

+ Romans 15:4-6 + Unified in Christ Alone + WELS Walking Together Sunday + 11 November 2012 +

Unity doesn't come easily. For a good example, all you have to do is look at the latest election process that just came to an end this past Tuesday. Just a brief glance not only at the comments, articles, and interviews in every form of media, but also at the vote totals, rhetoric, and local conversations gives you a pretty good idea that our country is not unified on many things.

Unity doesn't come easily. It doesn't come easily to families, to marriages, to companies, to communities, even to the church. Look across the landscape of Christianity just in America and you see the lack of unity with denominations, synods, conferences, and congregations splintered in different directions—sometimes due to personality problems or infighting, but often related to teaching, especially as many stray farther and farther away from the truth of God's Word. What unity is established is often in name only as church bodies "unite" under the banner of a watered-down, lowest-common-denominator teaching of God's Word. Such fracturing in Christianity has been happening since the earliest years after Jesus established his New Testament church on Pentecost.

Yes, unity doesn't come easily, and that's because every one of us is sinful in God's sight. By nature, every one of us has a self-centered desire to do what's best for me, myself, and I. Unfortunately that impacts every aspect of our lives, including our church and church body. Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul has the secret to real unity that he wants to share with us today. Yes, unity doesn't come easily, but strengthened by Scripture's blessings, we can be **UNIFIED IN CHRIST ALONE** to the glory of our gracious God.

Now unity didn't come easily for the Roman Christians either. The Jews had spent their lives following the old kosher laws regarding what they ate. The Gentiles—the non-Jews—had spent their lives eating food that was revolting to the Jews. Differences over food and other matters that were neither commanded nor forbidden by God were causing disputes among the believers. Mix into that contention a healthy dose of personality issues, where one Christian thought he or she was stronger than another in faith, in spiritual maturity, in matters of conscience, and before long, these conflicts were tearing the Christians apart. Unity seemed nowhere to be found.

Into this increasingly bitter conflict, the Apostle Paul came forward with a solution for unity among these brothers and sisters in Christ. That solution for real unity started with Christ. ***"Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.'"*** (Romans 15:2-3) Jesus was willing to endure insults and hardship to serve and save others. Paul wanted his fellow believers to realize that that applied to them too. They were to live to serve others rather than themselves, but Paul wanted them to also realize that a servant's heart that shows love for one's neighbor rather than self isn't something you can generate from within. So Paul pointed to Holy Scripture. ***"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."*** Through time spent in Holy Scripture, the Lord would give them endurance—the ability to live an unselfish life of service and then be truly united with their fellow believers. This wouldn't come easy, but ***"the encouragement of the Scriptures"*** would continue to strengthen them and give them hope.

Unity doesn't come easily to us either, does it? It's so easy to put yourself first—your wants, your needs, your opinions, your decisions. It's easy to look down on someone who's not like you or who differs with you in a way you don't like. It's easy to pat yourself on the back because of how faithful you've been as a Christian or how you're more excited about Jesus than another Christian. It's easy to think that everyone needs to know your opinion and why exactly what you think is best in any and every situation. It's easier to let insults fall on others than to fall on you and you might even enjoy it a little when those who differ with you have some trouble.

Such an attitude isn't just harmful to any form of true unity, but it also testifies to a much deeper spiritual problem within. When you focus on yourself and what you want, you're not just ignoring your neighbor, but ignoring God who in undeserved mercy provides you everything you have, including rescue from your selfish self. When you pat yourself on the back at how great a Christian you are or how important your personal opinion is, you don't just ignore a fellow believer serving faithfully or providing a wiser opinion, but you also fail to give glory to the God who did it all for you. When you revel in the trouble of those who differ with you, you not only show a cold and loveless heart towards your neighbor, but a cold, dead heart towards God. For such selfishness, you deserve God's eternal condemnation, because such selfishness only harms the unity our God has given to us as believers.

God in his mercy, however, does not leave you to your self-centered pride. No, he sends you a Savior who has endured insults and suffering and death to save you. This is the Savior of whom the Holy Scriptures speak—the One who forgives you for your selfishness, who cleanses you of your self-centered arrogance, who heals your broken relationships, and restores true unity not only between you and your fellow believers, but above all, between you and the holy God. In Christ alone you can find the source of true unity because Jesus reconciled you to God—something you could never do.

That becomes yours through Holy Scripture. Paul wanted the Roman Christians to realize that, and he wants you and me to realize that too. God's Word provides the foundation we need as it reveals God's whole plan of salvation to us. From our first parents bringing sin and death into our world and corrupting every generation down to our own to God's promise of a Savior—a promise that God himself unfolded over the course of the entire Old Testament to God finally sending his Son to be that promised Savior, all that ***“was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”***

There on the pages of Holy Scripture you find forgiveness earned in Jesus' perfect life of service to his heavenly Father and unfailing love for those he came to save. There you find something you really can't find anywhere else—hope not that something might happen, but hope that's based on what Christ has already done for you. In that life and love of Jesus recorded in Holy Scripture you find the enduring motivation to live no longer for yourself, but to have a servant's heart that shows love for your neighbor like Christ. You can live that unselfish life of service like Christ because you have hope in Christ. God accepted Jesus' perfect life and innocent sacrifice on the cross for you. Christ's empty tomb guarantees that God accepted that, and through Jesus you are now reconciled to the holy God. What better motivation is there for serving your Lord by serving your neighbor that remembering how Jesus served to save you!

Your motivation to serve the Lord is further strengthened through ***“the encouragement of the Scriptures”***, which then strengthens unity among believers in Christ. Consider Paul's encouragement to the Romans. ***“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** Paul understood how difficult it is for people to be unified, especially within the Christian church, but yet he could honestly pray that the Lord would establish that unity through his Holy Word. Why? Because such unity among believers brings glory to God's holy, saving name.

What does that mean for you and me here today as part of this congregation and our church body—the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod? It doesn't mean we always have to agree on differences of taste or preference or style or even what color the tablecloths should be, but even so, that should never prevent us from being united as a family of God in our common devotion to our real Savior and his holy Word.

Such ***“a spirit of unity”*** means that in humble Christlike love, we can agree to disagree where it does not contradict Holy Scripture because we are still united in Christ. If something does contradict Holy Scripture, we stand together against it. We don't burn one another down because he doesn't prefer what I like and I don't prefer what she likes. Satan loves to destroy relationships between fellow believers over differences of opinion and taste, because by doing so he can rob them of their hope. When we remember that Jesus accepted us when we were unacceptable and became a servant to save us, we can humbly stand firm together against Satan's attacks as we ***“follow Christ Jesus”***. That ultimately brings glory to ***“the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”***.

As a congregation we do that as we put our time, our talents, and our treasures in service to the Lord to carry out together the mission and ministry God has graciously given to our congregation. Yes, that includes using your talents to carry out regular tasks here at church, but it also means using the skills and interests and abilities God has given you to encourage, to invite, to support, and to create to his glory.

It includes understanding that when you give of your treasures to the Lord, you're not just supporting his work here in central and northern New York, but also the work of starting mission congregations across North America from the Carolinas to the California coast and world mission work in places like Nepal, East Asia, and Pakistan. You're supporting the work of training young men to serve as pastors and young men and women to serve as Lutheran elementary and secondary teachers. You're supporting the work of our church body to produce publications that proclaim the good news of what Christ has done to thousands of other people.

Just because we're a small mission congregation in central New York doesn't mean we're isolated from the wider work of a church body that has thankfully remained faithful to the truth of God's Word for over 150 years and has taken that truth to the ends of the earth. With them, we walk together because we are unified in Christ and his Word alone.

Unity does not come easily, but it's not impossible. Through the Word of God, the Holy Spirit establishes ***“a spirit of unity”*** between people of every language, tribe, nation, and background. You really won't find that kind of unity anywhere else in the entire world, because the source of that unity is Christ alone. Strengthened by Scripture's blessings, unified in Christ, and giving glory to our gracious God, we walk together. Amen.