

“Credo, Series Four, Part Five: The Church **United**”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for June 7th 2020 (Trinity Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Ephesians 4: 1-16

Let us be clear from the outset. The number “one” is the most crucial number--the most indispensable number--when it comes to the life of the Church, the life of the Church of Jesus Christ. And I realize...I realize full well!

That may appear to be an especially tone-deaf assertion with which to launch a sermon on this, of all days: Trinity Sunday, when the number that appears to deserve pride of place in our festivities is, of course, the number “three”. Without, in any way, wishing to distance myself from the number “three”...

...on the contrary!...

...the fact remains that the Christian Church’s distinctive “triune-language”...

“Creator, Reconciler, Redeemer”...“Source, Christ & Advocate”... “Father, Son & Holy Spirit”...

...our distinctive triune speech is bound to be badly misunderstood...will be seen as referencing three **different** gods...unless the magnificent number “three” is firmly anchored in the even more magnificent number “one”. As in Ephesians’ glorious heart-cry:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

One body and **one** Spirit! **One** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism...above all: **one** God! And yes: while Harry Nilsson may well have been correct when he described “one” as the “loneliest number”, there can be no mistaking the fact that it is--within the life of the Church--the most essential of numbers. Hands down! Even...even on a Trinity Sunday.

Well! As many of you by now, no doubt, have sensed: this is my long-winded way of issuing an invitation--my way of welcoming you--to the fourth of four sermons in which I have been pondering the four adjectives by which the Nicene Creed characterizes the Church. From where I stand, the adjective “apostolic” is the foundational adjective, despite the fact that it is the one that comes last in the Nicene Creed and, indeed: the one entirely omitted by the Apostles’ Creed. As for “holy” and

“catholic”, those too are indispensable ways of describing the Church: at any rate, describing what Christ’s Church **ought** to be like! But that leaves--for this morning--the final one of those adjectives: and yes...here comes that fateful number “one”, as in the Church’s insistence that we believe “**one** holy, catholic and apostolic Church” and yes: as in Paul’s characteristic appeal for those to whom he is writing to “maintain the **unity** of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”ⁱ Or, as Christ himself prays in the Highly Priestly prayer that provides a fitting climax to his Last Supper discourse in John’s Gospel: “*I do not pray for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that **they may all be one**, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*”ⁱⁱ

Whatever other significance the Church’s “oneness” entails, what cannot be denied is its **missional** significance. On the one hand, the Church’s very credibility is at stake; viewed from that angle, the Church’s unity is a priority so that *the world may believe that you have sent me*. On the other hand, the Church’s core identity is at risk when it fails to exhibit unity; viewed from that angle, the Church needs to be one *just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you*. Or as Paul in Ephesians puts it--having called on Christians to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” --they are to maintain that unity, that **oneness**, precisely because the church is to reflect the profound unity of God: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

Let me insist, once again! The church’s unity--it’s oneness--is a very big deal. For the Apostles’ Creed to speak of **the** church rather than the churches, for Nicene--even more explicitly--to speak of the **one**...church, is an attribute of the Church that is to be no less prized than the other three attributes that Creed highlights in its description of the Church. The Church’s oneness...its unity...is utterly intrinsic to its calling and its identity as the community of Christ’s disciples. Which, of course, raises the rather obvious question.

If Christian unity--if the Church **United**--is really and truly such a big deal: why are we so bad at it?

Permit me to speak personally; permit me to share a few personal reflections.

First: let me note the fact that one of the trickiest things I faced--as a classic “Boomer-seeker” back in the 1970s when I was being drawn to the church--one of the trickiest obstacles was the bewildering variety of churches from which I needed to choose. It was hard enough for me to reach a stage in my life when I found myself no longer able to deny the call I was hearing, the call to become part of the Christian community. Having reached that stage, however, it was no easy task to figure out where--within the wide range of options--I happened to belong. Trust me: when Christ, in his Last Supper discourse, prays that a Church “united” will make it possible for the “world” to believe, I can testify to the confusion it can cause an outsider when the Church presents a **dis**-united face. That’s my first deeply personal reflection.

A second has to do with the obvious fact that I have spent the past seven years--my final seven years in full-time Christian ministry--serving as part of an Ecumenical society, providing leadership to a congregation that shares a facility with a Roman Catholic Church. It would be foolish--and frankly irresponsible of me as I prepare to make my exit--for me to oversell the benefits of the Ecumenical context in which Trinity United finds itself; it has its special blessings but it also presents some very real challenges to a small congregation that continues to live side by side with a significantly larger Roman Catholic parish. What the future holds for this congregation in terms of finding the best way forward, not only so that it might survive but so that it will thrive, remains an open question: and its 40-year history at the Nanaimo Ecumenical Centre should be only one of the factors taken into account as this congregation discerns its future. Nevertheless! I will not underestimate--nor should you--the symbolic potency of the fact that we now live in a world in which Roman Catholics and Protestants can worship in a shared facility and can even--on a handful of occasions--worship **together**. It may not be a giant step...but neither is it a meaningless step...and yes: I am proud to have played a small role in that story. That's a second deeply personal reflection.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I am reminded of the fact that today just happens to be the 2020 Sunday closest to June 10th, the date on which the United Church of Canada came to birth in 1925. For what it's worth, it was only a couple of weeks after I settled upon this particular theme for this particular Sunday--the theme of Christian unity--that it dawned on me that this would be the Sunday just prior to our denomination's 95th anniversary. Whether that is nothing more than a happy accident--or a reminder that we preachers may have more help contributing to the shaping of our sermons than we tend to imagine--there is no denying the appropriateness of our pondering "the Church United" on a Sunday that brings us to the verge of celebrating the birth of "the United Church".

And please! Note that I have no illusions as to the bittersweet quality of any celebration on which we hope to embark on what marks the home-stretch to the United Church's centennial in 2025. It would be churlish and short-sighted of us to underestimate the courage and Christian idealism that prompted Protestant church leaders in Canada--by the mid-point of the 19th century--to seek to unify the witness of their denominations. Alas: by the time the United Church was ready to launch, most of the denominations (which initially included the Anglicans and some Baptists) which had participated in the talks, had withdrawn their participation. Even more tragically, the celebration of Church Union was badly marred by the withdrawal of roughly 30% of the Presbyterian churches in Canada, individuals and faith communities unable to make their peace with theological compromises that were part and parcel of the union. Mind you: none of that diminished the hopes and expectations of those who launched the United Church of Canada: forebears who truly believed that they were the vanguard of a process of healing and unification that would inevitably gain momentum with the passing of the years. Those dreams and expectations have, so far, not been met. Surely there can be no getting away from the sobering fact that the United Church of Canada--not unlike most mainline Protestant denominations throughout Europe and North America--presently finds itself in an existential crisis, a struggle for its very

survival as a denomination. Barring a dramatic cultural sea-change, one can only suppose that future “unions” involving the United Church of Canada will be undertaken with far more modest expectations than the union which initially brought the denomination into being: undertaken not so much as the “vanguard” of a glorious future, but as stop-gap measures to extend the life-expectancy of dying institutions and perhaps...**perhaps**...give them time to reverse their dying! More to the point!

Internal denominational **disunity** has been part and parcel of the challenge the United Church of Canada has faced for most of the post-war years. Beginning with the launching of the “New Curriculum” in 1955, the divisions between the United Church’s evangelical and progressive wings became a marked dimension of its denominational life, divisions which--in many ways--reached their crescendo as a result of conflicts over human sexuality which came to a boil at the meeting of the 1988 General Council which agreed to the ordination of “self-declared” homosexual persons.” This congregation is certainly no stranger to the devastating toll such disagreement can inflict, having lost both its minister and the vast majority of its members by the summer of 1989. Then again!

Then again! It is important that I avoid leaving you with the impression, this morning, that the United Church of Canada somehow invented Church disunity! Nothing could be further from the truth although that truth certainly takes on an extra measure of poignancy given the good intentions and high hopes with which the United Church was launched. Nevertheless: theological conflict appears to have been written into the very life-blood of the Christian movement, almost from its earliest beginnings. Indeed: many of the earliest divisions were the direct result of truly **theological** disputes. Many of the phrases found in the Nicene Creed, for example, are the direct result of Church Councils adding descriptions of Christ or the Holy Spirit with the precise intent of forcing those holding heretical beliefs either to submit to the authority of the Church, or to walk away. Often they did walk away: accounting not only for marginal side movements bound to fade over time, but to the establishment of Churches which continue to struggle--10, 12, 15 centuries down the road--to unify their Christian witness despite the fact that their areas of agreement are far greater than their areas of disagreement. That is certainly true of the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches (such as the Egyptian Coptic Church) whose separation is generally regarded as something of a misunderstanding, and yet a misunderstanding that has persisted for some 1500 years. That is also true of the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches which--as I pointed out a few Sundays back--can trace their separation to one small word that the Roman Catholic Church chose, unilaterally, to add to the Nicene Creed. And please don’t get me started on the theological impetus that gave birth to the Reformation of 1517: a Reformation which (no doubt much to Martin Luther’s horror) has helped to launch hundreds of denominations as well as 1000s of independent, unaffiliated congregations. This, despite the fact--as the great Church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, ruefully observedⁱⁱⁱ--that in many instances the Catholic Church now comes closer to articulating the principles which initially animated Luther (above all, the principle of “sola gratia”), than many of the Protestant denominations

who owe their existence to the German reformer. It can make for quite the spectacle...although, in truth:

In truth, perhaps the real spectacle--and the real scars--have less to do with the theological conflicts that cause division, than with the historical consequences of those divisions. Any hope for a quick healing of the division between Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, for example, were quashed by the horrors inflicted upon the Eastern parts of Europe by Crusaders from the Western parts of Europe. In a similar way, any hope for quick healing of the division between Catholics and Protestants in Western Europe, were pretty much placed beyond reach as the result of the wars of religion that decimated Europe for much of the 17th century. Echoes of that conflict have continued to play out in our own lifetime, in places such as Ireland; while there are many factors in the conflict that caused so much blood to be spilled in Northern Ireland, there can be no escape from the extent to which religious division between Catholics and Protestants helped to escalate that conflict. Nor, for that matter--in an area of the world with which most of us are less familiar--can the religious factor (hand in hand with factors of ethnicity) be overlooked in our assessing the nightmare that began to descend upon the former Yugoslavia in the aftermath of Tito's death in 1980, culminating in a horrific war between Bosnians, Croats and Serbs: a war which primarily pitted the Orthodox Serbs against the Catholic Croats. Such divisions, rooted in conflicts which go back centuries, are not easily healed.

Nor, I hasten to add, should we presume that the conflicts that are more characteristic of church-life here in North America are any more amenable to quick solutions. Many of the disagreements that have created divisions within the United Church of Canada have involved hot-button issues of an ethical nature, often involving sexual-morality: such issues often present an "either-or" choice that resists easy compromise. After all: you are either for or against permitting a divorced person to remarry; you are either for or against welcoming an openly LGBTQ minister into your pulpit; you are either for or against solemnizing a same-sex marriage in your sanctuary. Such issues are even tougher to finesse and tend to be even more intractable than more abstract theological points of contention. And there have been--and continue to be--other divisions, often involving worship and devotional practices. In our own time--and in this very congregation at its inception--there have been divisions that have resulted from the impact of the charismatic movement which swept through many parts of Europe and North America in the 1970s. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church was often able to absorb the charismatic movement into its parishes, in the mainline Protestant realm the eventual outcome of the movement tended to be divided congregations and the almost inevitable creation of new, breakaway congregations and yes, the creation of new, charismatic denominations. Then again! Those divisions should scarcely surprise us. Not so long ago a colleague reported that his UCC congregation lost a small chunk of its members who gravitated over to the local Presbyterian congregation. Why did they leave? Because the decision was reached, after much consultation and debate, to replace pews with chairs in the sanctuary...and that turned out to be the point of no return for a segment of the congregation! We're quite the bunch, aren't we!

All of this, of course, does have its comic edge...although when Christians find their doctrinal disputes leading to the shedding of blood, it stops being funny.

Earlier, I noted that part of what makes the “oneness” of the Church a big deal, is the way in which Church division can undermine **our mission** as representatives of Jesus Christ. I also noted that the oneness of the Church is meant (as Ephesians insists) to be **an image** of the oneness of God. But frankly...

...and the racial and ideological divisions that continue to stir not only the United States but worlds far beyond its shores, in the aftermath of the callous murder of a black man by a white police officer demonstrates afresh the urgency of this aspect of the thing....

...perhaps even more basic than the Church “imaging” the oneness of God, the Church--at its best--is meant to “image” the oneness of Adam: in other words the **oneness of the humanity** which God chose to rescue...

...on the far side of its endless divisions...

...by sending the new Adam, Jesus Christ, to bring healing not just to some of us, but to **all** of us. When the Church leads with its divisions, its petty bickering...worse still, when it finds itself in the midst of the sort of armed-conflict that defiled Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia, it represents the utter betrayal of its core purpose in the eyes of the good God. And no!

There are no easy answers to any of this. I confess that I resonate with Karl Barth’s suggestion that it would have been better had the Creeds spoken of “congregations” rather than of “the Church”.^{iv} Nor will I deny that I have not returned from each of the three United Church of Canada General Councils that I have attended, more of a congregationalist than when I left for them. And yet, somehow my gut tells me that there must be something more to the Christian movement than a scattering of isolated congregations. No! As much as I will always insist that the local congregation is the Church’s foundational unit, I am certain that there must be symbols of unity to bind those congregations into a visible, tangible reminder of the love of Christ and the power of the Spirit.

I am also continually put in mind of C.S. Lewis’ charming little book which he entitled *Mere Christianity*: a book that sought to present the Christian Gospel in a way that avoided the sectarian disputes that have so often sapped the energy--and undermined the credibility--of the Christian movement. That too, is surely part of the spirit we need at a time such as this.

Beyond that?

Well...beyond that two things, really. First: the cultivation of a spirit of forbearance: a spirit prepared to see the best in our fellow Christians even when we disagree, even when the disagreement is sharp. If what I said last Sunday about our need to honour the ninth commandment where non-Christian religions are concerned...

...“thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour”...

...surely it is even more pressing that we adhere to that commandment when it comes to our fellow disciples, no matter how wrong-headed we might think them to be on particular questions of faith and practice. Surely we can all agree that the 17th century’s 30-year war did nothing to honour Christ and did less than nothing to honour his cause on this earth: which leads to my other parting thought, namely this.

At the end of the day, this is about Christ...the one Christ, the one Spirit, the one God. Part of our hope as those who invoke Christ’s name is hope that the unity we seek is already fully embodied in the “three-in-oneness” of the God we worship, whose unity we already get to share, in an anticipatory way. Just as “our” holiness is best displayed when it testifies to the God who alone is truly holy, even our most fervent striving after unity is but a pale reflection of the divine unity we can already taste in the love of Christ. Indeed! We have a special name for that kind of unity, that kind of “union”. We call it “communion”. And, hopefully, we’ll have much more to say of just such “communion”...

...both as present reality and as ultimate destiny...

...when we return to the Apostles’ Creed seven days from now!

In Christ! Amen!

ⁱ Ephesians 4:3

ⁱⁱ John 17: 20, 21

ⁱⁱⁱ In a personal conversation at the Vancouver School of Theology

^{iv} *Dogmatics in Outline*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1959), p. 141.