

Sunday, February 13, 2022
The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Pastor Matt Duerr

“Humility and Church Unity”

Greetings to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. So, if you listen to the news, you hear a lot about equity, social justice, and diversity. You might be asking yourself as we move through Epiphany and focus on humility; you might be asking Pastor Matt, how does humility fit into the call for equity, social justice, and diversity? And I think the first thing we have to do is ask the question, ‘Why is there a call for equity, social justice, and diversity? Of course, the number one answer that comes out is racism. And yes, racism was certainly a part of our history; and it continues to be a part of the life in the United States. But I would contend that it is much more than racism. If we really get down to asking the question why; I think it boils down to well the fact that in our society, and in the world, there has always been the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots.’ And neither the ‘haves,’ nor the ‘have nots,’ have always behaved properly. But there also is a definite jealousy, a splitting between the two.

It's always been a part of my life. You could see it when I was growing up in Southern California, in the town of Downey. We lived in South Downey right on the border of Bellflower. North Downey, well that's where we went shopping at the Stonewood Shopping Center and that's where we would go, for instance, at Christmas to look at Christmas lights and Christmas displays on houses. Because well in North Downey, they were over the top. They were wonderful.

You see in Downey there was this company called North American Rockwell and they built the Apollo Space Capsule. And it was the Center for the production of the Apollo missions. And so, Downey had many engineers and designers and electricians and rocket scientists living there. And they all lived in North Downey. It was a well to do, prospering area. South Downey that was old Downey, that's where the building place was for building the Apollo; with the warehouse for their parts and stuff like that. It was that was on the border of Bellflower which was not seen as anything like Downey.

And then dad got the call to Bishop, a little town in the Eastern Sierra, or my hometown. The home of KRVS radio. And you know what we found Bishop is just a small little town. It's fairly old. It dates back to about the time of the gold rush, and it was very frugally built. You used what you could use, because you were in the high desert, you were in the Eastern Sierra.

So, for instance, the house that we moved into was the Parsonage at the church and it was built with lumber that the church had gotten by purchasing two of the barracks at the Manzanar Japanese Internment Camp. I think they paid a total of \$45 for the two entire buildings which they took apart, brought the wood up, and they built the parsonage, and they used the wood also for the church. It was always fun as a kid to go up in the attic of that parsonage because there was Japanese writing on all of the rafters up there. That's the way Bishop was built. It's older, it's very frugal. There are not any really big houses there at all.

Now if you drive 3 miles out of town, you come to an area called West Bishop. The houses are clearly much nicer, much bigger. It's not in Bishop. It's unincorporated land out in the county. That's where your more affluent people live. Now I mentioned that it's a little bit of a drive out there. When you drive out there, you have to drive across the Indian Reservation. There's both Peyote and Shoshoni Indians there. When you drive across the Indian Reservation, you find that well, that's more frugal than Bishop and it's a whole different lifestyle there.

But if you were to continue driving out of town towards the mountains, you come to the McClaren Estates. The McLaren Estates, that's our gated community, shall we say. It's not really gated. You have to cross over Bishop Creek to get into it. But speaking of Bishop Creek, I did some landscaping out in that area when I was in high school, and college and we did a landscape for a house that had Bishop Creek running through its backyard. But you know that wasn't enough, so they diverted the Creek to come into the house, come down a 12-foot waterfall in their living room, and then meander through the house, exiting out again and flowing back down into the Creek bed. It is absolutely over the top. And was there unity between those four groups? Not always. And then I moved to Lodi. Lodi, where you have railroad tracks, and the area west of the railroad tracks is West Lodi. In the area east is East Lodi, and never the two shall ever meet. It's like there's two different societies in one town.

It's what we see all over the world. But we do see it, and it is being brought to our attention here in the United States. Greenville SC has this issue and so they have taken 60 acres between the old historic part of town and the quote "new dynamic downtown." And they're building a park called Unity Park. And in the center of this park, crossing over the creek that runs through town and separates the one side from the other, is the unity bridge. A 160-foot-long bridge, bridging the gap, bringing the people together in one. It'll be beautiful. But honestly, is it going to work? Because what if the people don't realize that they're supposed to be connected? And what does the bridge really do to connect? And who says they should be connected in the first place? And who says they want to be connected in the first place? Maybe the people in the old historic part of town are living there because they like old historic town, and they don't like new dynamic digital downtown. And maybe the people in the new dynamic digital downtown, they like everything modern. They don't like those old Victorian houses with those steep roofs and the funny colors.

And I think that's where we now transition to the church. Because while those questions can be asked in society, in the church we are called to unity. It was a major hurdle for the early Christian Church. Paul definitely had to deal with this. Because as he went out and as he preached, he would run into Jews and the Jews would hear that Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies of the Torah, the Old Testament. And they would see Jesus as their Savior, but yet they couldn't let go of the Old Testament. And so, we called them Judaizers, because they would say to be a Christian, you had to be a Jew first. Because the Jews were the people of promise. They received the Promised Land. The Messiah was promised through them, and therefore you must be a Jew to really be a Christian. And if you didn't become a Jew, and go through circumcision, and all that, well then you were a second-class Christian or really not a Christian at all.

And when he would preach, Paul would also preach to Gentiles, like the people in Ephesus, who were worshippers of Artemis, also known as Diana, the goddess of fertility. And needless to say, their worship was much different than that of the Jews or of the Christians. But they wanted to bring their background with them, so you have the Jews, who we call Judaizers because they said, 'hey you Gentiles, you have to become Jews.' Meanwhile, those Gentiles were saying 'no, no, no, you Jews you are old fashioned. You don't understand it. We know how to worship. We'll bring the style of worship that

we have for Artemis to the Christian Church and things are going to just be spectacular.’

And so, when Paul goes and preaches in Ephesus, to the Jews and the Gentiles there; his first message resulted in a riot. Because the Gentile part were yelling ‘great is Artemis of the Ephesians,’ because well you know what there was a guild there, that made little statues of her and they made a lot of money off of her. And this would have been bad for business. But they yelled this for two hours and it resulted in a riot.

So, imagine the dysfunction that must have been in that church with Judaizers, converted Jews, and former followers of Artemis. And both wanting to bring their past together. We call that syncretism. And so, he wrote them a letter. Why a letter? Because it's in writing and he didn't want to have the people saying, ‘well Paul told me... Therefore you...’ No, it's in writing and it's firmly established. And how does he begin? We read he begins in a very humble way. “I therefore a prisoner for the Lord,” that word for makes a big difference, doesn't it? Not prisoner of the Lord, but for the Lord. He is willingly held captive under the authority and the power of God. He has no say in this situation, but he is a prisoner for God, to bring God's message to the people. until he says I urge you; in other words, listen carefully-this is of the most importance. What does he urge them to do? To walk in a manner, there is a certain way to walk through life, a certain way to live.

What is that way? How are we to walk? He continues; “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” That of course begs the question, what is this calling to which we have been called? I it is a very high calling, the adoption of sons. Walk in a manner worthy of being called a child of God. Well, what does that life look like? Paul continues; ‘with all humility.’ It's not with humility. It's with all humility, or total humility.

And that is definitely a reference to Christ and why the early Christians were called Christians. Because they were Christ-like. They humbled themselves like Christ humbled Himself. He totally humbled Himself. And as they humbled themselves to be prisoners for Christ, they became very gentle. And so, Paul calls them to walk in a manner with all gentleness or meekness, with all humility, totally like Christ. With all patience, which is the result of

humility as we saw last weekend. It bears the idea of modesty, meekness, and sweetness with all love. Because love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things. Love never ends. And so, we bear one another's burdens. We believe one another, and we believe in the salvation that comes through Christ. And we hope for that assured expectation. That's what hope means; that we will be with our Lord someday. And we are to be eager, looking forward to the opportunity to engage and act on this unity.

We should be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. And that is what comes from the Spirit. The Spirit brings a spirit of unity, and unity brings peace. And then we become happy and peaceful, because we're one, bearing, believing, hoping and loving together. Paul ends this then with it's a very focused unity message. He lists out seven "ones" and seven is the number of perfection in the Bible. So, he calls us to be one body as we read in first Corinthians. One body, many different parts, but one body. No part going and doing its own thing. Number two, one spirit. One spirit who calls us to faith, works faith in all, and creates a spirit of unity. One hope, that assured expectation that one day we will be with Christ. One Lord, Jesus is the only way. We do not play the syncretism game and go 'well, you know there's many pathways.' One faith. Faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. One baptism which is now the new circumcision. Through the waters of baptism, we become a part of God's forever family and receive his Holy Spirit. And one God and Father of all.

And there is the ultimate unity. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. And Jesus speaks of it in His high priestly prayer which we heard this morning. That high priestly prayer found in John 17 begins where Jesus prays for Himself. That He prays for His disciples, then He prays for us, those who would follow the disciples. And what was His prayer for us? I quote, "That they may be one just as we are one Father in me, and I in you," The Trinity. Three yet one; God the Father, sent the Son. God the Son, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and has sent the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts and points us back to God the Father, who sent the Son, who sent the Spirit. You see it going in the circle of life. There's no competition. There's perfect unity in godly humility and this is a perfect example for us in the family.

As we saw as the dad's begin the process by humbling themselves. And in the church as we saw last week. As the elders, the pastors, the leaders in the church humbled themselves. Not Lord over others, humbled themselves and serve and work together.

And it is perfect for three churches at three different locations, working and worshipping as one; none greater, none lesser. All humble looking at each other and considering the needs of the others before ourselves. This is the church, the body of Christ, many parts but one body, unified, engaging in action for all to see.

When we rejoice, we rejoice together. I pray that we are rejoicing right now because everything is working. When we grieve, we grieve together. When we pray, we pray together. Even if we don't know the person we're praying for. When we serve, we serve together bound by the Holy Spirit who creates in us a spirit of unity. Bound by God's word, may we walk forward in unity to which we are called to the glory of His name, and for the edification and building up of His people.

In our Saviors' name, Amen.