

Sermon File # 1308

Scripture Text: Ephesians 4:1-6

Sermon Title: *Our Life Together*

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

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Our Life Together

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Ephesians 4:1-6 as we continue our sermon series from Paul's letter to perhaps all the churches in Asia Minor surrounding the city of Ephesus. This indeed is a grand treatise on the church as God's New Society (Stott), built upon the foundation of his love and grace toward us in Christ Jesus.

We've noted that the first three chapters of Ephesians is the doctrinal section, wherein Paul tells us what God has done for us in Christ Jesus, giving us new life in him and making possible the bringing of Jews and Gentiles into his new community of faith, the body of Christ. The final two verses of chapter three, as we saw last Sunday, are a benediction to punctuate this great doctrinal section. Now, beginning with our text for today, Paul begins the ethical, practical section, which tells us what we must do in grateful response to the grace of God explicated in the first chapters (Mohrlang, 2003).

Ephesians is often thought to be an exception to the usual purpose and pattern of Paul's other letters, which address specific problems in the churches (See Guthrie's comments, 1105). But I think our text for today is an indication that Ephesians also was written with a problem in mind that needed to be addressed. Paul's urgent appeal for the unity of the church was

probably an indication that there was a problem of disunity, or at least the looming threat of disunity, facing the church (Wood, 55). Whatever the problems or threat may have been, Paul gives us vitally important truth about the nature of the church and its God-given unity.

Follow as I read **Ephesians 4:1-6**.

The title for this sermon, “Our Life Together” is taken from a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer entitled “Life Together,” which is the English translation of his “Gemeinsames Leben,” which is a description of an experiment in Christian community which he conducted in a small seminary he established in the tiny community of Finkenwalde on the Polish side of the border with Germany in 1935. This small “church plant” as we would call it today was a training ground for the pastor’s Bonhoeffer was training and preparing for ministry in the seminary, which was eventually shut down by Hitler’s police in 1937 (Devine, 83f). “Life Together” is a clear biblical description of the kind of fellowship and unity that God intends for his church, and indeed which is the very essence of his church (Bonhoeffer, 17ff).

IBC Brussels is an amazing fellowship of believers from a wide range of cultures, united in a secondary way by our knowledge and use of the English language, but primarily united in a far more significant way by our common life in Christ Jesus imparted to us by God the Father through the Holy Spirit. I invite you today to consider how we too are God’s “experiment,” his gathering of believers, called to experience a common life in Christ, what we call our life together as the body of Christ. How we understand this life together and what we do to preserve and protect it is crucial to our being the church of Christ Jesus in this place.

Paul realized the urgency of the church’s living together in the unity Christ provides. Our NIV is a bit weak in the first verse, making Paul sound like a beggar, at most a weak suppliant, making a humble entreaty. The Greek is better translated, “I exhort you,” an expression of Paul’s exercise of his authority as an apostle and servant leader and teacher of the churches (Hoehner, 503). With his use of pastoral and apostolic authority, Paul exhorts the church to live together in the unity that God provides, enables and expects.

Let’s note that our life together in this place first of all

Is based upon...

Our common calling (verse 1)

Paul begins by referring to his being “a prisoner for the Lord,” which was a part of his calling. He was in prison, perhaps in Rome, because he was faithful to fulfill his calling to proclaim the message of Jesus. He had received a dramatic calling on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1ff) and had sought to remain faithful in fulfilling and carrying out what God had called him to do, as he related to King Agrippa (Acts 26:19).

And he reminds the entire church of...

The calling

We all have been called to be followers of Jesus, and not just to receive a ticket to heaven which will be validated when we die. Paul has already written in the beginning of this letter that God has chosen his followers before the creation of the world (1:4). God the Father chose and then called us by grace and the Holy Spirit into a personal relationship with him through faith in Christ Jesus. We didn't choose God; he chose us. And by the Holy Spirit he pursued us and we turned from sin, received his forgiveness and were given the gift of eternal life.

Now we are called to follow him and, as his redeemed, ransomed and adopted children, are called to become like Jesus and to live for Jesus in the kingdom of heaven, beginning with our life here on earth.

We need to remind ourselves of the Apostle John's expression of this high calling:

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1).

Paul reminds us who are in this life together of the importance of...

Being worthy of the calling

To be God's children is all of grace, as we're told quite clearly in this epistle (2:8ff). We can never earn our position as God's children or deserve to be called the children of God and to follow Jesus. It's all of God's mercy and grace. But Paul says we must seek to live and relate to God and to others in a way that shows we want to be worthy and live a life that reflects our gratitude for God's mercy and grace. Now that we identify ourselves with Christ and belong to his family on earth, we want our lives to honor him and to not do anything that would bring dishonor to his name.

We know we are not perfect, and God loves us unconditionally and accepts us with all of our imperfections. Yet his saving grace has given us a new nature and we're to seek to live according to that new nature. He has given us his Holy Spirit, who produces in us the fruit of the Spirit, those virtues of Christ himself (Galatians 5:22f).

To be worthy of that calling means to not dishonor his name but also to be willing to accept the specific calling to the particular life and circumstances he has for us. Paul regarded being a prisoner for the Lord (1) not as a disgrace or even a hardship, but rather as an honor and a privilege, much as did the apostles in the Jerusalem church (Acts 5:41). I know this is a challenge for me, yet we need to be able to join with Paul in accepting our particular calling in life as an honor and privilege. God trusts us with our circumstances that we

will be faithful to honor and trust that he will enable us to remain faithful witnesses for him. Instead of our complaining about or even questioning the fairness of our circumstances, we need the grace to enable us to realize that God has honored and trusted us with our circumstances and wants us to live in a way that shows our gratitude and our desire to honor him with our submission and obedience.

Paul's reference to his being the Lord's prisoner is a way of his saying that his calling to be a child of God and a servant of the Lord Jesus makes his imprisonment worthwhile. We too need to realize that nothing we might be called upon to suffer in this life is worth comparing to the glory of our calling and our glorious destination (Romans 8:18). Paul's reference to his imprisonment is a gentle reminder that we too are called, not to "easy believism" but to radical discipleship, a life of following Jesus, whatever the cost (Piper, "One Lord..." page 1).

We realize that every one of us in the church, the body of Christ, has received the same calling to belong to Jesus and to follow Jesus. Our circumstances may be different, and your calling may have been more dramatic than mine (No doubt it was!), but it was no more or less profound than mine. God has called and accepted us by grace through faith in Jesus. How can we not, then, accept one another warmly?

And our life together is based upon...

Our common character (verse 2)

Paul says that in our life together we are bound to one another, not just with our common calling, but also with our common character. We have great diversity and variety in our personalities and that's good. This would be a dull place if we were all alike in our personalities. But we are by grace being given a common character, namely the character and virtues of Jesus himself. And Paul lists some of these that are critically important in our life together. We are to be completely...

Humble and gentle

What gives us unity in the body of Christ is the very person and character of Christ in us, and this unity thus surpasses anything the world can produce. And heading the list of virtues is that of humility, which was certainly not regarded as a virtue in the Greco-Roman world (Foulkes, 108).

Meekness, another word for humility, is not weakness. Consider the strength of Moses' character, and Scripture says he was the meekest man (Numbers 12:3). Meekness was a word used to describe the domesticating of an animal, whose strength had been harnessed for useful purposes (Stott, 149). Humility is strength under control—God's control. The humble realize who we are in relationship with God himself. Humility brings an attitude of grateful dependence upon God and a sense of our total unworthiness of his goodness

to us. Humility is the spirit of Jesus, who humbled himself for us and set for us the supreme example of how we are to serve one another (Philippians 2:1-11).

With humility comes the virtue of gentleness, another of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f). God's gentle people are able, indeed are singularly qualified to lift up the fallen without a spirit of self-righteousness or judgmentalism (Galatians 6:1ff). The humble and the gentle are great unifiers in God's church because they are always impressed with Jesus and never impressed with themselves and don't want others to have to be impressed with their self-importance.

As the ancient Church Father John Chrysostom said, humility makes us aware of our limits and doesn't allow us to be "excessively impressed with either our chains (e.g. Paul's sufferings) or our privileges" (158). In other words, humility reminds us that we are nothing and Jesus is everything, and that enables us to be gentle toward the fallen and our weaker brothers and sisters.

And in our common character we are to be...

Patient and forbearing in love

Our life together would be an even greater joy if we were truly patient with one another and bearing with one another in unconditional love.

We hear the word "tolerance" a lot these days, and the politically correct concept is that we regard everything and every religious viewpoint as having equal value, which means we can't truly value anything! But the meaningful understanding of tolerance is that we respect others, even though we have decidedly strong convictions about our own faith in Christ. And we should also practice tolerance and patience with fellow believers, and as Paul says, be particularly thoughtful and considerate toward the "weaker" brother or sister (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8).

I know I absolutely depend on your patience and forbearance toward me. All relationships depend on this, especially the marriage relationship. How long would any marriage last if there were not patience and forbearance between husband and wife?

Again, Jesus teaches us the "how much more" argument, when he gives us the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35). When we realize how God through Christ has loved us unconditionally, how can we not be forgiving, patient and longsuffering toward others? How glad and grateful we should be that God didn't wait till we became "deserving" of his grace! And so, we don't love reciprocally but unconditionally, not expecting to have our acts of love repaid in kind (Hoehner, 510). We need to remember how patient God has been and continues to be with us and that each one of us in a "work in progress."

And our life together is based on...

Our common commitment (verse 3)

Our life together in the church is both a gift and a responsibility, and we share a commitment...

To what we are given

In the first part of this letter, Paul explained the great mystery, even the miracle of the church as the result of God's making two peoples, the Jews and the Gentiles, into one new person (2:11-22; 3:1-6). God has erased the distinction between us, the barrier of religious observances and practices and prejudices against one another. We are made one new person, sharing our common life in Christ. And we are all indwelt by the same God through the Holy Spirit, Christ in us (Colossians 1:27).

Creating one new person out of many, bringing us all into one spiritual family, was the reason for Christ's death on the cross. We in Western Christianity need to "get over" our stringent individualism and instead cross over into individuation and the sense of community that we see in Scripture (Rah, 27ff). The Christian life cannot be lived in isolation and must be nurtured and expressed in the life of the body of Christ, imperfect as we are and imperfect as is any local body of believers. Christ chooses to dwell in his body, the church, and if we would fellowship with him, we must fellowship with his body.

We all can marvel at the teamwork of the ice hockey teams that competed in this year's Winter Olympics. Or what about the near-perfect coordination of the pairs of figure skaters? Yet these are based on human coordination and fall short of the true unity we are given in the body of Christ. We are not to be uniform in our movements, like those synchronized skaters. But we are to be unified in our hearts with the same indwelling Holy Spirit and a common commitment to and love for the same Lord Jesus, which is to surpass any player's commitment to his coach or teammates.

This unity is what we are given and we are...

To make every effort

Paul says we are given this unity of the Spirit but we are responsible to make every effort to keep this unity in the bond of peace. Just like a sports team can be filled with individuals who are "doing their own thing" and aren't interested in playing together as a team, so the church can have individuals who are careless and indifferent about the fellowship and the purpose of the church to be a loving, united fellowship of believers, who encourage one another to faithfully worship and follow Jesus.

I have a special love and appreciation for those who seek to be peacemakers in God's church, who are committed to seeking reconciliation between those

who have become divided from one another. Jesus certainly cares about reconciliation and has given us specific instructions and steps to take for restoring the alienated (Matthew 18:15-20).

Even though we couldn't use his method, we could certainly capture the spirit of Timothy Newport, whom I told you about some years ago. Timothy was a Down syndrome child of a layman and gifted soloist from Springfield, Missouri, USA, Russell Newport. Whenever Timothy, at the time a young teenager, would hear about members of the First Baptist Church who were at odds with one another, Timothy would spring into action. He would find one of the two persons at odds with someone and then Timothy would take this person by the hand and say, "Come with me!" He would then lead this person to the person in conflict or at odds with the first person, and then put these two persons' hands together and say, "Now, you forgive and love each other!" The pastor at the time told me that God used Timothy as much as anyone or anything in keeping unity and peace in that church.

We can't use his method but we can capture and emulate the spirit and the commitment of Timothy Newport in making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit. And this is to be accomplished "through the bond of peace." The peace of Christ, which is to rule in our hearts (Colossians 3:15), has a bonding effect on us. Military forces try to effect peace through power and force and by threat and coercion. But we bring about peace through the spirit of gentle submission to one another.

Perhaps Paul was alluding to his chains that were binding him and saying in effect that the peace that they have received through the Holy Spirit should have a bonding effect upon them, drawing them closer together and keeping them together like a chain of love and peace (Lincoln, 237). That chain of peace also should hold them together in the same fellowship of love.

Bonhoeffer's classic, which gives us the title to this sermon, spoke to me about the need we have to be committed to the fellowship that God has given us. No fellowship is perfect and we must not forsake a particular church because we have had difficulties with people or have become unhappy with individuals. The meaning of our life together is that we are committed to one another and realize all of us have imperfections and need for growth in grace and in Christ-likeness. Bonhoeffer says that the community of God is not an ideal but a divine reality, made up of imperfect people but placed together by the action of God. We need to see that God has given us one another as part of his work in our lives and we must learn to truly love and minister to one another, to the people God has already and certainly given us (26-39).

And in his book on Bonhoeffer, Mark Devine says that we need to "stop running" from difficulties in the church and remember that God has placed us in the church to "warn and recover" others (102). As your pastor/elder, I affirm the joy that I have in serving you and in serving with you. God has given us an amazingly sweet fellowship of people from such great diversity of cultures and even denominational backgrounds. Let's always remember that our unity is from the Spirit and that we are called to cherish and protect it.

And finally, our life together is based on...

Our common creed (verses 4-6)

Verses 4 through 6 read like a creed or possibly a hymn sung in the church, and if so, they were likely written by Paul (Hoehner, 514). Some scholars like to identify what they think are hymns or creeds that appear in the New Testament and then assume that they were borrowed and inserted by the epistolary writers or editors (For an example, see Moody, 118).

If these verses are a creedal formulation, they certainly are worthy of our reciting in worship. Note how they're arranged as...

The seven "ones"

- Paul speaks of our being united by these seven "ones," beginning with one body. We are part of the fellowship of Christ, his mystical body on earth (Salmond, 21f)
- We are indwelt by the same one Holy Spirit. When we live in step with the Spirit, we must be going in the same direction and united together in the same work and witness (Galatians 5:16-26).
- We all have the same hope when we were called. We all have the same faith and hope perspective, encouraging each other in our pilgrimage toward the Holy City (Hebrews 11:1-10). Hope gives us the same spiritual perspective and kingdom outlook.
- We all have one Lord, the risen Lord Jesus whom we are all committed to follow and obey, to love and to serve. We are seeking to put on the same Christ Jesus, with his supreme characteristic of love (Romans 13:14).
- We are united by one faith. And here faith is not the intellectual adherence to a statement of faith or doctrinal formulation, but is the experience of faith in Jesus Christ that has brought about our common life in him and our common commitment to follow him as risen Lord (Hoehner, 517).

Let me comment here on a recent conversation with a friend in the US who reported on numerous church problems and rifts in congregations that resulted in forced termination of pastors and often in the split-up of churches into two separate congregations. Usually the divisions are due to worldly thinking and expectations, with no regard for the need for reconciliation, forgiveness, understanding and restoration. We both concluded that many evangelical churches in the US are comprised of many unconverted members who have seized leadership and cannot even understand passages like our text of Scripture. These people were "evangelized" and admitted into the

churches by giving assent to a doctrinal position or to a plan of salvation that promised them a home in heaven but did nothing to bring about true repentance and transformation of heart and life.

- We share a common baptismal confession that expressed our commitment to Jesus as Lord and symbolized our new life, our resurrection life in him (Romans 6:1-7). Probably the early church made this common confession at baptism—"Jesus is Lord" (Lincoln, 240).
- And we are adopted children of the one God and Father of all who have been redeemed and are being remade by his grace through Christ. We are now part of the same family of God, who holds us together in his love and will never let us out of his hands (John 10:27-30).

This common creed that we can believe and cling to reaches its climax, reminding us that we have this life together...

With God the Father, over, through and in us

Paul seems to be wrapping up this 7-fold affirmation of our faith creed, reminding us that our great God is first of all over us. He is the sovereign Lord who is over all, including all of our circumstances. He's far greater than anything that would threaten us individually or as a church family, and he's certainly greater than any potential problems that would threaten to divide us or disrupt our fellowship.

He is also through us. He is at work through his church, and he is able to accomplish his work and will through us, which is what we noted the Paul's benediction in 3:20f. God is able to do great things through us and through this church body, which is what he promised the Holy Spirit would do through us (John 14:12).

And Paul reminds us that God is at work in us, in every one of us. No matter how someone may appear to be immature or weak in the faith, if he or she is a child of God through faith in Christ, God is in that precious brother or sister in Christ. This awareness of God's presence in the poorest of the poor is what made Mother Teresa's work such a blessed sacrament for her. If we look through the eyes of faith, we will see Christ in the eyes of those we love and seek to serve (Matthew 25:37-40).

In my denomination in the US, the writing and revising of a "statement of faith" has been a point of acrimonious debate, strident contention and destructive division. And a lot of the division has been over, not primary essentials of faith, but over secondary, non-essential matters. So I don't suggest we unite on a man-made statement of faith, but that we stay united on this God-given, divinely inspired creed of truth. This creed reminds us that God himself holds us together in his love for us. This is a creed worth remembering and following, and to not seek to live by it is not to disobey others but God himself.

Conclusion:

Our life together is a precious gift we must never take for granted. And once it's given to us, let's hold onto it. Sure, you are free to go "church shopping" if something here at IBC doesn't suit you. But in all likelihood you'll be, in the words of Bonhoeffer, running away from what God has given you and call you into and placed you into. If there are problems with relationships, he wants to be the solution and wants to work them out between you and the other party. He is the divine "Timothy Newport" who wants to join your hand to the other person so you can experience the joy and the miracle of true reconciliation.

We're called into this body of believers and are called to protect and even to strengthen and enrich the fellowship by our presence, love and fellowship. And God forbid that any of us do anything to damage this sweet fellowship and the unity God has given us. To willfully damage the unity of God's church is to invite his judgment upon us (1 Corinthians 3:1-23). Rather than to damage or to divide the fellowship, we are to enrich it by our love, prayers, encouragement and service to and with one another.

Your pastor and elders are responsible for and committed to the protection of the unity and fellowship of this church. If there's a problem in a relationship, and you've sought forgiveness or to offer forgiveness and reconciliation as Jesus outlines in Matthew 18:15-20 and your efforts have not succeeded, we are called to help you. We urge you to ask for our involvement in ongoing efforts to seek peace and restoration. We cannot allow disunity and discord to fester and to infect your relationship with anyone and thus to eventually affect the entire church. Our purpose is not to be harshly judgmental and vindictive but rather redemptive. We want to honor Christ and we deeply desire this marvelous "IBC experiment" to continue to be a testimony to the unifying and loving presence of Christ.

Let's all examine our hearts to see if we have found our place in the community of faith, in our life together as Christ intends it. For those who are not connected, I urge you to enter the fellowship and stay with us as God's "gift" to you (believe it or not!). For those who are momentarily disconnected, I urge you to seek restoration in fellowship with love, forgiveness and the desire to be forgiven and restored to a brother or sister.

My all of us give thanks for our life together and celebrate even now our unity and peace with and love for one another in our God-given life together.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What do you think might have been some problems threatening the church that Paul is addressing in our text?

2. What are some causes of division in churches you have known? Have you seen a similar pattern in these instances?
3. What do you think is the “worthy” life Paul exhorts us to live (verse 1)?
4. Using your own words, describe the character traits Paul says are important to unity (verse 2).
5. How is the unity of the church different than the unity on a sports team?
6. What are some of the things we can do to “make every effort” to keep unity in the church?
7. Spend some time reflecting on your relationships with fellow believers. Are there any with whom you need to seek reconciliation (as in Matthew 18:15-20)? If so, decide to take initiative, perhaps with an e-mail or phone call. If your efforts are unsuccessful, please contact a pastor, elder or other spiritual director to give you assistance in this important endeavor of reconciliation.

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