

One Church
Rev. Samuel Weddington, June 9, 2019, Pentecost Sunday

Psalm 133

1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! 2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. 3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.”

Our next reading for this Pentecost Sunday comes from Ephesians 2:21-22. In case you aren't sure what Pentecost is, briefly, Pentecost is the celebration of the birth of the Christian church. Pentecost coincides with the Jewish celebration of the Feast of Weeks, known as Shavuot, or seven weeks plus one day for a total of 50 days after Passover. For Jews, this day celebrates both the wheat harvest, as well as the giving of the Law to the people by God at Mount Sinai. Israel saw Passover as the event that led them out of bondage from Egypt, and the giving of the Law celebrated in Shavuot as their establishment as the people of God. We believe that in Jesus' death and resurrection, God has instituted a new Passover, a new exodus out of the powers of sin and decay. For us, Pentecost signifies the day when God's plans for us, God's people, came to fruition as we were established as Christ's unified body with the single purpose of proclaiming the Gospel that Jesus is Lord of all.

In light of God's plan for us as a unified body, I have selected this passage from Paul's writing. What we are getting ready to read is the high note of God's purposes for the church. Though we were not born as members of the covenant household of God; though we were not inheritors, by birth, of the promises made to Israel, in Jesus Christ, we have been made members, and the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been abolished. Let's turn our attention to Paul as he details what this adoption means for us, here and now.

Ephesians 2:21-22

21 In [Christ], the entire body is being knit together, becoming a temple, holy unto the Lord. 22 In [Christ] you all are being built together by the Spirit for the purpose of becoming God's dwelling place.

The Word of God for the people of God...

Contrary to the bulletin, the title for today's sermon is, "One Church." One church, one body is our subject for today. But to get there, let me share what was going on in my mind this week as I was studying Ephesians 2. I hate to admit it, but an old Johnny Cash song kept creeping into my mind. It's not one of his more famous songs, but it is probably one of my favorites. Maybe you've heard it: "One Piece at a Time." In case you haven't, the song is about a guy who, according to the song, "left Kentucky back in forty nine/An' went to Detroit workin' on a 'sembly line/The first year they had me puttin' wheels on Cadillacs."¹ As the song goes on, he unveils his grand plan. He wanted one of those Cadillacs he assembled, so he began smuggling out pieces of the car in his lunch box day by day. After about twenty years of doing this, he and his buddy started putting it together and found out none of the parts fit because they were from different model years. But with a little redneck ingenuity, they get it together, and according to the song, Johnny's "psychobilly" Cadillac was born. On an interesting side note, somebody actually built a car based on the song, and you can find pictures of it online. Let me tell you, I don't think there has ever been an uglier car ever made... well, maybe with the exception of a Yugo or a Pacer.

So, why does Paul's note here in Ephesians 2 remind me of Johnny Cash and ugly cars, you might ask? Well, it's simple: It's an apt description of the church. For two thousand years, Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, has been taking mismatched bumpers and fenders like you and me, sinners without hope, and forming us into one body. And to be honest, it is a miracle that it is still humming along. If, by our own ingenuity, we were going to build an organization for a single purpose, we wouldn't do it like this. By human standards, you wouldn't build in this way. Engineering 101 instructs us to seek out uniform building materials as we put the structure together. Look at the walls of this building. Do you not see that all the bricks and blocks and tiles are the same? See the symmetry with which we put these uniform pieces together, and with mortar and glue and nail, we fit the pieces together to make it smooth and level? Now, look around. Does your neighbor look like you?

Unlike our best thinking, the church is awash in odd couplings. Across the globe, the church is made up of nearly every nationality, race and language, and yet, somehow, it works. Think about the church of Jesus here in Bristol. We here at First Presbyterian have a magnificent building, to be sure, and down the street from us, we have brothers and sisters who attend plain block buildings with no adornment, some who attend church in old warehouses, and some who intentionally build warehouses to be a church. We've got brothers and sisters of every shade and disposition under the sun. Travel the world, as our mission team just did when we reunited with our brothers and sisters in Brazil, and you see that the church can just as equally be in the poorest spots on the globe, as well as the wealthiest. We don't share a common language, even. If the measure is efficiency or expediency or uniformity, the church of Jesus fails.

Yet, here it is, and we are part of it. This messy family, this messy household of God put together for the purpose of being the body of Christ, the dwelling place for the most High. And the mortar that fits it all together and smooths out the rough edges is the presence of the Holy Spirit. One church, one body, one purpose, and **if we were doing it right**, one mind, one heart, one Lord.

But you know the truth. The truth is, sometimes, most of the time, we make a pretty terrible go of it. Even here in our own church body, we are quick to exaggerate the seams between all our different, odd-shaped blocks. I don't think it is any secret that in our body, there is a divide over worship styles. For some of you, what we call contemporary worship is an irritant, while for others, organs and choirs do nothing for you. Personally, I don't have a dog in the fight as I enjoy both, but for some, such divisions go right to the heart of your identity as a believer and worshipper. I get it, I do. For others, maybe you have a deep seated need for a lecture from the pulpit, while for others, you've spent years with that lecture going right over your head.

¹ Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Three, "One Piece at a Time," *One Piece at a Time*.

How is this place; how is this particular body; how is First Presbyterian possible, I ask you? If it is by our own excellence; if it is by our own artistry; if it is by our own pageantry and fanfare; if it is by our own personal assessment of simplicity and authenticity; if it is by our own devotion to being on the contemporary, cutting edge, all we have is a recipe for disaster. You see things one way, and half the body sees it another. The pieces don't fit together. We don't love the same things. How is one church possible here in this place?

Of course, this is nothing new. As Paul writes his letter to the church in Ephesus, the church is becoming increasingly Gentile, and many of their Jewish brothers and sisters are at a loss as to how to move forward. How can we say that Jesus is the Messiah, and yet, these unwashed Gentiles who neglect the law of Moses get a front row seat? How can we say that we are faithful to God's commands when we are allowing these once unwashed pagans to dirty the assembly? I mean, my goodness, do they even know the difference between Moses and Abraham?

The bad news is that this new community is not possible if the church had relied on our own power. Eventually, the experiment would have failed if we, ourselves, are the glue holding it together. The good news is that we aren't that glue, and we don't operate by our own power. This church is one church; this church is possible; this church as it partners with brothers and sisters around the world who are so different from you and me that I can scarce describe it for you, you're going to have to travel there yourselves; this church is possible because we do not belong to ourselves, we belong to Jesus Christ who knits and builds us together into one body, one temple for the sole purpose of housing the presence of God in the world, and bearing witness to the lordship of Christ.

We are not the church of contemporary worship, nor traditional worship. We are not the church of enlightened, reasoned, scholarly discourse about holy things, nor are we the church of fiery preaching. We are not the church for the purpose of building a denominational name, nor are we the church that thinks that distinctions don't matter. We are neither a church of political conservatives nor liberals. We do not take our identity from the particular opinions and factional affiliations in which our culture is awash, and we are not a church that chases what is trending this week on social media.

We have no identity apart from Christ and his mission, and the minute we forget about that, the moment we depart this foundational identity and drift into divisions is the moment we begin dying. Christ alone in the power of the Spirit must be the source of our life. We exist to serve Him. We live to worship Him. We grow when we exalt His name among the nations, and draw others unto Him. We thrive when we joyously enter His presence and experience his unifying life. We become one when we cling to Him and search for Him and call upon His name.

A week ago today, I stood before a church packed with my Brazilian brothers and sisters and proclaimed something along these lines to them. I told them that we weren't there because we are nice people, or that we are storing up brownie points in heaven. We weren't there as a service organization to raise their standard of living. We were there as brothers and sisters in Christ, one family, to share in their lives, and they in ours, as we live out a partnership in Christ for the purpose of proclaiming His holy name to any and all who will hear it. I also told them that if we ever stopped coming; if we ever lost our heart for mission and connection with believers throughout the world, we as a church would die. We were there out of obedience to Christ's calling upon our lives. I told them that they, too, lived and existed to serve where God had placed them. We then spent the rest of the hot, humid night praising and worshipping God in a confusion of English and Portuguese worship songs and earnest prayer. The Spirit of God was so thick in that place, you could have scooped it up with a spoon.

How can this be? In closing, please note the tense Paul uses in verses 21 and 22. Paul tells us in verse 21 that the body "is being knit together, becoming," and in verse 22, we "are being built together." From a purely linguistic point of view, these are second person plural, present passive participles. What does that mean? Some refer to this as the divine passive. In other words, it is happening to us, God is doing the work, and the work is ongoing. We aren't there yet. By the work of the Spirit, God is present in us, even at this moment, perfecting and smoothing out the differences so we might become a beautiful temple for His presence. God takes the oddly angled brick called Sam and puts him right next to the symmetrical stone called [name here], and with love and care, unites us in Christ so that we might love one another and serve together in His name. This is the gloriously beautiful work of God present, right here and now, in our church, and in every true church around the world. How does the Psalmist describe that God given beauty? "1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! 2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes." When we are one in Christ, it is even more glorious than the healthiest, most vigorous picture of blessing we can imagine.

One church, one body, one Lord. It is because of what Christ has and is doing in us that we share table and eat together. Just as each of you will go back home this evening with your families and break bread even though you might be mad at our your kids, or maybe something went wrong on a particular household matter, here, and in the same way, we will take the bread and wine and meet our Lord. At this table, and no matter our differences, we are one family. We share a name. The name above all names. Here He seals His name upon our hearts. Nothing can be or will ever be the same again.