

“One in the Lord”
Psalm 133, Ephesians 4:1-6
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Virginia Catherine is a senior this year and we made our first college visit on Monday to FSU. It was a great tour, and we were very impressed with the campus and all that FSU has to offer. Gators, don't worry. We will be visiting UF on Friday this week, and I'm sure it will be equally impressive, but I do have to tell you that UF might already be in second place because of something we discovered after the tour while we were at lunch. I was google searching something about FSU and I noticed that one of the other popular google search questions was “Is FSU a Coke or Pepsi school?” Out of curiosity I clicked the question and read that FSU is a Coke school meaning they have a contract with Coca Cola so all the vending machines and fountain machines on campus sell Coke. I told Virginia Catherine, who loves Diet Coke, “Hey, FSU is a Coke school,” and she said, “that's good.” Then she got very serious and said, “Wait. What about UF? Is it a Coke or Pepsi school?” After another quick Google search we learned that UF is a *Pepsi* school. Virginia Catherine looked at me and said, “that might be a deal breaker. Seriously.” I mean, I'm a Coke person too, so I get it, but Joshua has promised that *if* UF turns out to be a real contender, he can tell us where to find Coke machines in Gainesville.

I tell you this today because it helps illustrate some things that are true about us as people. It illustrates the truth that we aren't all the same. We have different tastes and preferences. Some people like Coke and some like Pepsi. Some like FSU. Some like UF. Some like neither. Whether it's soft drinks or football teams, we're not all always on the same page about our likes and dislikes. And what a boring world it would be if we were! Our differences make life

interesting, but the story also reveals the impulse that we have to gravitate toward others who are like us and then to label, sort, and divide. I don't just like Coke. I'm a Coke *person*. We follow this impulse to label, sort, and divide over every kind of difference that can exist between ourselves and others, and then things can start to get dicey when we take the next step and begin to attach judgement. I'm a Coke person and Coke people are better than Pepsi people. We have better taste. We're smarter and better-looking, or whatever. When that kind of dividing and judging goes too far, it can lead to real suffering and injustice. Culture wars, political wars – all the kinds of wars, are created and perpetuated by feeding and exploiting this impulse to sort and divide. We've seen how those wars leave wounds on our souls and in communities, and sadly, even in the church – in local congregations but also in the larger church- we are susceptible to sorting and separating and to letting differences cause division. In our Scripture lesson today, we see that this was the problem that Paul was concerned about. The differences and disagreements among the believers were causing harm to their fellowship and weakening their witness.

Our reading this morning comes from Ephesians chapter 4. Ephesians is a letter that was likely circulated and read in several churches around a region that was very cosmopolitan drawing together people from many different cultures. Paul was writing to churches that reflected some of this diversity in their make-up. In the beginning of the letter before we come to chapter 4, Paul proclaims and celebrates the extraordinary good news about what God has done and what God is doing through Christ. Here is a brief recap of the first three chapters.

He says in chapter 1 that those who have been included in Christ through faith have already been given a glimpse of God's master plan which is a plan to bring *all* things in heaven and on earth

together under one head, who is Christ. Don't miss that! God's plan for all people and all of creation is *unity* that is made possible and held together in Christ. Then, in chapter 2, he goes on to talk about how we know that this is where God is taking things because of what God has already done. Sinners who were separated from God by sin have already been brought back and reconciled to God through Christ by faith, and people who were divided, Paul talks specifically about Jews and Gentiles, have already been brought together and made into one new humanity in Christ. In chapter 3, he says that he has been made an Apostle for the purpose of sharing God's good news, but he is not the only witness. He also points out that it is God's intention to use and work through the *church* to reveal this wonderful plan to bring all things together in and under Christ. In one of his other letters to the Corinthians Paul also talks about the church's role in revealing God's activity and purposes saying "...in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ." Paul knows that God is making God's appeal through the church, so after reminding them about all that God has done, he shifts in chapter four to talking about what they ought to do in light of what God has done. He urges them to conduct themselves in a way that will bear faithful witness to the reality of the oneness that is already theirs through Christ. We can tell how strongly he feels about what he's telling them because he says I'm *begging* you to walk in a way that is worthy of this calling to live out the reality of your unity in Christ.

It's not surprising that Paul felt begging was in order because he had already seen plenty of evidence that living together in unity and bearing witness to their Christian unity was a challenge for the believers in the early church. In Acts and in Paul's other letters that were written earlier than this one, we can read about how the believers argued and debated about whether Gentiles needed to observe the Jewish laws and customs. Some doubted that others

were really part of Christ because they weren't circumcised or because they ate meat that had been previously sacrificed to idols. Some thought their spiritual gifts, like the ability to speak in tongues or speak prophetically somehow elevated them over others in the fellowship. Some tried to distinguish and separate themselves from others by identifying themselves with the teachers and leaders who led them to Christ.

“I belong to Paul!”

“Well, I belong to Apollos!”

We are removed in time from the first recipients of this letter by close to 2000 years, but when we read about the debates, and controversies, and factions in the early church that distracted and divided the believers it's not hard to imagine what it was like because there are plenty of debates, and controversies, and factions that exist in the church today. I've heard people say, and you may have even said something like this yourself, that there are Christians, and *I* am a Christian, but I'm not *that* kind of Christian.

If we say things like that, we are likely talking about differences in our theology or how we read and apply God's Word in our lives, or we might be talking about the cultural differences that exist within different streams of Christianity. In this kind of way, it is true that there are different *kinds* of Christians, and we should expect the differences because the church is made up of all kinds of different people who come from different cultures, and backgrounds, and have very diverse personalities, temperaments, and life experiences. We are bound to think differently about things, and we are bound to have different emphases. We are also bound to grow at different rates and bound to have different strengths and vulnerabilities. This is what can make being part of the Body of Christ difficult, being united to all these people that can be hard to understand or get along with, but it is also one of the beautiful things about the Body of Christ.

Because the Body is diverse, we complement each other and bring along with our weaknesses a variety of gifts and strengths to the mix. It's like the image of the human body that Paul gives us to make the point that each different part makes a unique contribution that is important to the whole. It's good that every individual Christian or congregation isn't exactly the same. The diversity allows for many different access points for many different people. It's like on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit spoke through the Apostles in all the different languages of the people who were gathered so that Christ could be made accessible to them. This is a good way to think about all the different kinds of churches and different "kinds" of Christians. Each "kind" speaks a language that someone out there is going to be able to hear and understand. We speak in different ways, but through our many languages, we proclaim one Christ. Our different lives and different ministries speak and help make Christ accessible to all the different people that God wants to draw to Christ.

The diversity within the Body of Christ is beautiful and good, but instead of embracing and celebrating it, it seems to become something that makes us uncomfortable. We go with that impulse to sort, separate, and divide, and I think one of the reasons for that is because it gives us a greater sense of control than trusting that the same Spirit who is at work in us is also at work in and through our very different brothers and sisters. I saw an example of this this week when I came across an outreach resource that churches could use to invite people to worship. All you had to do was fill in your church's name and location. But in tiny print at the bottom was a requirement to check every box on a long statement of faith. Some of those boxes were things that unite all Christians — belief in the Trinity, the divinity and humanity of Jesus, his death and resurrection, his promise to come again. But then there were additional boxes, points that went beyond the core of our faith, and it was clear they only wanted a certain kind of Christians to be able to use their resource. It wasn't

enough to affirm the things that make all Christians Christian. When I saw that, what saddened me most wasn't just the possibility of churches being left out — it was the missed opportunity. The invitation could have been a chance for the whole church, in all its variety, to make an appeal to all our neighbors in all their variety and witness to Christ together. Instead, it became another example of how easily we slip into sorting and separating.

God speaks to us today to remind us that the Spirit has drawn us together with all of our brothers and sisters in this congregation, this city, this country and the globe, and we have been made one through our faith and baptism into Christ. It was God's choice to do this whether we like being joined to everyone else or not, and it is God's will for us to live and move in this world as one so that the world can see that the wars and divisions that lead to so much of the suffering and injustice in our world are not the end of the story. We are placed in the world as witnesses to the reality of true unity that Christ makes possible, and the world needs to see what is possible and to know the One who makes it possible. It isn't always easy to bear with our brothers and sisters, and we don't always feel like claiming them and they may not feel like claiming us, but Paul does offer guidance that helps us with this difficult thing. He doesn't say unity comes when everybody finally agrees, or when our differences are erased, or when we win the argument. He says unity is lived out when we are humble, when we practice gentleness, when we show patience, when we bear with one another in love. That is how we "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

I referred to Paul a lot today because we are looking at this text from one of his letters, but just so we're all clear, Jesus is concerned about our unity and our witness, too. In John 17 he prayed for his disciples. He prayed for us, asking God to make us one. "As you,

Father, 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... so that the world may know that you have loved them even as you have loved me.”

In the end, Christ is neither Coke or Pepsi. He is the one Lord and Savior of us all and we are made one in him. The world is watching to see if a different way is possible, and we are called to show them that it is. May we walk worthy of that calling, together. Amen.