

Keeping the Unity of the Spirit through the Bond of Peace, Ephesians 4:1-6

In our Second Reading today, Paul reminds us that he is God's ambassador, commissioned to preach the gospel. He has carried out this task to the extent of being arrested and imprisoned for his efforts. But even being a prisoner doesn't stop him from helping his beloved Ephesians. As their spiritual father and mentor, Paul wanted to see a balance between their Christian calling and their daily conduct.

The Ephesians didn't bring themselves to faith. They didn't by themselves find access to the Christian church. No, they were "called" by God's grace. In His love God had sent them His Holy Spirit through the gospel Paul preached. The Holy Spirit, who calls, gathers, and enlightens people, brought them in. When they were "dead in ... transgressions and sins" (2:1), the Spirit had given them life - a new life with grand possibilities. Because the Ephesians have this new life in Christ, Paul can expect a proper response from them when he says, "*I urge you to live in a manner worthy of people whom the Lord has called*" (Eph. 4:1).

What kind of life does Paul - or, rather, God - expect? Paul lists four qualities, divided into two pairs.

First Paul says, "*Be humble and gentle in every way.*" The realisation of their own unworthiness before God would humble them, and in that spirit of humility, they are to be gentle toward others. These two are internal qualities, characteristics that the Ephesians bring to the scene.

The next two qualities involve irritations and aggravations from others. Here Paul urges, "*Be patient and bear with one another in a loving way.*" The key to having patience and putting up with others is love. Again, the Greek word used here is that one-way love that doesn't look for anything in return. It simply reflects to others the undeserved one-way love we have received from a gracious God.

Why should the Ephesians put themselves out for irksome and irritating brothers? Paul points out that there is a great deal at stake. He urges, "*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*"

Nothing less than "the unity of the Spirit" is at stake. When Paul speaks of the unity of the Spirit, we need to be very clear that this is a unity the Holy Spirit has accomplished. It is the unity that exists in the holy Christian church, into which the Holy Spirit has brought all believers in Christ. It is not something dependent on us or something we create by our right actions and conduct. It does not come about because we "make every effort to keep the unity." Rather, Paul cautions us not to spoil the Holy Spirit's good work by our own actions and lose the unity He establishes by disrupting the peace with petty quarrels and inconsiderate actions.

Just how great and precious that unity is becomes apparent when Paul says it is the masterpiece of the triune God. All three persons of the Godhead - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - were involved in effecting this unity. Paul shows this in a table beginning at verse 4. He constructs three sets of three items each - one set for each person of the Trinity. Interestingly enough, he reverses the order from what we're used to seeing. He places the persons into this sequence: Spirit, Son, Father.

In the first set Paul highlights the Spirit's contribution to the church's unity by assembling three items, all introduced by the numerical adjective "one." He says, "*There is one body and one Spirit - just as God has called you to one hope.*" We have noted that the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, and enlightens people. Twice Paul in this verse reminds the Ephesians that they were "called." They were called into one body, the holy Christian church. In that body all people are of the same heart and mind - of "one spirit," if you will - because they all have one and the same hope, namely, eternity with God in heaven.

Regarding the second member of the Trinity, Paul sets up this triad: "*one Lord, one faith, one baptism.*" In Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed, we confess that Jesus purchased and won us, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood. And He did this so that we might be his own. He owns us. He is our Lord, and the only Lord we want or need. Furthermore, all believers by definition believe in Him. He is the object of their faith. "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). And the way to come to faith in Christ is through the means of grace, through Word and sacraments. In stressing the unity that exists among members of the church, Paul calls special attention to baptism, very likely because it is the universal sacrament, intended for all age groups.

In his third triad Paul varies the form, giving us three prepositions to highlight our gracious God's activity. There is only one God, our heavenly Father, "*who is over all, through all and in all.*" With His almighty power our heavenly Father looks after all and watches over them. With His matchless grace He works through His believers to accomplish His saving purpose. In fact, so close is the relationship between God and His believers that Paul can even say God dwells in His believers. As bold and daring as that sounds, Paul really is saying nothing other than what Jesus Himself promised His followers at the Last Supper: "*If anyone loves Me, he will keep My Word, and My Father will love him, and We shall come to him and make Our home with him*" (John 14:23).

Paul's point in this whole section is that a marvellous unity binds the Ephesians to one another in their local congregation (the visible church) and binds them also to every other believer in the worldwide holy Christian church (the invisible church). Therefore, in their daily sanctified lives the Ephesians shouldn't do anything to spoil this great blessing. Rather, they should "*make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*"