

"UNITED IN CHRIST"
(Ephesians 4:1-6)
© 2022 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 10-2-22 (World Communion Sunday Message)]

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1. [11am ONLY... Read text: Ephesians 4:1-6 and Pray]
2. Every four years, nearly 12,000 athletes from over 200 countries gather in a great city of the world to compete in what we've come to call the Summer Olympic Games.
 - A--In any given Olympiad, they come from countries such as Bhutan, the Ukraine, Nepal, South Africa, Great Britain, Brazil, the United States, and the Koreans.
 - B--They come with different political ideologies and beliefs: Democracy; Socialism; Communism.
 - C--They come with different religious beliefs and practices: Christians; Hindus; Buddhists; Muslims; Jews; atheists; and agnostics.
 - D--Yet, in spite of all of these differences, they come as a one, united humanity in love of sports, and in a desire to celebrate that oneness through Olympic competition.
3. Well, in today's scripture from Ephesians 4:1-6, we find the apostle Paul talking about how Christians around the world are "united", as well -- not to play sports, but to affirm our spiritual oneness in Christ.
 - A--[9am ONLY... Listen to the words of Paul in today's scripture: "*1 Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. 2 Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, 3 and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. 4 You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. 5 There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.*"]
 - B--Here/In today's scripture, we find the apostle Paul in Vs. 3 encouraging Christians to "*make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together.*"
4. Yet, today in America alone there are over 200 denominations that call themselves "Christian," not to mention the many other Christian traditions in other parts of the world! And even in our own denomination, there is division and conflict over differences of belief and practice.

A--So given this, how can we Christians really claim to have “unity” or be “united” like Paul says when there are so many differences? It’s a good question -- one that a lot of non-believers often ask.

B--Well, today as we celebrate "World Communion Sunday, " I want to suggest that in Verses 4-6 of today’s scripture, Paul gives us an explanation of how we can be “*United in Christ*” despite our many differences.

--II--

5. **First**, he says that “*there is ONE BODY and ONE SPIRIT..*”

A--Now, let's think about our own human body as a metaphor for what this means.

1--It is *one* organism with *one* “soul/spirit,” and yet it is nevertheless composed of many *different* organs (such as heart, lungs, liver), tissues (such as the skin), and systems (such as respiratory and circulatory).

2--And though these are different organs and tissues, they can’t operate independent of each other, for each of them is essential to the whole.

3--Perhaps some of you know the Aesop’s fable in which it occurred to the members of the body one day that they were doing all the work and that the stomach was getting all the food. So they held a meeting and after a long discussion decided to go on strike until the stomach agreed to do its proper share of the work.

For a day or two the hands refused to take the food, the mouth refused to receive it and the teeth had no work to do. But after that, the members began to find that they themselves were not in very active condition. The hands could hardly move, the mouth was all parched and dry, while the legs were unable to support everyone

They soon discovered, in other words, that even the stomach in its dull quiet way was doing necessary work for the body and that all must work together or the body would go to pieces.

B--In many ways, it's the same in the church: if we are “one body” and “one spirit,”¹ then as much as we may or may not like it, we *need* our differences in order to truly function the way God created and desires us to.

1--That means we *need* those Baptists, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, those "other Methodists", and all the other nearly 200 denominations that we may not necessarily agree with.

2--To be complete ourselves, we *need* those who worship God in Spanish, Korean, French, German, Russian, as well those who worship in English.

3--As much as it drives us crazy, we *need* Christians who are traditional, progressive, centrist, charismatic, feminist, evangelical, and liberationist.

4--To understand the fullness of God ourselves, we *need* those who worship Him with guitars and drums, as well as those who worship Him with an organ and with traditional rituals and creeds.

C--In short, we *need* each other to function properly as the “*Body & Spirit of Christ.*”

6. But we’re also “*united in Christ*” because Paul says there is “**ONE LORD**” and “**ONE GOD AND FATHER of all.**”

A--In ancient Judaism, the most basic creed was called the *Shema*, from Deuteronomy 6:4: “*Hear O Israel! The Lord your God is ONE.*”

1--And in the early church, the earliest creed was Philippians 2:11: “*Jesus is Lord*”

2--So in their times, both of these phrases were essentially statements of priorities.

3--To say them meant that you were acknowledging the priority of God and of Jesus Christ in your life.

B--That’s essentially what Paul in today’s scripture meant when he wrote, “*there is one Lord... and one God and Father of all.*”

1--So whether we call ourselves United Methodist, Global Methodist, non-denominational, Baptist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, or American, Korean, Latino, or something else... we Christians are bound together by our common allegiance to God alone.

2--So, for us to say that “*there is one Lord*” and “*one God*” is to say that...

(a) ...Money is not our lord; ...Success is not our lord;

(b) ...Nor is pleasure, our job, our material possessions, or even our relationships;

(c) Instead, it’s to say that God is the one who orders all the priorities of our life.

7. Finally, Paul says there is “**ONE HOPE,**”...”**ONE FAITH**” and “**ONE BAPTISM**”

A--Here, he’s not talking about a particular statement of beliefs or theological perspectives that we all have to adhere to, or that we all have to be baptized a certain way in order to call ourselves “Christian.”

1--No. He was referring to the fact that as Christians, we have committed ourselves to a common destiny (heaven = “*hope*”) through a common commitment to Jesus Christ (“*faith*”), expressed through a common experience of initiation (“*baptism*”).

2--We may have different ways of expressing and practicing these, but we share them in common nonetheless.

B--Another way of stating these phrases is to say that there is “*one Christian family.*”

1--And we all know that being in a family doesn't mean that we're all alike, or that we all always agree, or even that we all always get along.

2--But it does mean that we look out for & depend on each other, no matter what.

C--And so it's supposed to be with the body of Christ:

1--There may be Christians who believe or worship in ways that we don't like or agree with, but if Jesus is *their* Lord, then they're as much a part of the family of God as *we* are.

2--It's been said, “*You can pick your friends, but you're stuck with your family.*” Well, we might as well learn to get along down here on earth, because we'll be spending a long time together in heaven !

D--As a family, you see, we Christians are united by a common commitment to the *hope, faith, and baptism* of Jesus Christ (*however practiced!*).

--III--

8. According to the apostle Paul, you see, Christians around the world and throughout time share “***ONE Body & Spirit, ONE Lord & God, and ONE Hope, Faith, & Baptism.***”

A--Though we may express these different ways through our beliefs, practices, and worship, we, who are MANY, are nevertheless also ONE, united in Christ.

B--Remember that even though Olympic athletes *enter* the stadium under their own country's flag during Opening Ceremony, by the Closing Ceremony they enter it intermingled, as members of one, worldwide humanity.

9. Well, if our secular world can unite together in the name of *sports*, how much *more* should we as Christians be able to unite together (*despite* our differences) in the name of the one who has saved us and given himself for us all -- Jesus Christ.

A--So today, on “World Communion Sunday,” we're all invited to experience together one of the most tangible ways we can express our common unity in Christ.

B--As we celebrate Holy Communion together,² let us acknowledge how, in spite of our differences, we are called to truly be “United in Christ.”

10. [PRAYER]

11. [HOLY COMMUNION]

ENDNOTES:

¹ In the Bible, the Greek word for “Spirit” (*pneuma*) is the same as the word for “breath” or “wind.” So, if we consider how our breath provides all of the organs and systems in our human bodies with the oxygen they need to survive, then we perhaps can grasp how I think Paul is trying to say that the Holy Spirit is not the exclusive domain of the Pentecostals/Charismatics, but that even through our differences, in the church there is “*one breath of life, God's Holy Spirit.*”

² It's true that Christians practice this sacrament in different ways and by different names (Holy Communion, The Lord's Supper, the Eucharist). But all Christians everywhere practice it in *some* way.