

Hands Together – One in Christ Ephesians 4:1-6 and Philippians 2:1-2



In Ephesians Paul urges us to live a life worthy of the calling we have received. Sometimes Christians become confused about what is expected of them. Sometimes we may choose to remain in the background, saying nothing, as opposed to being bold in the Lord. When we are bold in the Lord we can bring a new level of adventure and sense of true unity to our community of faith.

Paul goes on to write that we need to be completely humble and gentle; to be patient, and to bear one another with love. Does this mean that we allow people to use us as door mats and then act grateful for it? Absolutely not! True humility is recognizing ourselves as children of God. We are worthy beings in the image of God. Yet humility calls for us to view others this way as well. In the body of Christ we have all been saved through Jesus Christ. This does not mean that we become “cookie-cutter” images of one another. We are one in Christ, yet diverse in our personalities, our ways of thinking, and our backgrounds. Yet Christ takes all of us in and transforms us through a lifetime journey of faith. **Are there times you regret not standing up for something? Have you ever regretted taking a stand?**

With people coming from different backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives there are bound to be misunderstandings and disagreements at some point. Look at how much time the Apostle Paul spent writing to churches that had disagreement among members. Since we do come from varying backgrounds we all have something distinctive to offer to the body of Christ. We all come with various talents and knowledge. Isn't it wonderful that each person has something unique to offer the community of faith?

This journey sometimes can be difficult. Sometimes we bump up against each other on this journey. It seems as if we are set to crash head-on into each other. Every relationship is going to have moments of conflict and uncertainty about the future. During these difficult times we need to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. We need to pray to God that we will be able to see and understand another person's point of view (which does not necessarily mean we will change our own) so that we can see that person as God sees them. There have been many times, still are many times, (and will be many more times in the future) when I have prayed to God, “Please help me to have a better attitude toward this person. Please help me to see this person as you do, God.”

We are called to treat one another with gentleness. If we are gentle then we do not expect that our opinions are the only ones that matter. We treat others as we desire to be treated. This may mean that we may have to give up control. When we give up controlling, we open ourselves up to a new level of energy, creativity, and love. We open ourselves to experiencing a new level of friendship with others. Openness comes from compassion and respect for one another. It also means that we risk stepping out in faith that the Holy Spirit is at the center of our faith community helping us to work through awkward situations.

What does it mean to have unity? Does it mean that we never disagree? Does it mean that we do not deal with issues? Sometimes people have a misunderstanding of what it means to have unity. **Discuss what you think unity is and what it looks like in a group.**

Unity means that we are united in a common purpose. All of us come to the table with different perceptions of how things could be and/or should be done. We bring with us our past experiences. We can have different viewpoints and ideas, and yet have a unity of spirit because we all have the big picture in mind. When we see that the common goal of our unity is to love Jesus Christ and to help bring others to know the love of Jesus Christ, then our thinking shifts. It is not about whether the group will do what I want to do, rather it becomes, “Does this promote the love of Jesus Christ in the world? Will others see Christ at work in our midst if we do this?” As Paul points out in Ephesians 4:5-6, “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all.” (New Living Translation)

Creativity is squashed when there is no one to raise questions. If all are outwardly agreeable, yet harboring inner questions, then there is actually disunity in the group. Although there may be an outer illusion of unity, there will be an underlying tension within our faith community. God gave us all different abilities and ways of thinking. This enables us to look at what we are doing from different angles. Someone may see opportunities in a situation while another person may put out the details that need to be worked out. It takes all our hands working together.

Suppose there is an agreement that the fellowship hall needs to be redone. Some members of the group have a vision of what the renovated fellowship hall can look like. Others may have an idea of what steps will need to be taken so that the vision can be accomplished. Maybe one member of the group has experience in painting and can share with the group the amount of paint needed as well as the potential costs. Another member may be good at project management. She can keep the various work teams on task as well as taking care of the budgeting. The first group with the vision of the work may not have any idea about how to budget or what materials are needed. It takes all hands working together to complete the vision. We need people who are good at dreaming as well as people who are good at taking care of the everyday business and details.

On the other hand, if we dislike any decision being made unless it is our idea we are surely creating disunity. Unity in a group, especially any church group, is a balancing act. It is never about one individual person or a subset of the group; it is all about Jesus Christ.

Suppose your Women’s Ministry group has decided to have a fund raiser to assist the youth in funding a mission trip. There are many ways to raise money. Aileen is always the first one to come up with a suggestion. She always talks as if her ideas are always the ultimate solution. The other members have put up with her domination for years. Her last idea for a project did not exactly turn out the way it could have. She had the bright idea of selling greeting cards.

Lilly had thought to herself that a lot of people now are creating their own cards on home computers. She did not want to bring this point up because she wanted to support Women’s Ministry. She was concerned about causing disharmony in the group. As it turns out, Lilly could have saved the group a lot of money by raising the question. Only one-fourth of the cards they ordered were sold. Marcia had wanted to point out that the cards looked dated. This type of

card art had gone out of style years ago. The paper the cards were printed on looked cheap. She did not want to upset Aileen, who was also an elder. Marcia was the pastor's spouse. **Have you ever been in a group where everyone was afraid to ask questions about the first and only idea presented; therefore, it turned out badly? What are some ideas to get the discussion going? Maybe the presiding person could ask if anyone has any other ideas. What is the best way to handle a person like Aileen?**

Philippians 2:1 tells us to, "...agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose." In the situation above is the purpose to always agree with Aileen, or work together on the idea of helping fund the youth mission trip? **Do we really love one another when we allow one member make the decision for the direction of the project so that, therefore, that same person always takes the fall when the idea does not work? Is it more loving to explore the various ideas and questions of the whole group? Are we really working together with one mind and purpose when we allow a person to dominate? Is the ultimate goal to help spread the gospel or to appease people?**

We can disagree with others while being gentle and humble. Loving other people means that we hear what they have to say openly. Too often we listen only to formulate in our own minds how we are going to respond! Listening may mean that we ask a person questions to clarify the meaning of what she is saying. How many times do we jump to conclusions without hearing a person all the way through? Have you ever known someone that has a response to what you are saying before you have fully explained?

There is a big difference between saying "I totally disagree" and "There is another way of looking at this which I would like to share." Suppose you are brainstorming for new and creative ways to minister to people outside the walls of your church. So far, all of the ideas presented (by only two members of the group) are duplications of other ministries in the community. **What are some ways you could raise the question of duplication in a positive and nonthreatening manner? Discuss some ways that have worked from your experience. What ideas do you have to handle something like this in the future?**

On the other hand, we need to listen to what others have to say. Sometimes we find ourselves "closing our ears" when we are confronted with someone who does not agree with our ideas. It is okay to agree to disagree. I remember working with someone who always wanted her ideas to be the ones set into motion. She would often shoot down ideas of others within our working group. It seemed as if the only ideas she thought worthy came from her own head! Her ideas were good. However, she got a reputation as not being a team player. She created disunity in any work group she was in. Despite her intelligence, her talents, and her creative ideas, she was later forced to resign. How different the story may have been if she had made unity and teamwork a priority!

In this same workgroup was a woman I will call Carly. Carly was gentle yet could stand her ground when she had to do so. She was a creative person. Carly was open to other people and their ideas. Nancy was jealous of Carly's ability to get along with others and to get work projects completed. Carly never said anything in anger to Nancy. She would calmly and patiently let her know how Nancy's attitude was affecting her. It never fails to amaze me how

God works. Within two years Carly ended up being Nancy's boss. Carly treated everyone with respect. **Can two people say the same thing in different words, yet we can hear what one person is saying while the other person's way of expressing herself causes us to become defensive? If so, what is your reaction when this happens?**

Unity in Jesus Christ means that we respect ourselves as children of God, as well as the people who are our faith family. The key word here is family. We are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Just as brothers and sisters may fuss over minor annoyances, we in the church do so as well. However, let someone else try to interfere in a fight with sisters, and one will find that the sisters turn on that person!

We can only find true unity when we agree that once a disagreement is over, it is truly over! We cannot harbor any resentment in our hearts or secretly nurse grudges. Holding on to past disagreements in our hearts harms no one but us. It is liberating to forgive one another and agree to be in unity as the people of God. Have you ever watched children at play? There can be disagreements over a toy or who gets to play a certain character. After a few minutes the children have forgotten the disagreement and are playing happily once again.

How can we bring unbelievers to Christ if we are always having disagreements among ourselves? We can show the world that it is possible to have disagreements that give way to greater unity among the church. Why should we settle for less than a Christlike way of handling our disagreement? Can you imagine getting to heaven and God asking some church members why they got in such a heated argument over the color of carpet in the sanctuary when there were people within the shadow of the church who needed to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Whether we realize it or not people are observing our lives as well as our community of faith. Sometimes a church can earn a bad name because the members often seem to be disagreeable with one another. Not only that, but they talk about their disagreements with other people who are not part of the faith community.

The true way to unity is to respect each other as well as being compassionate for one another. We show respect when we listen to another person with open hearts and minds even though we may totally disagree. We are compassionate when we risk caring enough to speak the truth and yet at the same time be willing to work out our differences through dialogue.

Prayer:

Dear God, hand in hand we come to you in prayer. We pray for the true unity that can only be found in Jesus Christ. We pray that your Holy Spirit directs and guides our work together. We pray that despite differences that may arise that we keep in mind that it is your work which we are doing. It is only through you that we can do great things together. Amen.

Rev. Sherry Whitaker Ladd serves as pastor to Santa Fe Cumberland Presbyterian Church and Swan Cumberland Presbyterian Church. She is a graduate of Memphis Theological Seminary. She does volunteer jail ministry for women inmates.