

A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, September 14, 2008

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Sometimes we hold to ideals that exist in a sort of tension. The tension can become outright conflict if we are not clear about how the ideals interact with each other. We value unity. As the epistle says, “There is one body, and one Spirit...one faith, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” But we also value individuality. St. Paul says that the one body has many parts and the parts are not all the same. An overemphasis on the individual can undermine unity, and an unbalanced emphasis on unity can devalue the individual.

We should note that these two ideals are part of our national political discussion. Most people value both the unity of America and also some form of diversity. The debate is about the acceptable parameters of each. When do the concerns of the individual or the special interest threaten the unity? And when do certain demands of unity stifle the freedom of the individual?

The Bible provides a framework for thinking about this tension in the church. There are certain things to which all must submit in the service of unity. The “one faith, one Lord” component of our unity is summarized in the Creed. The Creed proclaims that Jesus is Lord of all, that he is both God and man, that he will come again to judge the world and raise the dead, that the Holy Spirit is also God and that God is Trinity. Unity requires that each of us give our assent to these things.

The unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is rooted in truth. Thus, for us to share this divine unity, we must accept the truth about God that has been revealed to us. To deny the truth is to prefer my opinion over God’s revelation to his church. It is the sin of pride.

This is why we must submit to the truth with humility. Humility is willing to accept the revelation of God as truth, even when we do not fully understand the revelation. As St. Augustine said, “I believe in order that I might understand.” To believe is not to fully comprehend every doctrine. To believe is to say “Amen” to truth, even the truth that we now see only through a glass darkly.

But the body of Christ is made up of vastly different types of people. Some are artistic, others like sports. Some are intellectual, some don’t like to read at all. Some are active, some are contemplative. Some are outgoing, some are shy. The variety of the saints is evidenced in the different ways people pray, the different gifts each has for ministry and the different concerns that each has for outreach

We believe that this is a good thing. Unity is not sameness. The diversity of the body makes us each more broad. The one faith, to which we all submit with humility, unites us with others with whom we might not otherwise share common cause. It causes us to see the love of God from a different perspective.

Unity and diversity come together in this: As we face the altar together and say “I believe” and “Amen” with one voice, as we all partake of that one bread and are made one body (1 Cor. 10:11), a diverse and scattered group of people are changed into a unified church.

Problems arise in the church when non-essential things are required for unity. The tendency in some places is to require certain language. One must learn to say “Praise the Lord” or, “Hallelujah,” at just

the right moments to be fully “in.” The tendency in other places is to require certain outward forms. If you don’t make the sign of the cross, bow your head or lift up your hands at the right times, you may be viewed suspiciously.

To be sure, there are some non-essential common customs to which we ought to submit for the sake of unity. For example, common gestures of reverence help us to worship as one. The virtue of charity helps us to distinguish between helpful customs and the error of majoring in minor things. But the enforced aspect of unity ought to be heavily weighted toward the essentials—“One faith, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”

Problems also arise when diversity is tolerated in matters of truth. This is a common error today. Diversity, the freedom of the individual, is often given as a reason for allowing people to dissent from the faith. From this perspective, unity results not from our common submission to truth, but from defining the faith so broadly that no one’s opinion is excluded.

Again, this is the sin of pride masquerading as virtue. Just as humility is required to give assent to the truth, so pride causes us to exalt our personal opinions over the revelation of God—and the devil is always eager to tell us just how brilliant our new ideas are!

Submission to truth causes us all to worship the one true God, but the exaltation of personal theological opinion results in ten thousand idols of our own making. We must remember that the commandments against idolatry are the primary prohibitions of the Torah.

Moral diversity is also exalted in our time, as though the variety of sin tolerated by the church were some sort of virtue. This also undermines unity because it encourages people to follow the devices and desires of their own hearts rather than to be changed into the image of Christ.

There is, indeed, a diversity of sin in the church, but what unites us is our common confession. We acknowledge together that we have fallen short of the glory of God, even though we have each done it in our own characteristic way. The unifying aspect of sin is this: no matter what our sin is, it does not exclude us from coming to Christ if we truly and earnestly repent and are willing to be changed by God. The Cross is the one sufficient answer for all of our diverse sins.

Our confessions are always informed by the belief that Jesus can change us. We do not exalt the sin. We exalt the power of God to change sinners. We do not believe that change is easy. But we do believe that all things are possible with God, even holiness and resurrection, even for us.

This is why we, who are different people, with different gifts and different sins are all called to persevere in our common repentance, in the one faith, being children of one God and Father, following one Lord Jesus Christ, being sanctified by one Holy Spirit.