

Come to the Table ~ “The Priority of Unity”

What an appropriate time to begin a series of sermons on unity: World Communion Sunday. We have celebrated the diversity that is brought to the Lord’s Table around the world; and we have acknowledged that, enriched by this very diversity, we are united at the table—united in our common need for God’s grace.

EPHESIANS 1:3-10 (RSV) *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. ⁵He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace* | *which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸which he lavished upon us. ⁹For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

I don’t watch a lot of TV other than football games; but, when I was doing the interim ministry in Trenton, MO, I was up there by myself quite a bit, and I’d come in from work and turn on the TV while I was fixing dinner—and eating; and I got drawn into a couple of shows that I still watch if I think about it.

My favorite is “NCIS”. I’ve always enjoyed shows that involve reasoning things out—you know, the detective putting clues together and figuring out the crime... As a youth I thought about going into forensics; I enjoyed cutting up those frogs and earthworms in biology lab, and always have enjoyed doing research.

I was a curious kid. I think I told you about a Sunday School teacher responding in exasperation to a barrage of my questions, “Jimmy, there are just some things we’re not supposed to know.” And when I responded, “Then why did God give us a brain?” (I was a bit of smart aleck, as well as curious.) And, she slapped me—right across the chops. I know: she’d be in jail had it happened today; but it was 1949 or 50—I was eight or nine. She told my dad I’d been disrespectful, and, when we got home he got right to the seat of the problem! Well, the questions didn’t go away, but I learned not to ask them to her.

And to this day I don’t believe her comment: “There are some things we’re just not supposed to know.” Really? Then why DID God give us a brain?

In today’s text we’re let in on the “mystery of God’s will!” Maybe a better translation is the “secret” of God’s will. If we’re privileged with that information, nothing’s hidden from us! What else is there? The only information withheld—which also was withheld from Jesus, himself—is the day and hour when he will return.

“The Secret of God’s Will.” What is it? Look with me again at verses 9 & 10: (God) *made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to*

all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

The secret of God's will is (what?) "...to unite all things..." The KJV says, "...to gather together in one..." ERV says, "...that all things... be joined together..." It's really difficult to grasp the full meaning of this verb with one translation. In mathematics it means "to sum up" a column of figures; in rhetoric it means "to sum up" or "recap" an argument. [For example, Jesus taught that all the commandments are "summed up" in this sentence: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."]

But in today's text, the idea of summary is modified by the words, "...*all things in heaven and on earth under Christ*". It's like "all the vital forces of the universe are brought into focus in Christ. Christ is the focal point of the universe. And when "all things in heaven and on earth" are brought into their true relationship with Christ, they also are brought into their true relationship with each other and therefore into an all-embracing, universal harmony. One way to know if we're in our true relationship with Christ is to examine our relationship with each other!

Nothing is more important to God than the unity of all God's creation. It is the secret of God's will. Listen:

- 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10 *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.*
- EPHESIANS 4:11-13 *It was (Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*
- COLOSSIANS 3:13-14 *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*
- PSALM 133:1 *How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!*
- ROMANS 12:16 *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*
- GALATIANS 3:26-28 *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*
- 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-13 *The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink*

And listen to Jesus in the garden, praying for his disciples:

- JOHN 17:20-23 *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me*

through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

I could go on and on with verse after verse of Scripture. Nothing is more important to God. Unity is the mystery—the secret—of God's will.

But a clarification: Unity is not uniformity—it's not "same-ness." It was never intended to be. We're not called to be alike. Each of us is unique.

Nor is unity found in agreement of opinion, philosophy or ideology. It's not humanly possible (maybe theoretically) to experience total agreement. Democrats and Republicans will never agree totally—on anything. The tragedy is that since the days of Truman and Eisenhower—and maybe Kennedy—there's been virtually no effort on the part of either to even understand each other! And that divisive sickness has infected the ethos of this nation—including the church.

God created free choice! I can't believe God realistically expected humans to agree on everything—or to do everything the same as everyone else. A choir singing in unison produces beautiful sounds, so long as each singer is on pitch and all the vowels are unified. But a choir doesn't reach its greatest potential until it produces wonderful, rich harmony—beautiful precisely because the sopranos, altos, tenors and basses all are singing different notes at the same time!

God created us differently, so we could mutually enrich each other. In the Epistles of Ephesians and Romans it becomes clear that the Body of Christ lives up to its full potential precisely because each of us is different! That's true at this table, and it's true collectively at every Lord's Table around the world.

So, having establishing the theme of the epistle in our text today, the writer of Ephesians moves through the metaphor of church as Body of Christ to this literary masterpiece, summarizing the unity that is the mystery—the secret—of God's will: *"...speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love."* EPHESIANS 4:15-16 (NIV)

And on that basis, on World Communion Sunday, and every Sunday, we all are invited to "Come to the Table," where we are united, above all else, in our common need for God's grace.