

E Pluribus Unum. It appears on most of our American coins. It appears on the Great Seal of the United States. E Pluribus Unum. Out of many, one.

St. Paul had no clue about the future existence of a country called the United States of America. But he did speak in Ephesians about the dynamic of the many and the one. One of Paul's central themes in Ephesians is the relationship between unity and diversity.

This is the 4th of 7 weeks of readings from the Epistle to the Ephesians.

Our Epistle lesson today is from Ephesians 4, and it does talk about unity. But Paul first raises the issue earlier in Ephesians ch2, which we read from 2 weeks ago.

In ch2 Paul talks about how Jesus Christ through his blood shed on the cross has brought together people who used to be estranged. He creates his church, one group made up of different kinds of people. One new humanity, as Ephesians puts it, united as God's children:

As Paul says, "You are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone."¹

And today, in ch4, Paul extends this image of the central unity of the church. He uses words that we repeat at our services of Holy Baptism. He lists 7 reasons the church at its core is one, is unified. These 7 items are sometimes called the 7 Elements of Unity:

"There is one Body and
one Spirit;
There is one hope in God's call to us;
One Lord,
one Faith,
one Baptism;
One God and Father of all."²

So, at heart, by God's design, the church is one. It's important to remember this fact. We have so many divisions caused by our human nature and human sin. And yet, the body of Christ is one body, formed by the blood of his cross. And we worship one God in one faith.

Baptist, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Episcopalian. We are all part of the one church.

We forget this basic fact too easily. We often emphasize our differences rather than remembering our unity. We live in a hyper-polarized age, and we all too easily forget that the body of Christ is one body.

In fact, in the preceding verses, Paul warns us not to take our unity for granted:

¹ Eph 2:19-20

² BCP 299, Eph 4:4-5

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."³

Listen to those characteristics. Listen to the list of attributes we should strive to have: Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Bearing with one another in love. Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

In a hyper polarized world, those are attributes to strive for, and emulate, and live out in our own lives. And those are attributes not just for the global universal Christian church, but right here at St. Paul's.

Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Bearing with one another in love. Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

And so Paul is certainly all about the many becoming one. E Pluribus Unum. And he says that we need to strive to live as one.

And yet, there's something more.

Paul speaks strongly about our unity and advocates strongly for working to maintain that unity.

But he also speaks of the importance of our differences. Right after listing the 7 Elements of Unity, Paul says, "But..."

We should be one. But...

"But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift."⁴

What grace? What gifts? Well, he lists several.

"The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

I don't think this list is meant to be exhaustive. Elsewhere in other Epistles Paul lists some additional gifts.

But all these gifts come from God. And they are meant to be used to build up the body of Christ. Diverse people. Diverse gifts. Building up the one body. Coming to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.

³ Eph 4:1-3

⁴ Eph 4:7

Paul does list some specific gifts in Ephesians: apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher.

Elsewhere, there are additional gifts listed: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracle working, prophecy, the ability to distinguish between spirits, various kinds of tongues, and their interpretation.⁵

A third list includes prophecy, service, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, and mercy.⁶

A wide variety of gifts. And the list is not exhaustive. There are many other gifts that God gives his people to do his work.

We don't always think of ourselves as gifted. Shucks. Not little old me.

But all Christians have been given gifts that can be used to do God's work in the world.

God has designed the world so that each of us is unique. Even genetically identical twins growing up in the same household still have differences.

God could have designed the world differently. We could have been a bunch of identical clones of each other. Or maybe we could have been made like honeybees or ants, with just a few different tasks we were designed for.

But that's not the way it is with human beings. There is an almost infinite variety of people with an almost infinite variety of gifts.

Some stem from our experiences. Some here grew up in Texas, some didn't. Some grew up in poverty, some in affluence. Some are married, some not. Some were from large families, some were only children.

Some have learned things from their educations, some from their addictions.

Some have a heart for serving the poor. Some have a heart for scripture. Some are effective out front. Some work better behind the scenes.

A wide, wide variety of gifts.

But Paul reminds us, these gifts were given to us by God with one ultimate purpose: to build up the body of Christ, to do our own unique bit, to play our own little part in Jesus' work in the world.

And to do that, we need to be ourselves.

⁵ 1Cor 12:8-10

⁶ Rom:12:6-8

There's an old Jewish story. A man named Simon always desired to be more like Moses. And he kept going to the Rabbi and saying, "Rabbi I must lead my life so that I live more like Moses did." The Rabbi eventually told him, "Simon God will not ask you why you were not more like Moses? God will ask you why you were not more like Simon?"

Everyone has unique gifts. Everyone has a role they can play in the church's mission.

Paul is challenging us to serve as Christ's body in the world. We are one body.

Paul tells us to live in humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, in order to maintain the unity of the body.

But we are also called to use our unique gifts within the body, so that we can help each other grow in faith and in fellowship.

Out of many, he has built one church.
One Body, one faith, one God and Father of all.