

## **9/26/10 - 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Trinity – Historic - Ephesians 4:1-6**

*It was Sunday morning in Kiangsu, China, during World War II, about a half dozen years or so before the country became communist. A Christian worship service was being held in a little church. (At this time Christianity was not suppressed. In fact in 1920, Ruth Bell Graham, the wife of the famous evangelist Dr. Billy Graham, was born in Kiangsu, the daughter of medical missionaries Dr. Lemuel Bell and his wife Virginia.) While the service was in progress, there were sudden gasps and suppressed cries of fear. Women clutched their babies. Men half rose from their seats as a Japanese soldier walked down the aisle. Troops from Japan had recently taken over Kiangsu so this man was part of the occupying army. But when he reached the front of the church, he laid an offering on the table and the fear in the church subsided when he said: "I am a Christian. I desire to worship with you." He opened a hymnbook to the hymn, "Blest Be The Tie That Bind". Then he and the Chinese Christians all sang together:*

***Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above. Before our Father's throne we pour our ardent prayers; Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.1[1]***

The text before us reminds us why we Christians can sing, "***Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.***" We do so because, as St. Paul point out, "There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."(4-6) And the apostle further reminds us that it is our responsibility as Christians to, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."(3) As God's people we are to preserve the oneness with which we are blessed. We are to:

### **"Keep The Unity Of The Spirit!"**

#### **1. By relying on the Holy Spirit who has sanctified us.**

How do we do that? First and foremost, we keep the unity of the Spirit *by relying on the Holy Spirit who has sanctified us.*

##### **A. The Holy Spirit called us to faith in Jesus.**

As Christians we would do well to remember who it is who united us as one body of believers. Paul reveals who that is when he refers to the oneness we share as "the unity of the Spirit." (3) Keeping the one faith and one hope that we share comes *by relying on the Holy Spirit who has sanctified us.* Here we need to clarify how we are using the word "*sanctify*". In the Bible it is used in a wider and a narrower sense. Saying that remaining united comes by relying on the Holy Spirit who has sanctified us, is using "*sanctify*" in the wider sense. This means that keeping the unity of the Spirit comes from relying on *the Holy Spirit* for he is the one who *called us out of the unbelieving world to be holy by bringing us to faith in Jesus Christ, enlightening us, and keeping us in the faith.*2[2] What we are incapable of doing for ourselves because of our sinfulness, God the Holy Spirit in his love and mercy did for us. He *brought us out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of faith so that we now see all the gifts God gives us in Christ . . . [such as] forgiveness, peace, hope, joy and comfort. . . . [And the same] Holy Spirit also strengthens our faith and renews our love to do God's will until we enter heaven.*3[3]

##### **B. The Holy Spirit works through the Means of Grace.**

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1[1] Naismith, A Treasury of Notes, Quotes & Anecdotes, BBH, Grand Rapids, 1975, p. 167

2[2] Kuske, Luther's Catechism, NPH, Milwaukee, 1982, p. 347

3[3] Ibid., pp. 195, 197, 204

But how did he do it? How did the Holy Spirit create faith in Jesus in our hearts and make us part of the one unified body of Christ, which is made up of all believers of every generation in heaven and on earth? He did it with some very special tools – with some unique instruments. ***The Holy Spirit works through the Means of Grace***, which is *the gospel in the Word and in the Sacraments. Through these he offers and gives us the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.*<sup>4[4]</sup> That’s why St. Paul once said: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”(Romans 1:16) The gospel is God’s instrument through which he enlightens and enlivens hearts that by nature are spiritually blind and dead. It is his good news for all people. It is his proclamation that in love he sent his Son, Jesus, to take away the sins of the world – with the result that all who believe in him will have everlasting life in heaven.

### **Application**

So let us ***keep the unity, which comes from the Spirit, by relying on him, for he is the One who has sanctified us.*** This is what the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed is all about. There we confess with all true Christian believers all over the world: *“I believe in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. What does this mean? Martin Luther in his Small Catechism spells it out for us in these clear and simple terms: I believe [i.e I rely on these Biblical truths] that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but **the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.** In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead; and he will give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.*<sup>5[5]</sup>

#### **2. By cooperating with the Holy Spirit who still sanctifies us.**

Secondly, however, we ought to consider the fact that we are involved in keeping the unity of the Spirit too. How is that possible? It’s possible because we are people who have already been sanctified or set apart from the unbelieving world to be God’s holy people. As such we are able to participate in the process of preserving the unity of the body of believers ***by cooperating with the Holy Spirit who still sanctifies us*** – who keeps on sanctifying us or continues to sanctify us.

##### **A. The Holy Spirit leads us to live a holy life.**

But if we have already been called out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of faith, if we have already been brought to faith in Jesus as our Savior, if we have already been set apart from the unbelievers of this world to be part of the fellowship of the unified body of Christ – the Church – why does the Holy Spirit need to keep on sanctifying us? Here we need to remember that the word *“sanctify”* is used in the Bible in two ways. Up until this point we have been primarily using it in the wider sense to refer to everything God the Holy Spirit does to bring us to faith in Christ and to keep us in that one true faith. But in the narrow sense *“sanctify”* refers to the work of ***the Holy Spirit*** by which he ***leads believers to hate sin and be eager to live a holy***

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4[4] Ibid., p. 343

5[5] Ibid., p. 5

*life filled with good works.*<sup>6[6]</sup> How does he lead us, or with what does he guide us in *good works, which are simply expressions of our love and thanks to God for all his goodness to us? Our guideline in doing good works is God's will as it is written in his Word.*<sup>7[7]</sup>

### **B. We work at following the Spirit as he guides us.**

So if the Spirit is guiding us through the Word – which he inspired the prophets, evangelists and apostles to write – and if our motivation for doing good works is God's goodness to us, in what way do we as Christians cooperate with the Holy Spirit in our sanctified living? The Spirit doesn't live our lives for us – we do. ***We work at following the Spirit as he guides us with his Word*** and as Christ's love for us motivates us to do so. Accordingly Paul says: "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. . . . Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."<sup>(1,3)</sup> And what are some of the basic characteristics of a Christian's sanctified life? Paul adds: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."<sup>(2)</sup> And where there is humility, gentleness, patience and love, there is also unity, peace and oneness.

### **Application**

God grant that we may always ***keep the unity of the Spirit by cooperating with him as he guides us in sanctified living.*** Let's remember that such cooperation includes a genuine effort on our part to continually use God's Word and Sacrament so that the gospel may always drive us to live lives that promote unity and oneness among us as we are guided by God's will for his people. And when we see ourselves losing patience, or letting our sinful human pride get the best of us so that rudeness rules instead of gentleness as our love grows cold – then may the good news of Jesus' gentle patience with us as seen in his loving forgiveness get us back on track so that in all things he may be glorified.

### **Conclusion**

It's a simple message filled with both profound truth and common sense that the Spirit inspired Paul to write in this text. And it's an important message: ***Keep the unity of the Spirit by relying on the Holy Spirit who has sanctified us and by cooperating with the Holy Spirit who still sanctifies us. Amen.***

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<sup>6[6]</sup> Ibid., p. 347

<sup>7[7]</sup> Ibid., page 200