

“Practicing Wholeness” Ephesians 4:1-16

At the very beginning of this passage Paul reminds us that he is writing as a prisoner, “the prisoner in the Lord.” I have a good friend who has spent significant time, as he puts it with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, as an enforced guest of a state run resort. I heard him make this witness. He said, “When the doors closed behind me, I thought my life was over. I had no idea at all how God would use that time to open so many doors in front of me.”

What my friend learned while in prison was a new dimension of spiritual awareness. It was a kind of spiritual awareness that is very much in harmony with the awareness that is being described in this passage. Did you notice that unity and oneness is a very important theme here. In fact “one” is repeated seven times – one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.

We are all familiar with the chant, “We’re number one. We’re number one. We’re number one.” It usually has a competitive ring to it that means that we are number one because we have defeated all the competition and so we are better than everyone else. We are used to seeing this intensity in the thrill of athletic competition.

Just yesterday Michael Phelps, the American Olympic swimming hero, once again defeated his archrival in the 100 meter butterfly setting a new world record, the same competitor he beat by less than a whisker in the Olympics. The photographs show him with arms outstretched, “I’m number one!”

Just over a week ago the world’s premier cycling competition the Tour de France ended with the winner a young man from Spain Alberto Contador beat the American who returned to competition Lance Armstrong who ended up in third place. They both raced for the same team Astana but there was still some sniping back and forth between them in the press.

Just across Tampa Bay at Tropicana Stadium we are rooting for the Rays to return to win another American League Championship this year. Last year I got these foam versions of “We’re number one!” Last week we were at a game against the Yankees, the one that they actually won. Whenever Derek Jeter or Alex Rodriguez came to bat, there would erupt a chorus of “boos.” Christine asked me, “Why are they booing?” I just told her, because it is a baseball tradition to “Boo” the best of the competition. We’re number one means that we are better than everyone else.

I am very afraid that more than a little of that competitiveness seeps over into our religious and spiritual life. I do think it is always good to keep a sense of humor about such things, to not take ourselves too seriously.

I like the story about the young very intense Methodist pastor that had just graduated from seminary and was appointed to a Methodist church in a small Southern town. He arrived at the beginning of the summer; so he had not been there very long when he got a call from the funeral home in town. The funeral director explained that a person had died who was a Baptist, but as chance would have it all the Baptist preachers in town happened to be on vacation so would it be possible for him to officiate at a funeral for this deceased who had been a Baptist?

The young pastor wasn't quite sure what the proper protocol was here, and he wanted to be sure he got things right so he told the funeral director he would need to call him back. The young Methodist pastor immediately called his District Superintendent, explained the situation and asked if it was Ok for him to officiate at a funeral for a Baptist. The District Superintendent did not even hesitate as he replied, "Young man, you bury as many Baptists as you can!"

We are all familiar with that religious and spiritual competitiveness. We take "We're number one" to mean we are better than, superior to, or at least more right than everyone else. That is often revealed in our use of labels. We use labels to diminish others and exalt ourselves.

This is not something that any of us are immune from. We all struggle with this. Do you remember when Jesus used the example of the Pharisee and the tax collector to teach us about prayer? The Pharisee was the religious man who was quite smug about having it all together and he very proudly comes into the Temple to pray and proceeds to thank God for all the ways he was better than all those thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this derelict tax collector right beside me, and then he proceeds to list all of his spiritual attributes. In stark contrast the tax collector won't even raise his head to heaven and simply and quietly asks God for mercy.

Jesus simply says, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted."¹

When we exalt ourselves, when we are the hero of all our stories, we are childishly grieving the Holy Spirit. It is a temptation that is not uncommon at all. None of us are immune from it. The scripture is very clear here as to the importance of unity, to make every effort allow the unity of the Holy Spirit to be revealed in the way we are together, as a people, as a congregation, as a church, as humankind that seeks to see the unity that binds us all together in a common destiny of love.

In the order of worship it is why we consistently begin our worship with a prayer of confession. We are not here trusting in our own righteousness. Some may

¹ Luke 18:9-14

feel and rightfully so, that a public confession of sin is just a formality. How can I meaningfully pray a confession when I can't identify with the words I am saying. That is true, but this prayer of confession symbolizes at least two things. First, we have all sinned; that is one thing we all have in common. In fact, it is part of what unifies us so there is no competitiveness in our sinfulness either. That is possible just as well; you think you've sinned, you've got nothing on me; just wait until you hear how sinful I have been. There's no need for that either. It is part of the human condition, but what deeply unifies us is that we are all forgiven as well, and we will experience our forgiveness in direct proportion to our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us.

This unity cannot be contained within our walls, within our denomination, within any label which we choose to be identified with. We are in competition with no other church; we are in competition with no other expression of faith working in love, for there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all who is over all and through all and in all.

But the scripture is quick to add here, that does not mean that we are all the same nor does it mean that we are all supposed to be the same. There is wisdom and beauty and the glory of God's creation is revealed in diversity that is unified in praising God in all things. The more surrendered to Christ we are in our individual lives and in our life together the more we will see God at work in glorious ways in all of those around us. There is a saying in the Talmud that goes, "You don't see things as they are. You see things as you are."

That asks of each of us a humbleness of spirit. The more our church has a humble and gentle spirit the more we will be empowered to glorify God and serve Christ in all our ways. It is a humble spirit that is sensitized to the workings of the Spirit.

A native American was in downtown New York City, walking with his friend who lived there. Suddenly he stopped and said, "I hear a cricket."

"Oh, you're crazy," his friend replied.

"No, I hear a cricket. I do! I'm sure of it."

"It's the noon hour. There are people bustling around, cars honking, taxis squealing, noises from the city. I'm sure you can't hear it."

"I'm sure I do." He listened attentively and then walked to the corner, across the street, and looked all around. Finally on the corner he found a shrub in a large cement planter. He dug beneath the leaves and found a cricket. His friend was astounded. But the Cherokee said, "No. My ears are no different than yours. It simply depends on what you are listening to. Here let me show you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change—a few quarters, some nickels,

and pennies. And he dropped it on the concrete. Every head within a block turned. "You see what I mean?" he said as he began picking up his coins. "It all depends on what you are listening for."²

As we celebrate this holy meal together I ask each of us, "Are we humble enough to hear the spirit working in us and through us and among us?" How are we listening?

Rev Stephen Hoffman
First United Methodist Church of Palmetto
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² from [When I Relax I Feel Guilty](#) by Tim Hansel