

Because Jesus we are one
Jubilee Mennonite Church
May 7, 2017

Purpose: To declare the unity of the body founded in Christ

Message: As members of the body that is far larger than any of us, we are invited into the work of building the body

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-16 (I will read); John 17:20-26 (Please read)

Synopsis: As passe as it may now sound we are one body. As churchy folk, this is not a big deal to us—it is well worn language that Paul uses as a primary notion of what it means to be church. But consider it in light of the cultural world. We identify ourselves by our uniqueness far more than our essential commonality—the teams for whom we cheer, our music preferences, where we live—on and on it goes. It is no better in the church with church splitting from church, and bodies being ripped apart. Yet, despite this, because we love Jesus we are one. We are part of the larger whole, and for that we give thanks. How can we lean harder on the only meaningful identifier there is—that of being followers of Christ—to build up the body?

Ephesians 4:1-16

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

2 Be completely humble and gentle;
be patient, bearing with one another in love.

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.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

8 This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”

9 (What does “he ascended” mean
except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?

10 He who descended is the very one
who ascended higher than all the heavens,
in order to fill the whole universe.)

11 So Christ himself gave the apostles,
the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,
12 to equip his people for works of service,
so that the body of Christ may be built up
13 until we all reach unity in the faith
and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature,
attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants,
tossed back and forth by the waves,
and blown here and there by every wind of teaching
and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

15 Instead,
speaking the truth in love,

we will grow to become in every respect
the mature body of him who is the head,
that is, Christ.

16 From him the whole body,
joined and held together by every supporting ligament,
grows and builds itself up in love,
as each part does its work.

I know that I will live to regret these words, but I am looking forward to Luke and Anna's why stage. You know the one; where the world opens up to the eyes of the child with every breath bringing another question of why. I look forward to it as a time to introduce my children to the wonders of the world, of explaining things ad nauseum with "because...". I am guessing I will need to hang on to the recording of this sermon for when I am profoundly fed up with it about a year from now, wanting them to simply give me a moment's peace, and go to sleep for the love of all that is holy. It's a little bit too bad that we lose that impulse with maturity. There is something special about that level of curiosity about the world, of seeking to learn about everything before the cynicism of coming to understand the number of questions which cannot easily be explained with a "because" answer stifles our inclination to keep wondering aloud. Nothing quite captures the moment of innocence as questions such as these.

Sometimes we become so accustomed to the complex answers that we forget to ask the questions in the first place. This is especially true in matters of faith. Either we become so accustomed to the whys and wherefores of the movements of faith that our churchly duties become old hat, or we have allowed years of complexity and nuance to cloud the basic reasons for why we do what we do, and are who we are. That's why in this season of celebrating the risen Christ, we are answering some of the implicit questions of faith with the most foundational answer these is: Because Jesus.

It is easy to think of Easter, already fading into our memories 3 weeks back, as a simply happening that we mark and move on. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again is something we chant when we recite the creeds of the church. But what goes unsaid is that it is because Christ is with us that the world has changed, and we change with it. It is because Jesus that the world is different, and it is because Jesus that we are different. At the end of all our arguments and clever logic and all the rest, we are who we are, do what we do, say what we say and believe what we believe because Jesus is alive and moving in our midst. That is the fundamental answer to all the why questions that we could ever encounter. We are Jesus people, following as faithfully as we may the way set out for us in Jesus' example of what it means to be people of the kingdom. We are little Christ's—what Christian really means—emulating all that the master has done with endless resounding repercussions from this most

simple reality of who and what Jesus was. Over the next weeks, we will be sitting with this fundamental, simple, yet extra-ordinarily impactful answer, being guided by the way of Jesus in our midst.

Yet it is often our simplest assertions that get the most complex. None more so declaring that because Jesus we are one is just such a claim. We are one because we love Jesus and accept him as Lord and Savior is the most basic, fundamental notion of being church together. It is our basic team identity, and as such that is important. To be in a group, to categorize ourselves with those who we are like is a basic human desire. Historically, clan, tribe and nation are the primary movers of human history. One group defines itself by whatever marker they chose, and, often, it is the loyalty to that group that defines a person and their lives. More troubling still is that it is often this fundamental identity that motivates conflict in our lives, as in we are us and they are them, and they are bad. If you wish proof of this impulse being all too alive and well in modern society, I suggest you look no further than your nearest sporting spectacle; think the Banjo Bowl with Blue Bombers taking on Roughriders with provincial pride on the line. Sports is just one of the most obvious of illustrations—we could go on. By saying that we are one in Jesus we are declaring ourselves to be on Jesus' team, to be part of that crowd for better or for worse and to belong to him come what may. And that is good and right and proper in all things.

All of which sounds swell and happy. Until we start to consider what exactly that might mean. It is, after all a fairly radical thing to claim this identity above all others. If we say because Jesus we are one we are saying all those who are part of Jesus are part of the we. But the trick of that is that when we stop and consider all those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who call on his name in all things and all times, we might just be placed on a team that makes us somewhat uncomfortable about who we are aligning ourselves to. Because we know how broad a field that can be. Including some people who claim Christ but behave in ways we find hard to deal with, if not downright offensive, who don't function the way that we do, who don't believe entirely as I might. Even within the broad category of Anabaptist Christians, we know that there are gulfs and divides of churches and denominations over practice and belief that divide, sometimes, brother from brother, family from family. We make the statement "Because Jesus we are one" as a theological truth only to apply a good deal of

footnoting to the meaning of we: applying tests of theology, belief, practice, inclination and just plain comfort to define who is part of we and us, and who is not. Indeed, it is this simplest of all statements that has caused us the most challenge throughout the centuries and right down to this very day as we try to balance this radical notion of Jesus binding all together into one body and one reality under one head with the need to understand what it means to be part of a church that holds accountability, ethics, and standards as primary virtues as well. Why? Well, because Jesus did too. Isn't that tricky?

Now, before you get the impression I am trying to make a point bigger than what one sermon can really contain, I need to stop you right there. I am not arguing for one side or another of any particular debate what so ever. I am not going to be nearly so neat and tidy as all of that. Because Jesus binds us together, we are given the work of understanding who US happens to be on a day in day out basis, however we understand the body—a cell group, a congregation, conference, denomination, tradition. As it is written: where two or three are gathered, the spirit is there”, to which I generally add “so too is conflict shortly thereafter.” Paul's advice to the church at Ephesus rings true today—do what you can to maintain unity, acknowledge where we can the fundamental truth of the oneness of Christ, and always disagree in love. It can be difficult to hold both the fundamental assertion of the oneness of Christ on one hand and the reality of church division on the other. We needn't fear this. We needn't avoid this reality—it is the work of following Jesus. It's hard. It's stressful. It brings about all sort of grief, because we so much want to get this balance precisely right.

Almost every day through the web, email, and social media we receive appeals for help from all over the world. Every appeal goes about the same way—we are believers in the one Lord Jesus Christ, and appeal to you as brothers and sisters to help us in the way you know best. And even though most of these appeals are the mythical Nigerian princes and princesses (or where ever the e-scams are coming from these days) there is always a deep cord with strikes within me. Because despite my substantial disinclination to do anything but delete their email by the fastest possible means, I know that my assessment about whether they are part of the body of Christ or not is not the one that, in time, matters.

Here is the good news in this. Try as I might to figure all of this messy business out to the best of my ability of how to make this consequence of Jesus work, I must always hold this out in front of me: the body is not mine, ultimately. It is Jesus' body. It is Jesus' church. And as such the "we", however it might be defined for us particularly, has a larger meaning than what we might know: the one that Christ himself holds. Jesus died to save everyone, and I don't get to ultimately set the rules of the body, only seek to be faithful to them as I understand them best in the here and now. Even as we go about the difficult yet necessary work of defining this "we" that is us, we must remember, always, that Jesus is the one who finally, and fully builds the body and calls it to be one, holding with humility the boundaries that we set and maintain. Even though I am not big into faith healers, not being particularly gifted in that art of the Spirit, I hold no wish to say that they are not part of Jesus, not part of the body. I think that even as we draw the boundaries for our particular body, we must always remain challenged to think of the essential character of the body of Christ: those for whom Jesus died to save, which is all of humanity. Somehow, when we claim this essential truth, we are always asked to expand ourselves into the Jesus we—the bigger we than what we can imagine now, being challenged to follow after.

Because Jesus we are one. It is just that simple. It is just that hard. It is just that wonderful that it is God's working in Christ who Saves us, always, a truth that can cross every line, group, division and wall we could ever erect. Thanks be to God; for it is God's work, not our imperfect attempts, and it is marvelous in our sight.