

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

¹I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

John 6:35

³⁵Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Warning: Christ Ahead

(PLACE ORANGE CONE IN AISLE) How many of you remember your first communion? Was it a big deal? For many of you it was. If you grew up in the church, you had probably been through at least a year of study before you were allowed to participate. If you came into the church later in life, without going through the long process of confirmation, it was still a big deal. But whatever way you wound up at the altar, you had somehow come to accept that Jesus was your Lord and Savior, that he was, as he declares in the Gospel verse today, "the bread of life."

But did you realize that there was a catch? Coming to the altar for Holy Communion is not as simple as it may seem...because you aren't the only one who is coming to the altar. There are dozens of other people coming to the altar with you. You belong to a large family. And like every family in the world, there are a few oddballs who show up at the dinner table. There is the weird uncle, the eccentric aunt, the spoiled nieces and nephews, the bratty cousin... Sure, you like MOST of the people coming to the Lord's table, but you might end up sitting next to someone you don't particularly like.

Of course at Holy Communion you're not actually sitting at a table, and the Lord's Supper doesn't last very long. But you know that Holy Communion means much more than having a piece of bread and a sip of grape juice once a month or once a week near the altar. The communion ritual is symbolic of a much larger communion that does beyond a single segment

of a single worship service. Holy Communion is an outward sign of the inner reality that you and I are UNITED IN CHRIST. WE'RE UNITED TO CHRIST, AND WE'RE ALSO UNITED TO ONE ANOTHER. That's right; we are part of big family, sharing the same big table with dozens of "brothers and sisters" under the same roof and millions more brothers and sisters across the globe. And we often have a really hard time getting along with all those millions of brothers and sisters and cousins and nieces and nephews and aunts; we have a hard time getting along with those brothers and sisters and cousins and nieces under the same roof.

That's the challenge that Paul is referencing in the Epistle lesson; BEING UNITED IN CHRIST. It's obvious we're not united because not all churches welcome other Christians at the Lord's Supper, which is rather arrogant when you think about it; Jesus invites everyone to his table, even Judas, but we refuse to admit each other? But even if churches stopped restricting one another from table fellowship, that doesn't mean that suddenly we would be unified, because even within a single church in a single denomination there is dissent among members. Even between pastors serving the same church there is dissent. There are folks that we just can't sit next to at the table. We even stop coming to church because we can't stand being in the same building as some of those pesky brothers and sisters. And our division betrays the sad truth that **we have not made Jesus the head of his own Church.**

This is not a new problem: Paul must have been witnessing the same divisions and dissent that characterize our church today. In our epistle reading Paul warns us not to be blown about by every wind of doctrine, but rather to "GROW UP" into Christ, who is the head of the church. To GROW UP INTO CHRIST AND NOT BE BLOWN ABOUT BY EVERY WIND OF DOCTRINE. Paul must have been hearing about divisions in the church over a variety of doctrinal issues, issues that served as wedges between different factions in the same church. We don't spend a lot of time on Sunday morning reciting creeds here, and I have avoided creeds intentionally. I don't dismiss them as unimportant, but too often creeds are used to split hairs, and too often there is intellectual pride at stake as some folks insist that they have God figured out. And our emphasis on creeds becomes a substitute for true BELIEF or FAITH. We reduce our religion to a theological formula that spells out the nature of God and Jesus Christ, and then we convince ourselves that it is BELIEF IN THIS FORMULA that really matters to God, that if our theology is flawed we'll be barred from his presence, and we try to convince ourselves that we are SAVED because we have the right formula. ALL THAT IS HUMAN PRIDE, AND IT'S THE WORST KIND OF HERESY. THERE WAS A NAME FOR THIS HERESY IN THE EARLY DAYS OF CHRISTIANITY; IT WAS CALLED GNOSTICISM, THE BELIEF THAT OUR SALVATION WAS THE RESULT OF OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S MYSTERIES. I have avoided including creeds as a part of our regular worship service because I would rather keep our focus on BELIEVING IN JESUS AS OUR LORD AND SAVIOR instead of BELIEVING SOMETHING ABOUT JESUS AS THOUGH GETTING OUR DOCTRINE RIGHT WAS THE KEY TO OUR SALVATION.

Following Christ as the head of the Church is the key to our salvation. And following Jesus means making him the boss, and doing our best to maintain unity. Paul makes a wonderful point in our epistle lesson about our differences. He says we NEED THEM! SOME, HE SAYS, WERE GIFTED TO BE PROPHETS, SOME TEACHERS, SOME PREACHERS, SOME APOSTLES, SOME

EVANGELISTS. In other words, our differences strengthen us, equipping us to do all things necessary to build the church. OUR DIFFERENCES SHOULDN'T DIVIDE US: THEY SHOULD MAKE US BETTER. THERE ARE SOME ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL, GIFTED PEOPLE IN THIS CHURCH. BUT IF THE CHURCH WAS JUST CLONES OF ANY ONE OF THOSE WONDERFUL PEOPLE, WE WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO FUNCTION WELL. Can we look at our differences as a strength toward accomplishing Christ's mission rather than a hindrance to accomplishing one's personal mission? Can we look at ourselves as distinctly gifted individuals that God has placed here intentionally to accomplish a specific mission, and can we appreciate others for their unique gifts which we DON'T possess, gifts that enable the body, THIS body, to be uniquely equipped to accomplish God's will in this place at this time?

The only way this can work is if we submit to Christ's authority and not insist on our own. Jesus says "whoever comes to me will never be hungry." Do we come to Jesus or do we request the he come to us? Jesus says, "whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Do we believe in Jesus, or do we believe in some doctrine *about* Jesus, some special knowledge that we think will entitle us to some reward for "getting it right"?

HENCE THE SAFETY CONE, A WARNING THAT CHRIST IS AHEAD, AND CHRIST IS **THE** HEAD OF THIS CHURCH AND EVERY CHURCH. "Christ invites to his table ALL who love him, repent of their sin, and seek to live in peace with one another;" this is what we confess at the beginning of our Service of Word and Table. "Christ invites ALL..." That includes the eccentric aunt and the bratty nephew, and that includes you and me. As you come forward today to join in this holy meal, remember that ALL have been invited, and neither you nor I can deny folks this invitation. Let's accept the fact that Jesus is the host, and it is by grace that each of us has been invited to this table. And it is to Jesus Christ that our commitment lies.