

Photos of the Faith – The Number One

Ephesians 4:1-6

Introduction

As a way to set the focus for today's sermon, let me tell you one of Aesop's famous fables:

In the forest lived four oxen. They were very good friends and always went together to graze in the fields. However, every time they went there, a hungry lion tried to attack them. The lion longed for their meat, but they always withstood his attacks by fighting him as a team. Together they used their horns and massive strength and they defeated the lion every time.

Eventually the lion left to find another forest where he could find something to eat. Sadly though, one day, the four oxen had a quarrel amongst themselves. As a result, they started going to the forest separately.

When the lion heard what had happened, he returned to the forest. Now that this group was divided, he intended to take full advantage of the situation.

Finding the first ox grazing in the fields alone, the lion crept from behind. He killed and ate the ox. The next day, the lion attacked the second ox and killed it too. In this same way the lion killed the third and the fourth ox.

Had the four oxen stayed together, they wouldn't have lost their lives.

Moral: "United we live, divided we will be killed."

That moral, of course, gave rise to the much-more-common wording "United we stand, divided we fall." That ever popular motto has been used by a host of people in a number of different situations over the years:

- Winston Churchill used it often as he attempted to boost English morale in World War II
- Founding Father Patrick Henry quoted it in his last public speech just before collapsing. He would die less than two months later.
- Taylor Swift uses it in song about a broken romance, titled "Death by a Thousand Cuts." (*Does she sing about anything else?*)
- It is the state motto of Kentucky and it appears on the Missouri state flag.
- Abraham Lincoln is often thought to have said it, but he actually quoted a verse from the Bible in his one of his debates with Stephen Douglas. That verse says "a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand."

Given the current and multiple divisions in our country these days, the phrase is making a comeback. Very few people would call our nation – much less our world – "united." In fact, I doubt today will go by without someone making it clear that the two of you are divided in some way.

So, as I read these verses in Ephesians 4, I was intrigued ... and frankly, a little intimidated. How do you preach a sermon about unity in a world that is divided on every issue? But then I remembered that was the whole point of the passage. The writer is putting on parchment the very words of God. And ...

God is calling all of us to demonstrate unity in the middle of greatly divided culture.

So far this series of sermons based in Ephesians has revealed three photos of the faith for us to consider:

- In week #1: "Plumb line" – to the praise of His glory
- In week #2: "Bricks" – God is building a sanctuary of praise
- Last week: "Measuring cup"- God loves us fully

Today our photo is the number one. The grandfather part of me wants desperately to preach the rest of this sermon using my Count Count voice (from Sesame Street), especially as I say that from this text "I will make two observations about the number one." I will restrain. But here is observation #1:

OBSERVATION #1: ONE IS AT THE HEART OF GOD

Look at verses 4-6:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6)

When you hear those verses, you can't help but realize everything about God can be summed up in the number 1. If I don't count the last phrase with the three "alls," I count seven "ones" in the span of 31 words! That works out to about every third word. God is all about the number 1.

- The great declaration of faith that is at the core of the Jewish faith says:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

- Among the final words that Jesus spoke before His crucifixion are these:

I and the Father are one. (John 10:30)

- I will be officiating at a wedding this weekend. The great miracle that happens within that wedding ceremony is reflected in this truth of Scripture:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Mark 10:7-9)

- And when the Scriptures speak of about you and me, the "one-ness" shines through as well:

So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Romans 12:5)

You don't have to read much of the Bible before you recognize that God is pretty serious about the number one. In fact whenever God sees one-ness being lived out among His people, He adds His blessing to the mixture:

How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!
It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore. (Psalm 133:1-3)

What a wonderful ideal! What an awesome goal! And do you know what!!! We all can achieve that goal of unity ... if the rest of the world would just give up their cockeyed notions and start seeing and doing things my way. Because I'm the one who is right! Right?

Do you see what happens in that moment, in that way of thinking? I take the number one away from being descriptive of God and I try to make descriptive of me. YOU become the reason WE are not one.

So if I can't convince you to come over to my way of thinking and doing, and you can't convince me, how do we ever hope to accomplish the one-ness God blesses? Observation #2:

OBSERVATION #2: ONE IS THE CONSEQUENCE OF A WORTHY LIFE

The writer of Ephesians – the Apostle Paul – spends the first three chapters outlining the theological reasons behind our faith. Now here in chapter 4, he begins to lay out the practical implications. The chapter begins with this second observation:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. (Ephesians 4:1)

If you know the life story of the Apostle Paul, you will remember that at one point he thought of himself as #1. He was right and everyone else was wrong – to the extent that he eagerly persecuted Christian people for no other reason than disagreeing with his perspective. At the writing of this passage, he is sitting in a prison cell because he realized they were ones who were right and he was wrong. Ouch!

From that cell, he writes his fellow Christians and says: “Hey guys, if we are ever going to be one, it is not going to happen through force. It can only happen by living:

A life that is worthy of our calling

What does such a life look like? We don't have to guess. Paul describes it for us.

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:2-3)

Humble. Gentle. Patient. Loving. Peaceful. Five characteristics.

Now watch what happens:

Humility:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, ... made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-7)

Gentle:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28-29)

Patient:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you... (2 Peter 3:9)

Loving:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

Peaceful:

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. (2 Thessalonians 3:16)

Did you see it? The life worthy of the calling is a life that displays the character of God.

Let me show you in this diagram. You and I are separate. And as long as we focus on one another, that separation will continue to exist. But as we individually focus on the living a life worthy of our calling, we become more like the God who is one, and the distance between us lessens. And one-ness becomes more of a reality.

APPLICATION

We will never be one to the perfect extent that God is one. Not this side of heaven, anyway. But despite our differences, we can dwell together in unity.

Later in this 4th chapter of Ephesians Paul will talk about how we don't all have to be exactly alike in order to function as one. That text will not be a part of this "Photos of the Faith" series, but if it would have been we would have used the picture of the Body of Christ. We all have different gifts ... but we use those gifts so that the one Body of Christ may be built up. And as we do ...

... we all reach unity in the faith ... (Ephesians 4:13)

Author Sheldon VanAuken once made the statement,

The greatest argument for Christianity is Christians. There is nothing more compelling than those who live the life of Christ.

But guess what he said is the greatest argument against Christianity. Christians who don't live the life of the calling they have received.

Which arrow reflects the direction of your heart?

Amen.