***Encountering God through the Unity of the Body***

***Ephesians 4:3-6***

***Week 1: Unity of the Spirit in Peace - Written by Jordan Acre***

**Introduction**

Unity, it almost sounds like a strange word or something out of a fantasy novel. Our world is anything but a symbol for unity. Even when we try to down size from the world to a country or from a country to a town or from a town to a family, it is hard for us to make a case for unity. When we look at the Church with its many denominations or our local church with its different viewpoints, it is hard to make a case for unity. Yet Jesus prays for us in John 17:20-23 that we would be one just as He is one with the Father. He prays that we would be brought into complete unity. Because Jesus prayed this prayer for us, unity is not a fantasy. It is a God-created and God-given reality!

**Prayer**

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this time together as your people. Thank you for the scripture we are about to read. Father, as we read, open our hearts and our minds to your voice. Teach us your ways. Mold us in your image. Show us how to be your hands and feet to those around us. In your name we pray, Amen.

**Scripture**

**Ephesians 4:3-6**

***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.***

**Devotional**

***What is unity of the Spirit?***

It means that what unites us as the body of believers is far greater and more important than what divides us. God is our King, His Kingdom is our home. Our loyalty lies with Him. When we realize this, then the divisions of the world fade away. My identity becomes a Child of God. My nationality becomes His Kingdom. I realize that my struggle isn’t against flesh and blood but against the powers and principalities of this dark world. My political views become to love the Lord my God with all my heart, mind and strength and to love my neighbor as myself. Unity of the Spirit means I am no longer my own because I belong to God. It should be a very humbling experience as we let go of ourselves and surrender to God. We learn that to love God is to love those around us. To serve God is to serve those around us. We are unified not because we have the same background. We are unified because we have surrendered to God!

***What is the Bond of Peace?***

The bond of peace is the acknowledgment that while we have surrendered to God we are still on the journey and we will make mistakes. We are to show grace and forgiveness when that happens, every time it happens. We are to choose love!

***Why should I care?***

If you are just going through the motions of the Christian faith then you probably won’t care about keeping the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. You are probably more concerned with building your own kingdom and identity. However, if you are serious about your relationship with the Creator of all things, who has broken the curse of sin and death and is at work restoring His creation, then you care about this because it is who you have been called and new-created to be by your Creator. You are no longer your own. You are His and he has called you to live in love, unity, peace and forgiveness. It is His way or our way. The two can not both be the Lord of our lives. God’s way leads to life. Our way leads to death. Either way it will cost us everything, but with God’s way we gain more than we could even ask or imagine - the life that is truly life!

***How do I live this out in my life tomorrow?***

We get serious about loving God, which means we get serious about loving those around us. We love not just those who are easy to love but those who are our enemies, those who have hurt us and those who hate us. Start by praying for God to teach you how, asking for His strength to help you. It is only through Him that we can do this. It is only when we surrender to God that we will find who we were created to be. It will take time and it will take a daily choice to follow Him. This is a dangerous and difficult journey but God has promised to be with us every step of the way. Keep your eyes on him, put your trust in Him.

**Prayer**

Our Heavenly Father, holy is your name, let your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today what we need to live and follow you. Teach us how to forgive as you forgive, so that we also may be forgiven. Lead us in your pathways of righteousness because it is easy for us to be led astray by our desires, deliver us from our foolishness. For all things belong to you now and forever more. Amen.

**Blessing**

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus,so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ***Romans 15:5-6 NRSV***

***Week 2: Unity of the Body - Written By Joden Jackson***

**Introduction**

As we look at these verses there is a common denominator throughout it. The word “ONE”. One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father. Well what’s the significance of all of these “Ones”? While the word “body” could refer to the body of Christ (the church) or to a person’s body, the emphasis really remains the same. I like to remember that though God’s Work is immense, He works individually with each and every one of His children. God has one purpose for us to fulfill. Let us not be entangled by the work of others but, rather, let us focus on the work God has for each of us to do.

**Prayer**

God, As we gather together in Your presence, we humbly come before You, acknowledging Your sovereignty and the boundless love You shower upon us. We thank You for the privilege of diving into Your Word and exploring the depths of Your wisdom and grace. May this time of study and reflection draw us closer to You and to one another. May our understanding of Your Word deepen our love for You and our appreciation for the unity You have established among Your people. In Your name, we pray, Amen.

**Scripture**

**Ephesians 4:3-6**

***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.***

**Devotional**

In the bustling tapestry of life, amidst diverse cultures, opinions, and beliefs, we often find ourselves seeking unity. The pursuit of unity is not merely a human longing but a divine design deeply embedded within the fabric of creation. In Ephesians 4:3-6, the Apostle Paul eloquently illuminates the essence of this divine unity that we, as believers, are called to embrace.

Paul begins by emphasizing the oneness that exists within the body of Christ. Just as our physical bodies are intricately woven together with various parts functioning harmoniously, so too is the body of believers. Despite our differences in backgrounds, talents, and personalities, we are united by our shared identity in Christ. This unity is not contingent upon external affiliations or human constructs but is rooted in the Spirit of God dwelling within us.

Furthermore, Paul underscores the unity of hope that binds us together. Our hope is not grounded in fleeting aspirations or temporal pleasures but in the eternal promises of God. It is a hope that transcends circumstances, offering solace in times of distress and assurance in moments of doubt. As recipients of this divine hope, we are called to embody it, extending compassion and encouragement to one another as we journey together in faith.

Central to our unity is the acknowledgment of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is the cornerstone upon which our faith rests. It is through Him that we find redemption, reconciliation, and restoration. Our faith is not a mere adherence to doctrines or rituals but a heartfelt commitment to Christ, trusting in His finished work on the cross. Baptism symbolizes our identification with Christ's death and resurrection, signifying our participation in His new life. It serves as a unifying rite, marking our initiation into the body of believers and affirming our allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

As we reflect on Ephesians 4:3-6, let us embrace the profound unity that we share as members of the body of Christ. Let us cultivate relationships marked by love, humility, and mutual respect, recognizing that we are all co-heirs of God's grace. May we uphold the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, bearing witness to the transformative power of Christ's love in a fragmented world.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, We thank You for the unity that we experience as members of Your body, the Church. Help us to cherish and preserve this unity, striving always to maintain the bond of peace. Grant us the grace to love one another as You have loved us, bearing with one another in patience and humility. May our lives reflect the oneness we have in Christ, drawing others into Your loving embrace. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

**Blessing**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you always, as you dwell in the unity of the Spirit, bound together in one body. May your hearts be anchored in the hope to which you are called, your faith grounded in the one Lord, and your lives marked by the confession of one baptism. May you walk in the richness of this divine unity, manifesting love, humility, and peace in all your interactions. May the unity of the Spirit permeate your communities, drawing others into the glorious light of Christ. Amen.

***Week 3: Communal Confession: One Father, One Baptism - Written by Robby Patton***

**Introduction**

 NYC (Nazarene Youth Conference) 2023 was just one year ago. For some the memories and excitement are still vivid and alive, for others it seems like it was a lifetime ago. For many the memories of NYC will no doubt include traveling debacles or challenges. Whether it be hot buses (too soon?), buses that didn’t show up, buses that left mid journey, flights that were missed, flights that were overbooked… The challenge of the journey is often one of the greatest memories we take away. I bring up what may be painful memories for some of you to point out that all 10,000 people made it to Tampa. Through all the difficulties, the various modes of travel, the unique timelines, the crazy stories- we made it. There was a shared goal and by keeping the end goal, *the telos (τέλος)*, as our focus we were able to gather for an amazing time with God.

As we confess One Father, One Baptism we recognize that we have one hope of salvation. We as individuals, unique church communities, as a common denomination, and as a part of the complete church confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, are invited to, “Come follow me.” A simple, yet complex, call to step into faith on a journey toward Christ. As we walk on that journey we find that there is a common confession, *One Father, One Baptism.*

**Prayer**

 Lord, You have created us wonderful and unique and we celebrate that diversity of Your handiwork. As we make the decision to follow You, we seek to find the fullness of the identity you have for us. We recognize that You are calling us Yourself and one faith that leads to You. There will be reshaping as we surrender to Your will, help us to be clay that appreciates the master's hand. There will be divisions that separate us, help us to be filled with Your love and grace as we journey to the shared confession and faith.

**Scripture**

**Ephesians 4:3-6**

***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.***

**Devotional**

 The Greek world that Paul was writing to, particularly the church in Ephesus, would have in some very clear ways reflected the current world we find ourselves in. Greek culture was very comfortable with a pleasure based society that encouraged decision making based on personal feelings. It was also very common to seek to appease the gods through sacrifices and superficial offerings. The greatest good was ultimately thought to exist in knowledge and power.

The parallels are uncanny as we see “You do you,” “Have it your way,” “If it feels right, go for it,” among others as the slogans for our society. Faith for many has become a series of checklists to keep God/god happy. It is clear though that anything declared science cannot be questioned, and our dominance over others is often based on the power and control we wield.

And yet, it was into this context that Paul was inviting, calling, pleading for people to hear the good news in a different way. The invitation is as present and valuable today as then; find your hope not in the things of this world, but in the God who is calling you. Paul clearly points to the connection that is created when all people share the common confession that we have one Lord, one faith and one baptism; the common thread moving through this invitation is a loving Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Paul traveled greatly and saw many diverse people groups. If Paul were to be transplanted to current America he would likely be surprised by the technology but familiar with the society. The divisions in our world, in our faith, in our churches are not new. Though each new generation declares theirs to face more challenges, the root issues remain the same. God is standing outside of our issues inviting each of us to focus on the *τέλος.* The world encourages us to find what makes us unique individuals and sets us apart. God wants us to see what brings us together, a common confession that we have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

**So What…?**

 As we are being called to unity we must also confess and recognize the divisions and obstacles that prevent that unification. When we see that we disagree with another we should seek not to alienate but to reconcile. Through this process we must connect with scripture as God’s word and direction. We must be willing to change when God shapes us.

On the path to unity we are also accountable for those around us. Matthew 5:23-24 points out that any disunity that we willfully hold on to can become a stumbling block and prevent us from fully worshiping and fully confessing the truth of One Lord. In our righteous confidence we should be humble enough to confess that we may need to change our hearts posture toward others. We may not come to a point of agreement on all things, but we can come to the common confession that we love and serve one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

**Prayer**

 Lord, we thank You for the invitation that You have set before us. We thank You for the grace and love that You show when calling to us in our brokenness and inviting us to wholeness. We thank You for Your provision and wisdom calling us to unity and connection as one body confessing You as lord and savior. We ask that You would create in us a new heart that is bent toward You and more perfectly reflect Your son in this world. Give us Your grace and mercy in such abundance that we can freely and confidently allow it to spill on all who we encounter.

**Blessing**

 Rest in His peace knowing that you have been invited to be daughters and sons of the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the one who is over all and through all and in all. Let the hope and confidence in Christ be sufficient to allow you to walk humbly toward unity in one body, one Spirit, and one hope.