

“Grace That Grows”

Psalm 1; Ephesians 4:1-16

October 27, 2024

Introduction

- Several years ago, I was at Sharon Presbyterian Church.
- Sitting at a table filled with church members.
 - o I was sitting between two couples. They all seemed very friendly.
 - o We got to chatting and the funniest thing happened.
- Turned out, these people were, no kidding, across the street neighbors, never knowing each other.
- It added resonance to a trend that we shouldn't miss.
 - o We are growing more isolated than ever before.
 - Bowling alone.
 - Loss of societal cohesion.
 - o We are doing less with one another and this is leading to widespread feelings of disconnect and disillusionment.
 - o Loneliness is worse for us than 15 cigarettes per day. UGH.
- There is a solution.
- Church.
- Paul knew this and talked about it with everything he had.
- Paul's desire.
 - o Paul desperately wanted healthy, functioning, evangelical communities.
 - Paul believed that when believers exhibited the bonds of unity within diversity leading towards maturity, the church would be resonant on its' own.
 - People would see other people excelling in life and want also to be involved.
 - o Everyone loves a winner, right.
 - o So, Paul formed these churches and then nurtured them from afar, wanting always them to be functioning.
 - Much of what Paul is doing from afar is pastoring.
 - He's taking the problems and strengths of each church and trying to mold them into the bonds of love through the Holy Spirit.
 - o So, Paul writes with the hope that the churches will hear the wisdom and respond to it.
 - What Paul sees in Ephesians is for the church to be a unified body of believers with a diversity of gifts to mature in wisdom and love to be that resonant body of Christ that evangelizes the world around them.

To that end, Paul talks about Unity.

- It's a unity that is lacking in present society. You're not just going to find it out there. It has to be cultivated and kept real.
 - o That is the work of the church.
 - Ephesians 4:1-3 – *“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”*
- Paul calls the church to be unified.
- What does it take to be united?
 - o First it takes Humility.
 - Why? It's hard to have a cohesive group when you pack it filled with people who think they're better than the rest.
 - A sure-fire method for failure.

- I remember for a while there the Yankees used to just buy the best free agent talent every year.
 - Only to lose.
 - Oftentimes they imported big egos that couldn't get along with the other guys in the clubhouse.
- Humility means thinking less of yourself and more of other people.
 - **Philippians 2:3** – “*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*”
 - **Romans 12:10** – “*Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.*”
- Second it takes Gentleness.
 - Strength under control.
 - Being gentle is a cool word in the Greek.
 - Doesn't mean meek, weak.
 - It means strength under control, like a finely trained war horse.
 - We can't go running off the first second we don't like what's going on.
 - We need gentleness in the church to make it a hospitable place.
 - Gentleness is what leads us to prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- It also takes *Patience*.
 - Other people aren't like us, they're different, hold different thoughts and ideas and yet we're supposed to live harmoniously with them.
 - In the New Testament, *patience* is presented as a quality of enduring strength, often described as "long-suffering" or "forbearance." It's more than just waiting without complaint; Biblical patience involves a steady and hopeful perseverance through difficult situations or relationships. This patience is rooted in trust in God, enabling a person to remain calm and resilient in the face of hardship.
 - *Patience also plays a vital role in community life, helping believers to bear with one another's imperfections and extend grace in challenging relationships. This reflects God's patience with humanity, setting a divine example for believers. Patience, then, is a powerful, Spirit-driven quality that allows us to approach trials and others' flaws with compassion, steadiness, and love.*
 - We need patience if we're going to deal with other people.
- Most importantly, you must have Love.
 - Love is what binds it all together in the Holy Spirit.
 - And this love, this is what makes being a church member so special.
 - Give data about connectedness.
 - More important than wealth when it comes to contentment.
 - People with more love, live longer lives, I believe.

Bridge Paragraph

- Unity is the essential foundation of a thriving church community, but within this unity, there is beautiful diversity. The unity that Paul describes in Ephesians is not about uniformity or sameness; rather, it's a call for believers to be bound together by a shared love and purpose, even as they bring different gifts, perspectives, and roles. True unity creates an environment where diversity can flourish—each person's unique contribution enriching the body as a whole. This diversity isn't merely tolerated; it's celebrated as God's design, making the church a fuller, more dynamic expression of Christ. Just as an orchestra harmonizes distinct instruments to create a symphony, the church's unity provides the setting where individual gifts and strengths come together in a powerful, God-honoring way. From this unity, we move naturally into

exploring the unique roles and talents God has given to each member, understanding that diversity, far from weakening us, strengthens and enriches the body of Christ.

Unity isn't about uniformity; it's about providing a fertile soil for our diversity to shine.

- God's design for us to be like a mosaic or a symphony orchestra with each one of us shining our gifts to the glory of God.
 - o We got a little taste of that yesterday, didn't we?
 - We got organizers and people to set things up, we got people to run things and we got people to take things down.
 - A lot of gifts were expressed yesterday and a lot of joy given to kids and parents all around the area.
 - o Yesterday, we shined the light of Jesus Christ on the world in a unique, Cook's way.
- One compelling story illustrating the beauty of diversity within a church is the well-known example of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir in New York City.
 - o The choir, which is part of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Church, represents over 200 members from all walks of life, ethnic backgrounds, and ages.
 - o Members range from recovering addicts to professionals, and they come together with a single purpose: to worship God through music.
 - o This choir illustrates the beauty of diversity in the church, as people who might otherwise have little in common unite their voices in harmony, creating something greater than any one person could achieve alone.
 - The choir's founder, Pastor Jim Cymbala, emphasizes that the choir's strength lies in its diversity, each member contributing their unique background and life experience to create a powerful, spirit-filled experience. This tapestry of voices from different backgrounds not only brings joy to the congregation but also represents the kingdom of God—a place where all are welcome, valued, and able to contribute their unique gifts. This diversity, rather than causing division, creates a richer, fuller worship experience that reflects the church's calling to embody unity amid diversity.
- **Challenges of Diversity:** Recognize that while diversity strengthens the church, it also presents challenges, such as misunderstandings or conflicts that arise from different perspectives or approaches.
- **Maturity as the Key to Navigating Diversity:** Paul doesn't stop with unity and diversity; he moves into maturity as the next step. Maturity enables us to use our gifts wisely, handling differences with love, grace, and humility.
- **Setting Up Maturity:** Maturity is what allows unity and diversity to flourish side by side, creating a strong, resilient, and loving body of believers.

Paul envisions Maturity arising from this unity within diversity.

A mature congregation can weather all storms of life which will occasionally come into a congregation.

How is maturity achieved?

- Through Spiritual disciplines.
 - o Prayer and Scripture study.
- Through service.
 - o Out work leads to our maturity in Christ.