

Rev. Jerry Deck
Ephesians 4:1 – 10

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Ephesians 4 the Church

This past week I was doing premarital counseling with a couple in Pastor Scott's office. I did it in there for a couple of reasons. First, he has a table in his office which makes it more conducive to counseling because I have them reflect on things that they need to write down. And second is because his office is so much cleaner than mine! Piles are stacked neatly, books are in the right place, and well it's just a comfortable place, whereas my office has papers all over the desk, old coffee cups scattered hither and thither and so on. So, Scott's office is just a much better environment.

Anyway, as we were there in his office I was having the couple reflect and write some things down and so I did what one does (or at least what I do) which is to snoop around in Scott's office. You know, see what's on his calendar for the next week, check to see what's in the drawers of his desk, check his email, those kinds of things. As I was doing that I noticed that he had a pile of cards that looked like this and so I started thumbing through them. If you're not familiar with these cards they were done back in February of 2013 for ZPC's 30th anniversary. Jim Capps, who was the interim senior pastor, asked ZPCers to fill out these cards with their hopes and prayers for ZPC as it moved into the future. Scott had some of those cards and there are more that are in a "box" just outside of these doors, some of which I went through this week. As I looked through the ones in Scott's office, and then through many that were hanging in the box, something stood out to me about many of them. Let me read some of them for you.

As you can see the major theme from these cards is that of unity, of togetherness. Now that's not too surprising, especially in light of the difficult times that ZPC had experienced the previous few years. But it's clear that that what ZPC was desperate for in 2013 (and I have no reason to think that has changed) is for unity, for strong community, for a sense that we are on the same page.

Of course, this is not a new thing for Christian communities, because we see this clearly from the very beginning of the church, as Paul's letters make clear. Paul, in fact is begging the church in Ephesus to be unified, to make every effort they can to stay together. As NT Wright has said, it is perhaps difficult for us today to grasp just how central the theme of unity was to Paul's vision of the church because we have grown so accustomed to so many divisions within the worldwide church. But, if we base importance on how many times Paul talks about something, then unity would certainly be in at least his top 10.

And so, if we see Paul focusing so strongly on the importance of unity and we know that ZPCer's (and my guess is the vast majority of churches) are desirous of unity it begs this question: why in the world do we find unity so difficult to come by?! Now I'm not usually a big point-by-point preacher (please no snide remarks about how many of

my sermons do seem pointless), but this week I couldn't help but see 5 main points that perhaps are hindrances to us actually being unified. So if you like to write points down, here's number one.

First, I would suggest, is because churches easily lose sight that, as Paul says in the 1st verse, we are to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. We forget, in other words, that we have been called by God to be on mission for him. And one of the things I have oftentimes noticed is that when a church loses sight of their mission, of their calling by God, then division and disunity will almost always ensue. The image, and one I may have used before, is that a church who knows they're called by God, are a people with their arms around one another and marching after the Spirit of God. However, a church that loses that sense of call, may initially still have their arms around one another, but they are surrounding one another like a football huddle. And what you discover is that if you start staring at one another long enough and you have forgotten your mission you will, I promise you, begin to find things you simply don't like about the person across from you. Navel gazing turns quickly into complaining and division and strife and before you know it the church has lost its sense of unity and call. It's why I keep coming back to ZPC's mission, "Called together by God (arms around one another) to make disciples and release them for service into the broken world (and that is our call). We dare not lose sight of that.

Which brings us to the second point about why unity is difficult for us to attain. Now this one is really surprising. It's this: unity is difficult for us because it is really, really, really, really, hard. I mean the truth is that we all love this fuzzy notion of unison, but when real disagreement and conflict come up, rather than seeing that as a sweet opportunity to work on unity we allow our natural inclinations (things like getting angry or running away or not saying what we're thinking or not listening) to take over. But what Paul calls us to is to work, to make every effort, to be unified, not because we agree on everything, but in spite of the fact that we don't agree on everything.

In the premarital counseling I do we talk about things like finances and goals for our lives and conflict resolution. And the easy part is to say what we would like to have happen. A nice 401K. Money for college for the kids. Vacations every year. But what we talk about is the fact that while those are all great, they will be unattainable if you don't sit down and start talking about the actual steps it will take to get to those lofty goals and then follow those steps, no matter how difficult they are.

And this is what we wrestle with when it comes to unity. We all think it would be great (who of us disagrees with that), but the real question is are we willing to take the necessary, difficult steps, that arrive when trouble comes or will we either act like we have no problems or bolt someplace else until problems arise there and go elsewhere? And the truth is that Paul, in this passage, provides us with those difficult, but necessary steps to bring unity

They are humility, gentleness, patience and a willingness to bear with one another in love. Those things may roll off the tongue, but they don't roll off us very naturally, do

they? Let's just unpack them briefly. Humility. This was not something that was looked upon highly in Greek culture, in fact, it was looked at as being a weakness. But one of the attributes of humility is a willingness to not insist on your own rights. Of course, in a time and place when every group and organization wants it's own rights and in a country that was founded with our Bill of Rights, to be willing to give up one's own rights seems like a non-starter for most of us.

Or gentleness. This can also be translated as meekness and, as one commentator suggests, means making sure we are not simply serving ourselves first. Patience, of course, we understand. Literally this means having a slow fuse. Ben Witherington says that it means putting up with the irritation of others. When we say we have to be patient with others, while we may not say it out loud, what we really mean is that people can be incredibly irritating and annoying. (Can I get an amen?!). The question is, are we willing and able to put up with that irritation and annoyance? And then of course there is putting up with one another, which is really pretty self-explanatory. There is a sense here that we will not always naturally get along and that we have to be able to bear one another's weaknesses. So again, the question is never, "Do you want to be unified?" but instead, "Are you willing to be humble, gentle, patient and to bear with one another?" That is really the critical and telling question.

Which brings us to our 3rd point about the difficulty of unity, which is that unity is difficult is because all too often we don't genuinely believe that, as Paul says in verse 4, there is one body and that we are a part of that body. We forget, I believe, that we are the visible community, or body, of Jesus which means that we are on display for the world around us to see and because we forget, we too easily separate and divide from one another.

I thought about showing a movie clip right here from Monty Python's Holy Grail, but then I remembered that my wife, Megan, was distraught by the Jesus Christ Superstar clip I showed a couple of months ago and so I thought if that bothered her then probably on Mother's Day I shouldn't show the clip I was wanting to. So, I'll explain it to you instead. The scene I'm thinking of is the one where Sir Arthur is trying to get past the Black Knight. Do you remember that scene? Anyway, the black knight won't let him by and so a sword fight ensues. Now remember this is all farcical and so, while it sounds gory, it's more light-hearted than that, I promise. So, there in the middle of the fight, Sir Arthur cuts off the knight's arm and Sir Arthur says, "Okay now stand aside so I can get by," to which the knight says, "Tis' but a scratch." A Scratch?! Arthur says incredulously, "your arms off!" "No it's not," the knight says, "I've had worse" and so the fighting continues. Shortly thereafter Sir Arthur cuts off the knight's other arm and, after pointing out that the fight is now over the knight contests, "It's only a flesh wound." So, the black knight starts trying to kick Sir Arthur to which finally Sir Arthur cuts off one of his legs. Surely, now the black knight would realize it's over, but all he does is say he is invincible. And so there he is hopping around on one leg until at last, Sir Arthur cuts off his other leg and there standing on his waste the black Knight says, "Alright, we'll call it a draw."

So, what in the world does this have to do with today's text?! Well, it seems to me that in so many ways the church today is the black knight. Yes, Christ is the head, but we have separated ourselves in all different ways and for all different reasons. We have an arm over here and one over there and a leg scattered hither and another over yon and yet, just like the Black Knight, we don't get how ridiculous it must sound to others when we, dismembered parts of the body, keep saying that we are the body of Christ. We act like our divisions are merely scratches or flesh wounds, when they are so much more and then we wonder why the surrounding world scratches their head when we say that we are the body of Christ. In other words, we don't see how our words seem to be completely disembodied from what we actually look like. And it seems to me that if we really understood ourselves as being the body of Jesus we might be much less likely to allow division and disagreements to separate us from one another. If we really understood how these divisions made us appear to the outside world, we might be more eager to practice humility and gentleness and patience and bearing one another in love. Otherwise we are like the black knight yelling at Arthur to come back to him, while Arthur (aka the world) has long gone on his way to new things.

So why, you may be asking, is this significant to talk about this morning? Well for one, because our youth inquirers are joining this one body of Christ today and so that is always a good opportunity for us to be reminded of what that means, of what that entails. Again, as a church we need to realize that this is not them joining a community organization, but them saying in front of everyone that they desire to be a part of Christ's body.

But secondly I think it's significant today because we as adults owe it to the younger generation to make sure that what we say we believe and how we act are not two different things. The most important way that we pass our faith down to the next generation is not by exciting worship or engaging programs, but is for our words and our actions to align, because if they don't then we have lost all credibility. And for us to say that we believe scripture, and the unity to which scripture points, is important, but then to not actually live it out is a death knell not just to the church today, but also to the church tomorrow.

As I and some other elders sat down this last week and listened to these youth inquirers talk about their faith and about the gifts that they'd like to use for the church I was deeply impressed. This is a really good group of young men and women. At the end of our time we opened it up for questions which, of course, is always an interesting part since you have no idea what they might ask. Sometimes they want to know what pastors do (I think that one's probably a plant question from their parents) and sometimes, like this year, they ask questions like, "How do dinosaurs fit into the Bible?" (I let Pastor Scott answer that). As we were wrapping up the questions this week, one boy ended by asking this question, "Who is the head of the church?" A great, great question. The answer, of course, is Jesus. Jesus is the head of the church. Of course, that elicits the follow-up question that I would like to ask you. Then who is the body? (Answer). My hope and prayer today, tomorrow and in the future is that we will answer that question, not merely by our words, but by the way in which we live, the

calling in which we follow, the humility, gentleness and patience which we show. May we be the one, unified body of Christ. Hallelujah. Amen.