

Epiphany 3 World Day for Christian Unity - World Anabaptist Fellowship Sunday

Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16

There’s an old joke…

We laugh b/c its so nearly true. Even in a community of 1, hard to find theological unity.

As a people that say we value unity, compassion for the other, justice, grace, and mercy, we sure do find it difficult to get along.

In fact, Jesus recognized how hard this was going to be when he was on his way to the Garden of Gethsemane on the day he was arrested in John 17. He stops to pray for his disciples. He prays that they will be one

*That they may all be one… so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (v21)*

Since there were enough people to form a church (in 1st C) there has been division and disagreement on how to be that church, on what to do as that church, and who can and cannot be included in that church.

So in today’s scripture passage from Ephesians, Paul is calling the church in Ephesus to Christian unity.

Ephesus was a major Roman city/ port city/ diverse population & culture

The church here would have been a mix of people (reflecting metropolitan)

* Primarily gentile, but a gentile of many cultures
* No wonder Paul had so much to say about unity

They are called to a unity that is created by love and grows in love.

The unity is based not in similarity of gifts/backgrounds/cultures, but in connections created by the Spirit and shared in baptism.

Our modern practice of church shopping, always makes me a little uncomfortable, as if you are looking for a new car with all the right features

One thing I like about rural churches is that they bring together people based on geography more so than a city church, and for the most part we learn to get along, listen and respect each other, and become community

But we know that can be hard work, for us and for every church before us

Even just glace at church history, reveals that the Church has a propensity to fracture, a long standing pattern of splitting over unsurmountable disagreements,

* A quick wikipedia search on church schism= in the 1st 1000yr -20+
* The great schism of 1054 = R. C. Church and the Russian Orthodox
* 3 popes for a time
* 500yr later, Reformation = resulted in wide number of churches (us)

Some of the reasons for these splits, seem logical and valid, clear theological differences of interpretation in how to follow Jesus

* Some looking back seem almost childish.
  + Ex: schism over what day to celebrate Easter on a sunday or a fixed day (like Xmas)
  + Yet in our own recent history my own childhood church had a split in the 60’s over tvs

In short, we don’t know how to do this unity thing well. Our human nature makes for disagreement.

* Jesus would have known this
* Still prayed for unity
* Didn’t resign to accept our tendency to do it our own way
* But wants us to keep making efforts towards unity

1908, in the Catholic church, the week of prayer for Xn unity began

In the wake of WW2, Late 40’s the World Council of Churches has formed and joined in the week

Week of prayer of Xn Unity -Jan 18 -25

Wednesday Jan 24 1:30 at NSMC ecumenical service

This same season of unity building also invites us to join in worship for Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday, where anabaptist churches around the world, connected through MWC, worship around the same theme (today) (“Part of God’s Bigger Picture”)

Last week, in this season of Epiphany, of following a star to J, I talked about our personal calls J.

* The ways in which we are guided in our faith,
* Thru scripture, HS, guidance of others, practices
* gave examples of our individual/personal calls
* While still important, also communal calls that we discern together as a community -just as powerful to our faith, and just as faithful to r walk

As a church, we discern together our responses to needs in our community,

* Give money and time to causes we care about
* Sponsored refugees
* Offered hospitality and compassion to our community and others far

A few years ago: class “God’s Shalom and the Church's Witness”

-textbook: *Natural Saints: how people of faith are working of save God’s earth*

Each chapter is another church who is listening to God’s call collectively.

-church yards into garden plots, food panties and soup kitchens from local food, then hiring local youth to work these gardens and grow food for the poor

-solar panels on church roofs, churches facilitating green job training while installing their own energy efficient devices

-eco tours of environmental disasters and mine sites

-Planting trees and wildflowers, reclaiming “waste lands”

They all would agree that it wasn’t always easy, deciding what to do and how to do it as a community is hard work.

-there was at times, disagreement and times they had to slow down the project to listen to all the voices involved, but there were also times where people and resources just fell into place at just the right times, where the moving of the Spirit was tangible and discernable.

It was beautiful and hopeful to see what groups could do when they joined their efforts, when guided by Jesus, and eager to follow.

At the Ministerial meeting, talking about unity, i shared a story about how a group of christians (ecumenical) built a graveyard, and how that graveyard and its inhabitants tell the story of unity in Christ

* inhabitants include refugees, prisoners on death row, wealthy donors, family members, & next door neighbors
* they said great story, your on for preaching on Wednesday
* come hear the story

These success stories give us hope. Remind us that even though we wear different stripes, we are all on the same team. We are all worshiping the same God, all striving to follow God’s ways, all wanting a better world

For all the schisms that our global church has had, we continue to pray for unity. While those splits aren’t often undone, sometimes they can be mended

In Feb 2016, Pope Francis meet with the Russian Orthodox patriarch to greet each other and sign a joint declaration including a call for peace in the middle east.

* These were 2 churches that had not met in nearly 1000 years,
* The leaders of the East and West had disputed about theology and praxis for at least 200 years before they split.
* Yet after all this time, they got together to recognize that they really are still part of the same family of G, still worshiping the same God.

Later in that same year Pope Francis, went to Sweden to meet with the world Luthern church for their 500yr commemoration of the Reformation and prayed with them that both churches would seek forgiveness for past wrongs. (Should we invite L & C to ours?)

While we have an awful long way to go to find any kind of global Xn unity, these steps are hopeful.

At the same time, I don’t want to belittle the conflicts that created the divisions in the body of Christ as merely not getting along.

Interpreting how to follow Jesus faithfully is complex and complicated

* Sometimes/always churches have broken off when they have honestly felt that the church was not being true and faithful to the teachings of God.
* I believe in adult baptism & priesthood of all believers, which wouldn’t be here if my Anabaptist forbearers wouldn’t have left the C church
* There’s a Methodist denomination in US that was formed because black people were denied communion in the presence of white
* There are times when we as a church fall short of following God, get wrapped up in our own politics, opinions and agenda’s and don’t make space for others to fully participate in our churches
* How many times have we held onto our own convictions of being right, and excluded others from being part of the family of God?
* Have we ever looked at the past and said “boy, sure glad we excluded those people”? No
* And since, are poor at loving this diversity new churches are created

J prayed for unity in his followers, & paul asked the early church to make every effort to maintain unity of the Spirit.

The chapter in Ephesians gives us some words/ attributes to strive for to help is with this difficult task of collective discipleship /unity

* With all **humility, gentleness, patience, & love**

Maybe if we focused on h, g, p & l a little more, less on being right, maybe we could learn to love a little better.

We can not do this on an institutional level, if we cannot do this first on an individual level.

* It must begin with yourself
* Practice these attributes of unity in your household, then your friends, family, community and church.
* Practice humility, gentleness, patience and love
* When we practice this with those we already love, it will be easier to do for those we find harder to love

So this week I invite you to pray with others around the world, for unity, and specifically for humility, gentleness, patience and love

* In our lives
* In our church
* And in our global family of churches around the world

May we learn to value and love each part of God’s big family, love their diversity and celebrate their gifts, so that we see each other as part of God’s bigger picture.