

At my previous job one day, I was casually mentioning my seminary studies to a couple of coworkers. Turns out that they both came from a culturally Roman Catholic background. Their families were Christmas Easter Only types, and I think that they weren't even very consistent with that level of Church attendance. Both of my friends, (and sadly I have to admit that many more of my friends), had turned their back on the faith. Faithfulness was not modeled for them, and, based upon the example they received, they assumed that Christianity was empty formality. There was nothing there.

Of course, they didn't give up on religion. In my discussions with my friends, it turns out that they were both attracted to Buddhism. When asked why, I remember one of them saying something to the effect that, "I like that everything is united, it is all one, and we are one along with it." Then I remembered being very frustrated because, we Christians have a real, awe inspiring, and true, and better sense of union with the divine, and these friends had never been taught this.

To this end, let us not miss this emphasis in today's epistle from the beginning of chapter 4 of St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, which continues from the beautiful text of last week's lesson. If you will recall in that reading, the Apostle encouraged the Ephesian believers not to be paralyzed by his tribulations, or by their own tribulations, but rather to embrace the adventure of following the Lord Jesus closely.

Ephesians is one of the prison epistles, and, correspondingly, St. Paul states in this morning's passage that he is the "prisoner of the Lord." But he states that this imprisonment should not be a cause of alarm for the Christians to whom he is writing, but rather taken as an exhortation to godliness, to persevering in their faith to the glory of God. St. Paul also reminds them to be humble while living in godly union, "forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The Apostle then elaborates upon this unity, beginning by stating, “There is One body, and One Spirit.” We are reminded in these phrases that we are very, actual, members incorporate in the Body of Christ. We are members of each other, brought into the eternal family of God because of our death to our old natures and resurrection to our new natures, our new lives, by the power of the Spirit and by the presence of the Spirit in us.

Natural man, having idolatrously presumed to be god, exists in isolation, for by rebelliously cutting ourselves off from God, we cut ourselves off from everything; we lose our being. But by the Spirit of God, we are made alive in and to Christ. He is the source of our lives, and He is the goal of our lives, and being one with Christ, means that we are spiritually one with all the others whose source and goal is Christ.

St. Paul continues, “... even as ye are called in One hope of your calling.” We again encounter the idea of calling in this passage. For good and bad, we have different experiences and skills and perspectives, but all of them are to be used for the building of the kingdom of God. We have different callings, but they all are to be used toward the same goal. Our work, exercised in humility and love, does something, and in it, just like in our worship, we glorify God and build and strengthen the kingdom. Within all their variations, our callings all have One hope, and truly make us united.

Continuing in the epistle, we have One Lord, Jesus Christ. We have One faith, the core of Biblical doctrine expressed in outline form in the historic creeds of the Church. We have One baptism, a sacramental life given to all who sincerely come to the church in faith. And we have One God and Father of all who is above all, and through all, and in you all. In all of these things and more, we must acknowledge that we are the same, we are One, we are united. Do not tell me that a theology of union is not central in Christianity.

But given this, we must ask this morning if we actually understand our unity? We are one

with each other, do we get that? This is the family of God. These are the people with whom you will joyously spend eternity. Of course, that thought understandably may terrify some of you. "I am spending eternity with that guy over there?! Doesn't sound all that joyous to me. Lord, have mercy upon us". Of course, you do realize that he is thinking the same thing about you. We would do well to be reminded of 1 John 4:20:

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?
(NKJV)

I suggest that it would be best to learn, not just to tolerate one another, but to actually enjoy one another. This means that we both learn to better love the other, but also to be more lovely, to improve ourselves so that we better image Christ and become easier to love. We must continually strive to improve in these two areas. If we refuse this, or if we refuse to honestly look at ourselves and work on ourselves, then we are not living into that unity which the Apostle reveals here to us.

Now we must ask the question, "Why wouldn't we strive to both love better and to be more lovely?" The answer is pride. Pride is the opposite of love for love forgets the self and gives to the other, while pride exalts the self and demeans, objectifies, and uses, the other. St. Paul encourages us to forbear with one another in love and to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, but pride works against love and cares nothing for peace.

We see this pride embodied by the Pharisee in today's gospel lesson. Jesus wants to heal a man with a disease, what we think of now as edema or severe water retention, on the Sabbath. This man is placed near Jesus as a test by the Pharisees to see what He would do. Of course, Jesus knows that these Pharisees are being hypocritical and prideful. They are using this man in an attempt to entrap Jesus. They have no concern for his condition, they consider him to be sub-human, and they basically admit to having more concern for their

own cattle, their wealth, than for this man who is surely a fellow Hebrew. They too were a nation, supposedly united under God, but there is no real unity. There is only striving for more honor and clamoring for more wealth and pandering for more fame. There is only pride. There is no unity.

If pride keeps us from Godly union, why don't we change? Why don't we put pride out from our midst? Well let's begin by recognizing that pride, the exaltation of self above all others, is the core of sin. All sin can be argued to be a manifestation of pride and therefore it isn't just a simple, easy thing to eliminate from our characters and communities. It is important to recognize just how embedded pride is within us. A lifetime of determined effort is required to rid ourselves of the pride of life.

The real question is why don't we engage with ridding ourselves of this sin? What are we waiting for? First, many of us haven't examined our own hearts closely enough to believe that we have a problem. We are comfortable; let's not stir things up. We think, "Everything is just fine. There is no dumpster fire here to see. Pride? I don't even think about that. I have real-life problems to deal with, so I don't need to find a problem that doesn't exist."

To this, I can only reply that if you sin, you have a problem with pride. And if you are human, then you sin. In other words, everyone has a problem with pride; let us not delude ourselves on this account. Until we can say that we truly love like Jesus does, then we have a pride problem. Wake up and begin to discern your heart's condition, and then determine to root out the areas of pride in your lives.

Second, we need to recognize that many of us just don't believe that we need to be more united or that pride has that great of an impact on our unity. This attitude of minimizing the impact of pride manifests itself in many ways, but commonly through laziness, which is a sign that a person does not consider the Body of Christ important enough to discipline his

life's habits. Such individuals don't think the reward of greater unity and greater effectiveness in the Kingdom is worth the effort. They rationalize that this sin is just a personal thing and doesn't matter for anyone else. They say to themselves, "Perhaps I am a little prideful (or choose whatever besetting sin one likes), but I don't like giving up too much of my time, and I don't want to be thought too religious. I've done enough, let someone else step up for once and show a little love. I can be more diligent tomorrow."

There are two things to take note of here. In this answer, we are comparing ourselves to others in order to feel satisfied with our current level of effort. Also, we are neglecting St. Paul's admonition to humble ourselves and to love our brothers and sisters. He doesn't mean that we stir up good emotions towards others in the church. Emotions of love and loyalty to others are nice, but love is more than that. To humble ourselves in love means that we actually must get out and do something. The best response for a person who has been underestimating the impact of pride in his life, is to start thinking rightly about this sin and then make a commitment to participate in the body of Christ, and to follow through with it. You don't have to do everything all at once (in fact this would probably lead to discouragement and failure), but do something. Change your habits, start with just one, to better reflect love in your life instead of pride.

We have talked about ignoring our pride and also of minimizing our pride, but there is also a third form of pride which we should also address. Some people avoid humbling themselves in love, out of fear. They are afraid that others might see what they really are. They are afraid of being sucked in too deeply and losing themselves, which, as we think about it, is prideful for it prioritizes the self over others. They are afraid that they might not get the good seats, which is also prideful. They are afraid that the host might tell them to give place to another who is more worthy. They fear the opinion of other men. Isn't all of this just pride again? Shouldn't we just begin by acknowledging that we aren't worthy, that we should take the lowest place, and that we should feel blessed in just being invited to such a great feast?

Fear is pride masked and destroys unity. Perfect love cast out fear and builds unity.

The real questions upon which we should be focused is how do we take the lowest seat?

What does that mean? Well, let us return to what St. Paul says,

I THEREFORE, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, for-bearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Taking the lowest seat simply means that we bear patiently with each other, that we consider others more important than ourselves, that we work, actually doing something, for unity in love and peace. Love is made real through action. Your actions offered to God build our unity and build the kingdom of God. Your actions are required to incarnate the first and second greatest commandments, of loving God through loving our neighbors. It is not that hard to understand, but it is really hard to embody because we are called to perfectly serve, to perfectly be like Christ. Therefore, let us not ignore our pride, let us not minimize our pride, let us not shrink away from it in fear. Rather let us strive for Christlike perfection, throughout our whole lives, working in love and humility, until we lay our head down at the last, are welcomed into the presence of Christ; until we hear Our Father in Heaven say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.