

THE CHURCH -- "A GOD'S-EYE VIEW"

Ephesians 4:1-17

Proper 14, August 5, 2018

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

I imagine that we have all heard that old expression before, haven't we? "I can't see the forest for the trees!"? What this old expression is attempting to convey to us is the **importance of "perspective"**!

Sometimes, in the **physical realm** but also in the **psychological-spiritual realms**—we may be so **close to a situation that we can't really view it accurately**. What we need then, to gain a more accurate perception of the situation we are confronting, is sometimes called: "**A Bird's-Eye View**." It's a **view that is seen from high-above**. It's what you see when you are looking down on something from a high position, so that you can somehow then see all of it; **not just a part of it, but all of it!**

Please allow me to **use this phrase in a sentence** for clarification: "*John's pilot-license enabled him to have a bird's-eye view of the beautiful countryside!*" In other words, my brothers and sisters, if you have a bird's eye-view of a situation, then **you can see, and you can know, what is happening in that situation in all its parts!**

A GOD'S-EYE VIEW

St. Paul is writing these magnificent words of our **epistle lesson this morning (Ephesians 4:1-17)** under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and therefore, what St. Paul is giving to us, is **not just a "Bird's-Eye" view of the Church**; but even **far more importantly** it's "**A God's-Eye View**" of the Church.

Paul begins our Epistle Lesson this morning with an "**exhortation**," because **among the many spiritual gifts that the Crucified, Risen, and Ascended Christ had poured out upon St. Paul** was also the gift of "**EXHORTATION!**" People with the gift of exhortation know how to command other people to do things that they need to be doing, but usually in much more of an **encouraging manner** rather than in **some type of offensive or upsetting manner!** Paul's exhorts this rather large group of Christians, not only in the Church at Ephesus, but in all the surrounding sister churches of Ephesus located around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, exhorting them: "*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*" (Ephesians 4:1-6)!

BY GOD'S DESIGN THE CHURCH IS ALREADY UNIFIED

Did you notice how Paul said, "*Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit,*" rather than saying to these dear people: "*Make every effort to become unified!*"?

BY GOD'S OWN DESIGN AND THROUGH THE POWERFUL SANCTIFYING MINISTRY OF GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE CHURCH, INCLUDING OUR LOCAL CHURCH IN THIS PLACE, IS ALREADY UNIFIED!

This really shouldn't surprise us, not when we hear Paul teach us that there is only **ONE BODY, ONE SPIRIT, ONE HOPE, ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM AND ONE GOD AND FATHER.**

Therefore, even though, we were all baptized at different times and most of us were also baptized at different places, it's the **SAME BAPTISM THAT WE RECEIVED** -- - so that the result, now, is also the same! At the hour of our Baptism, each one of us, was washed clean of our sins and given the gift of the Spirit—the “**ONE HOLY SPIRIT,**” St Paul reminds us, who leads us in the **ONE FAITH** that Jesus is the **ONE SAVIOR from sin.** By way of an analogy, we are all collectively **LIKE A TEAM OF BASKETBALL PLAYERS WHO HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE SAME UNIFORM,** a uniform that helps to identify us all publicly as being members of the same team—so that during the game---**HOPEFULLY, WE WILL ALL BE AIMING TO SHOOT AT THE SAME BASKET!**

BUT NOT ALL PLAYERS WILL WORK TO BECOME A “UNIFIED TEAM”

EVEN IF YOU ARE NOT A SPORTS FAN, YOU STILL KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT SPORTS TO KNOW THAT JUST BECAUSE ATHLETES WEAR THE SAME UNIFORM, THIS DOESN'T NECESSARILY MEAN THAT THAT THEY WILL GENUINELY BECOME A UNIFIED TEAM AND LEARN HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY AND MOST EFFECTIVELY WORK TOGETHER!

More often than we would care to remember, there are often those “**HOTSHOT**” **PLAYERS** out there who think that they are the team's all-stars and who **immediately shoot the ball** every time they can touch it. Their teammates become majorly annoyed at this and oftentimes, therefore, stop passing them the ball. **BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, YOU HAVE A TEAM THAT IS CONSTANTLY SQUABBLING DURING TIMEOUTS. THEY MIGHT ALL WEAR THE SAME UNIFORM AND BE SHOOTING AT THE SAME BASKET, BUT NO ONE IS HAVING MUCH “FUN” ON A TEAM LIKE THAT!**

Likewise, the Apostle Paul is teaching us here that **WHILE UNITY IS GOD'S GIFT IN THE CHURCH,** it's also something that we need to keep working, and to “eagerly” keep working to maintain—because the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh—keep trying to destroy the unity of the Church catholic as well as to destroy the unity of the local church—by using our own innate sense of selfishness and self-centeredness to accomplish this dastardly task!

THE KEY TO MAINTAINING UNITY IS HUMILITY!

Because of this great inherent danger, St. Paul goes on to write to us in verse two: *“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2, 3).*

But this is a very important insight that St Paul is giving to each one of us here: The key to maintaining the Unity of the Spirit is humility!

And because St. Paul wants us, not only to have a bird's-eye view of the Church, but a "God's-eye View of the Church," please note how the Apostle Paul urges us to be completely humble and gentle—not just humble and gentle most of the time or when it suits our needs.

But it's hard to be humble and gentle when others, when sometimes, even our fellow Christians, can be so hurtful! Paul understands that. That's why he also urges us to ***"bear with others in love."*** Jesus modeled what it means ***"to bear with others in love"*** when he prayed from the cross, ***"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."***

Jesus could have justly cursed those who were crucifying and mocking him. Instead he took the abuse, praying that these soldiers and others would see the error of their ways. And if they didn't? Well, Jesus would leave that to his heavenly Father to sort out. ***"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"*** (John 3:17)!

But neither has our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ sent us out into the world to condemn the world, my brothers and sisters, but to proclamation the message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ so that others might be still saved by Christ in our world today too!

Of course, bearing with others in love doesn't mean that we will never point out to other people, to other believers, when they have hurt us. But bearing with them means in patience and love also means that we will hear them out; since it could very well be true that we also have misunderstood what they said or did.

If it becomes clear that their words and actions towards us were indeed mean-spirited, we will urge them to repent. But our purpose here is not to rub their face in their sins. Rather, we also want to be able to announce to them that Jesus paid for that sin and God has removed it from his sight, just as we have removed that sin from our own sight too, for Jesus' sake, and for the primary purpose of maintaining the unity of the Church.

WE DON'T HAVE TO MAINTAIN THIS UNITY ON OUR OWN

Thankfully we don't have to try to maintain this unity on our own. Paul went on to write: ***"But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift"*** (v. 7)!

That's why it goes on to say: ***"When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men"*** (Ephesians 4:7-8)!

Here **St Paul is quoting Psalm 68** that serves as a prophecy of Jesus' coming down to this earth to win our salvation. The translation of the Hebrew psalm into Greek, leaves us with some interesting wording. It literally says that Jesus came and "took captivity captive."

What was it that had captured us? Satan. Sin. Death. Hell. But Jesus in turn came to capture them. As Martin Luther once put it so well, "Jesus came to exterminate my death; he came to damn my hell!"

Once Jesus accomplished that through his death and resurrection, he ascended into heaven.

Psalm 68 refers to that triumphal ascension and it compares Jesus to a conquering king returning home with all the spoils of war. But Jesus didn't keep those spoils for himself. Rather, he shares them with the Church.

Paul writes, ***“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13).***

Jesus' gifts to the Church are spiritual leaders like pastors whose job it is to equip you, the saints, so you can continue to maintain the unity of the Church. And what are the primary tools that pastors should always use to help you maintain the unity of the Church?

God's Word. Paul describes the positive effect the Word has on believers who continue to study it. Paul wrote: ***“Then we will no longer be children tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it, is equipped, when each part is working properly, make the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:14-16)!***

EVERY CHRISTIAN IS A BODY-BUILDER

To build each other up in love. That's our goal as members of the Church. In fact, you could say that **every Christian is a body builder, that is, every Christian's goal is to build up other Christians, for by doing so we build up the body of Christ—the Church.**

So why is it then that, too often, we nevertheless still act more like cast members on the reality show **“SURVIVOR”** than do we act like members of Jesus' body?

Since only one contestant on that show will get the prize, the participants are at each other's throats from day one. If they forge friendships, it's only because they think the other person can be useful for a time. Eventually, however, even these alliances dissolve and bitterness will ensue as each strives to step on the other to get ahead.

The fact is we are all survivors—survivors of a fallen world desperately making our way to our home in heaven, like survivors of a shipwreck who have managed to pile into the same lifeboat. I imagine that survivors on a lifeboat get sick of each other after a few days. But what are they going to do?

Jump overboard and swim for it? Not if there's no land or ship in sight. Instead they will just have to bear with each other and learn to work together or they'll never reach their goal of getting home.

So, the question that we, as members of the Church, want to keep asking ourselves is “What can I do to ensure that those who have gathered in this lifeboat called Mount Olive Lutheran Church make it to heaven? How can I help my family and my fellow members stay close to Jesus?”

ONE THING WE WILL WANT TO DO IS TO “BEAR” WITH ONE ANOTHER

One thing we'll want to do is “bear” with each other. Unity. It's what the world desperately seeks. But we Christians already have it. Why wait to heaven to enjoy it? By being completely humble and gentle, and patiently bearing with each other in love, we can and will enjoy its benefits right now. And we'll do this with the help of the one Lord who sent his one Son to save us, and now, through his one Spirit, has unified us. **Amen.**