

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

How do We Maintain our Unity?

On May 22, 1856, a U.S. Congressman named Preston Brooks walked onto the Senate floor and approached the desk of Senator Charles Sumner. A few days earlier, Sumner had made a speech against slavery in which he insulted slave owners and specifically, a relative of Brooks. So without warning, Brooks began to beat him on the head and shoulders with his cane. Sumner was trapped under his desk which was bolted to the floor and covered with blood. Brooks swung so hard, his cane broke into pieces, but he continued to strike with the piece that was left. Finally, Sumner managed to stand up by ripping the desk from the floor and then he collapsed unconscious. Now, several senators did try to stop Brooks, but one of Brooks' friends held them at bay with a pistol. So, do you think our congress is divided today? It's been worse. Brooks resigned his seat in congress, but he was promptly reelected. People all over the south celebrated his actions and sent him new canes to replace the one destroyed in his surprise attack. You think our country is divided now? It's been worse in the past, and not just in the era before the Civil War. But the Civil War does give us good reason to work toward unity even while we acknowledge legitimate differences among us.

Obviously, I didn't come here this morning to talk about politics. But this little history lesson reminds us of a hard truth: sin divides people. That's true in countries. It's true in marriages and families. And it's true in churches. I think we tend to idealize the church a little bit. We want to believe that in here, we only treat each other with love. But again and again, St. Paul tells Christians to love and forgive each other. Why does he do that? Sadly, because we don't leave our sinful natures in the parking lot when we come in here. So this morning, St. Paul tells us to make every effort to maintain our unity and the bond of peace. But what would that look like? My friends, **how do we maintain our unity?**

God often compares the church to a family. One of the biggest mistakes that families make is allowing a certain laziness about their relationships to creep in. Good marriages take work – you have to put in effort to keep the love alive. Good parenting, good relationships with siblings, good friendships all take work. That's true about our relationships in our churches, too. In our church family, the effort has many things in common with the way it works in a regular family – helping with our responsibilities, supporting each other when others attack, spending time together, and so on. But it takes on a distinctly spiritual dimension within the church, because our unity in the church is based on what Christ has done for us and the faith we share in him. So all healthy and effective efforts toward unity will reflect that shared faith in Christ.

You see that in what St. Paul says this morning. He urges us to live our lives in a manner worthy of the calling we have received. We can't build up our unity by sinning. Recently, a Christian was talking about his efforts to reach a brother who was wallowing in sin. He told his brother, "It's like you're on a zip line to hell." No one who's riding that zip line away from God can be working toward real Christian unity. Now, that doesn't mean you can't be friends with people like that. Some of them are a lot of fun. But in the end, every sin that we commit damages our relationship with Jesus and so it damages our relationship with Jesus' family, the church.

So Paul urges us to live in a way that's worthy of the calling we have received. But he's talking to sinners that Jesus called by the gospel. Jesus washed our sins away and when he told us that, he changed our hearts. So now, in Christ, God sees us as perfect and holy. Paul urges us to strive to live the way God sees us. That is the best way that we can build up our unity. But again, what does that look like? Paul talks about humility. That's the difference between true faith that lives for God and pride that wants to feel like we're better than everybody else. When your pastor talks about turning away from sin, does that stab your heart because you know you have work to do in that area? Or do you look around and think to yourself, "You guys need to listen to this!?" The first attitude is humble and repentant. I am a sinner. Even when I call you to

repent, I know that you could point out my sins, too. But the second attitude is self-righteous. So even if I do live a better life than you do, even if I never cheat on my wife or get drunk or miss a church service, my pride makes those good works into sins. So instead of fostering unity, that pride actually tears us apart. It makes you want to put me in my place. It tempts you to hate me – and Jesus says that the person who hates his brother is murderer.

Along with humility comes gentleness. To be gentle, you have to pay attention to other people, to how they react to things, to when they're hurting and when they're lonely and when they need a word of encouragement. An arrogant person just doesn't think about it. He or she just doesn't notice what's happening to the people around them.

The other trait that Paul mentions is patience. When do you need patience? Parents, you can think of a thousand times, right? When your kindergartner drills you with one question after another and doesn't even listen to your response. When your older student would rather play video games than do his or her homework again. When your adolescent forgets to turn off the lights or load the dishwasher or somehow just can't seem to get the aim right to hit that dirty clothes hamper. We need patience when our loved ones' sin and weakness shows itself. Guess what? The same is true in the church. You're not going to like everyone in your congregation. You're not going to like every pastor. You're not going to agree with every decision your church council makes and sometimes, your patience is going to be tried by what looks like utter foolishness. You might even be right – what they decided to do might be downright stupid. That's before we even get in to all the times someone says something snotty or does something hurtful.

The easy way out is to just stop coming to church – and then stew about the fact that no one has called you to find out why you're not coming. Then you conclude those people never really cared at all. It all could've been avoided if someone had been more loving. Sometimes, pastors like me need to repent of that sin. But is it humble and patient to sit at home and stew about the fact that no one is calling you begging you to come back? The key to being patient and humble is forgiveness. I need to be forgiven because I sin every single day. And all the people who ever hurt my feelings also are sinners, just like I am. Just like my sins don't mean I'm an unbeliever, their sins don't mean their unbelievers either. They just mean that we haven't gotten to heaven yet. The devil gets endless mileage out of our failure to forgive each other and be patient with each other while we struggle to live our faith here.

So, live a Christian life, especially when it comes to how you treat your brothers and sisters in this family of God. Be humble. Be kind. Be patient. Always. How're you doing with that? I'll be honest, I have trouble with all of this. How about you? Are you guilty of sinning against God and tearing apart his family? So what is the answer? Jesus. He came into this world to live the life we live. But not the way we live it. Jesus was perfect in his heart and perfect in his life. He was so humble that he let Pontius Pilate nail him to a cross for a crime he didn't commit. He constantly attended to the needs of others. He was the perfect member of God's family. He did all that in our place. Now, when God looks at how we treat each other, he sees Jesus being perfect in love and God calls us perfect. When Jesus was at the end of that perfect life, he laid it down to pay for all our sin and failures. He paid for all our pride. For all the times we could only see what we wanted. He paid for our impatience and our refusal to understand how hard it is for others to live a Christian life. He paid for everything that every one of us ever did that tore at the unity of our Christian family. And his blood washed it all away. He rose to tell us that. He rose to assure us that we are forgiven now and forever.

That gospel is the key to our unity. St. Paul called it a unity of the Spirit and a bond of peace. Only when the Holy Spirit works through that gospel message are we one. Because it is the good news about Christ that makes us part of this family. You came in when you were baptized as a baby or when someone somewhere told you about your Savior. It is the gospel that forgives us. It is the gospel that replaces guilt with joy. It is the gospel that enables us to forgive and love even those who have hurt us. So St. Paul says there is one body and one Spirit. We are all members of the body of Christ. Whether we're the mouth or the hands or the feet, we're all joined together by the one Spirit of Christ working through the gospel.

That body extends beyond this congregation's walls. This is where we experience it most directly because this is where you come to hear the gospel and take communion. This is where you get to know those Christians that you spend the most time with. But there are others out there. We have a circuit – it's called the Metro West circuit. It's a group of local congregations and I am currently serving as the circuit pastor. We have a district, the Michigan District, and it includes congregations all the way from the Soo down to Kentucky

and over to Pennsylvania. We have a synod that works throughout the US and around the world. And we have lots of other ways we join together – the biggest local one is HVL, the high school we run together to teach our children to know the Lord. All that, too, is part of the body of Christ. We are one with all those Christians and Paul calls us to work for unity with them.

That poses some special challenges. Sometimes, there is resentment between congregations. Sometimes it's as simple as jealousy over one church's size and wealth or pride in that same size and wealth. Sometimes, we don't remember that other Christians at HVL or in other congregations are one with us in Christ. There are special challenges to our patience in being part of a larger body that makes decisions and operates by rules that we don't always understand. That's hard.

But Paul reminds us that we have one faith – we have one confession of Christ. And this is where doctrine comes in. In the WELS we are very clear that doctrine determines visible unity. We cannot claim to be one with those whose confession of faith is not one with ours. That would be a lie. But we look forward to heaven where there will be no doctrinal differences and where all those who truly trusted in Jesus will be absolutely one in faith. And one in Spirit. And one in all that we do and say and feel and think. In heaven, we will never sin against our unity again. We will get there – and so will many people who are not part of our fellowship here – because Jesus has taken our sin away and he has made us part of his family.

And he commands us to work for unity here. He calls us to live our faith together and to help each other resist temptation and grow in faith. He calls us to be patient. To be humble. To be gentle. He reminds us that our confession is one and he calls us to study his word together and to encourage each other to cling to the truth. Above all, he calls us to forgive each other as he has forgiven us.

You know, sometimes when I go to district convention or even when I go to a voters meeting, it seems like we are very divided. Sometimes, I could almost imagine somebody bringing in a cane and pounding on someone else who they think is tearing us apart. But thankfully, that never happens. God is a God of grace, so he keeps us all in his family. God is a God of miracles. He works through the gospel to overcome the sin that divides us and he makes us one, even here in this world where sin ruins everything. God is God of promises. He will bring us home to be one in his love forever. Until then, my friends, live lives that are worthy of your calling. Amen.