prayer than that community of teenagers, but it has redeemed ritual for me. The importance of welcoming all refreshes my soul. I find in this community kindred spirits committed to mission, earth care, learning, and care for one another. But our response to racism and participation in local advocacy is a little luke-warm.

From the outside the church appears as one of the more contentious institutions in the world today and yet my experience within particular faith communities is one of harmony, a sense of common purpose, and a place that deepens faith, hope, and love.

Churches in Africa and Korea are vibrant worshipping communities that reject gay and lesbian people. How is this possible? Haven't they met the Jesus whose entire ministry was with the outcasts of society? All the evidence suggests that the church is not one in its witness. But is it possible that in spite of all our imperfections, we might still be one in Christ? Is it possible that in spite of our differences, we might still claim one faith, one Lord, one baptism?

My experience says that it is, that each faith community offers opportunities for spiritual growth. Perhaps our oneness consists in Jesus Christ who is Lord of the church, even though we know this Jesus differently. My experience says that we need the church, imperfect as it may be, to deepen our understanding of Jesus and faith.

Because we all claim Christ as King, we need to not gloss over all the differences. Because Christ is King, each faith community must work to hone its vision to the leading of Jesus. Because Christ is King, all Christians need to place themselves within faith communities that deepen their understanding of Jesus, scripture, and the responsibilities of faith for a hurting and dangerous world.

We are not yet one in Christ, but Christ still leads the church. Despite the controversies within the church at Corinth, Paul reminds them that they "are the body of Christ." He

reminds them that their differences are for the building up of the body of Christ, not for tearing it down. He tells them that they need each other and the gifts that each bring to the faith community.

We are not yet one in Christ, but if we acknowledge Christ as King, we will not allow the church's imperfections to separate ourselves from the faith community. We need each other for the deepening of faith. There are no churches that have nothing to offer, though there are particular churches more suited to your needs than other churches.

We are not yet one in Christ, but we are moving toward that vision described by Paul where Christ dwells in our hearts and grounds us in love, where we are coming to know the height and breadth and depth of God's love, where we are coming to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

Churches vary as much as the people in them. The differences make us stronger. Controversies disturb us. We are not yet one in Christ, but where Christ is King we hold on to the promise that God is able to, and will, accomplish far more within us and our faith communities than are able to ask or imagine.

It is within the church that we have been nurtured in faith, that we have been challenged to grow, and where ministry has flourished. Whatever our flaws and disagreements, here is a place where we draw near to God, where love for one another is strong, where unity is experienced... where Christ is King. Amen.