

8-1-2021

10th Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor Priewe

Text: Ephesians 4:1-7,11-16

Theme: One Way to One

There's a song that has become almost like a world anthem- John Lennon's *Imagine*. Remember how it goes? "Imagine all the people, living life in peace." It was heard again at the 2021 Olympic Ceremony in Tokyo, the 5th time in the last 25 years that this particular song has been sung on the global stage of the Olympics before the eyes of millions of people watching. The song has a few suggestions for how the world can finally live together as one, and many in our world, based on its continued use year after year, seem to have embraced it as truth that will actually bring us together as one. Here's some of the lyrics. "*Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us, only sky. Imagine all the people, livin' for today.*" That sounds like what people already do!

V2. "*Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion, too. Imagine all the people, Livin' life in peace.*" It's kind of ironic to sing this song at the Olympics where all the countries of the world line up to compete against each other. But the sweet voices of the Olympic children's choirs singing the soothing melody lulls you into a soft sway as you try to imagine this idyllic utopia. Then comes the call to action, "*You may say I'm a dreamer, But I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will be as one.*"

Ultimately, it's not a bad goal; it's even a biblical goal. Who doesn't want all the world's problems—like wars and divisive politics and corruption, or what to do when a pandemic strikes, or the racism and hatred that fills our streets, the mass-shootings and the masses shouting, the posting and the tweeting which inflames it all—who wouldn't want all that stuff to simply go away so that the whole world could live life in peace as one?

The end Lennon has in mind is good, even something God himself is expressly interested in bringing about. Ephesians 1:10 tells us that God "**made known to us the mystery of his will...to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth**". But what about the means John Lennon suggests to get there? Have people only live for today? Get rid of heaven and hell and imagine there's no religion?

Sadly, people have been taking him up on that suggestion more and more since the 1970s when the song was written. Atheism is on the rise and the religious "Nones," people with no religious affiliation whatsoever, make up the fastest growing segment of America's religious landscape. If all those stats are going up, and Lennon was right, the world should be getting better, not crashing down to a new bottom, as it seems to have been doing lately. Lennon's way to live as ONE is totally devoid of God, and that's precisely the problem. God's purpose is "**to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth UNDER CHRIST.**" (Eph. 1:10).

The reason it has to be under Christ is because Christ is the One he sent to do this job of making peace and unity. As Paul says, "**He himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.**" (Eph 2:14-16)

What does this mean? There's *only one way to one* and it has to be *in Christ*. By his death, he has united everyone who believes in him into one body—the Church—the invisible building of everyone who trusts in Christ as Savior. Connected to Christ, you're part of one body with every other believer in the body. And there's one lifeblood running through him, the Head and you, the arms, legs, eyes and ears. Just like Paul says, "**There's 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.**" (Eph 4:4-6).

The image of Christ as the head of his body, the church, is a simple and common metaphor throughout the Bible. The head directs the function of the rest of the body. Another illustration occurred to me this week as this pack of water balloons sat on my desk from our rained-out Family Fest. Have you seen this amazing invention? It's a hose nozzle attached to a hundred different little straws with water balloons on the end that allows you to fill a hundred balloons at once, all in one minute. I watched with giddy joy the first time I saw this invention at work as the whole bunch filled up as one big mass of balloons, each touching each other, each connected to the source. Connected to Christ by one baptism, one Spirit flows into each of us, filling us with one and the same faith as we interact with each other in one body. What a joyful arrangement as everyone benefits together as ONE!

But now imagine there was one balloon in the bunch that was replaced with a nice prickly cactus, with sharp needles on every side. Imagine every balloon that brushed up against it instantly popping, one after another, until the whole unified mass was destroyed. That's the kind of "out of character" lifestyle that Paul warns us against when he encourages us **"to live a life worthy of the calling you have received."** (Eph 4:1).

So what are the needles you need to get rid of? 1) The pride that declares your opinion to be supremely superior to your neighbor, no matter the topic. (Poke) 2) The arrogance that blocks up your ears so that you only want to speak, but not listen. (Stick) 3) A sharp reactive tongue that stirs up anger, that gushes folly, that crushes the spirit, as the Proverb says. (Pop) 4) A hyperactive Facebook page that only fuels the fire. If you're not convinced or convicted of any of these yet, think about the visceral gut reactions you have had when these trigger words come up in conversation--masks, vaccines, election, mandates, President Biden, Former President Trump. What to do about school for next year? What to do about the variant? Did you feel your pulse quicken, a stirring in your stomach starting to boil up inside you already? Is it hard to suppress what you want to say about each issue?

Having an opinion isn't the issue, until we let it dominate over our neighbor. That surge for power is simply proof of the fact that we are guilty of the same original sin that divided humanity from our God long ago and condemned us all. Adam and Eve first sinned when they in effect said to God, "We shall eat from the tree because we know better than You, God." And if humanity collectively knows better than God, then of course, we also know better than our neighbors as well, and they had better learn it fast.

This is the pride and arrogance that Christ calls us to die to or else we will die of them forever. In dying to these things, Christ calls us to true life in the body! Even when we were dead in these very sins, he has made us alive and has torn down the walls that separate us both from God and each other. He has made us holy once again and so he simply wants us to live a holy life, not poking and gouging each other, but to live as the one body he died for us to be.

So Paul says, **"be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."** (Eph. 4:2). Humility is the mindset that allows you to swallow your spite and treat people gently when they do something you don't like. Patience is the choice that allows you to bear with someone gracefully even when they think differently than you. It's a one-way street we travel down to reach unity and it begins from our identity in the body of Christ. Since Christ has given his very life to accomplish this unity within his body, he calls us to **"make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."** (Eph 4:4).

So how do we do this? How do we manage to keep this unity when there are so many things that could divide us? John Lennon's suggestions were pretty vague. He said we could just imagine life with no religion, or countries, or possessions, and the strife and greed and pain

would magically melt away and everyone would share the world and live in peace. That kind of utopia has proven to be nothing but imaginary, a figment of his imagination, with no plan or power to accomplish it.

But the unity of the body of Christ is not a figment of God's imagination. He has a plan and has given us power to continually work towards unity on this side of heaven until we reach true unity in heaven. What so often holds us up on our journey to unity is that we lack maturity. Remember your younger years out in the backyard arguing with your siblings about who hit who first? Remember turning the recess touch football game into a tackle football game when the teachers had to come intervene? That lack of maturity just went to show how much we needed someone to train us and help us grow.

That's exactly what God gives to his body, the Church. **“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 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.” (Ephesians 4:11-13)**

Arriving at unity requires us to be built up in the maturity of our faith and knowledge so that we handle the Word of God correctly and deal gently with our brothers and sisters in the faith. No spiritual fisticuffs on the playground! We want more than a Sunday School knowledge that's just enough to get us into trouble. The last thing we'd even want to do is distort the Word of Truth to support our agenda. So Christ has given us spiritual leaders to help us grow to spiritual maturity which in turn will help us reach real unity with one another, based not on imagination but on truth. This weekend we have the chance to celebrate a few of these gifts of God as we install 3 teachers and a staff minister to serve God's people and equip them for works of service. We thank God for them because of their crucial service to the body of Christ. Without it, we'd be in dire straits.

As the Apostle Paul goes on, **“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.” (14)** This is such a striking image. Just picture little baby Soren and Josie out in a kayak in the middle of the stormy ocean getting blown here and there and everywhere. That is what God is protecting us from by giving leaders to build our spiritual muscles and equip us to steer clear of the danger.

“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. (Eph 4:15) Speaking the truth in love--that's our **One Way to One**, our one way to reaching unity and maturity in the body of Christ. Just as God has spoken to us the harrowing truth about our sin and the unyielding truth of his love for us in Christ, we also owe that same truth and that same love to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to our whole world. Never truth without love, and never love without truth, but always both together. And we won't be naïve dreamers, as if suddenly the whole world will, all at once, live as one. But each one of us speaking the truth in love to everyone around us, one by one, will help them find the One Way to One--through Christ alone. Amen.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Eph. 1:3)