



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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With One Voice Romans 15:1-6

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I want to begin this morning with a quote from Dietrich Bonhöffer's wonderful little book *Life Together*:

“It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song. Thus all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian Church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the Church.”¹

It is not *you* who sings, but the Church. As a member, your part is to *share in* the Church's song. Bonhöffer uses our corporate singing as a metaphor for the whole life of the Church. He highlights the very point that Paul has been making in these last chapters of Romans. Our individualists and self-centred culture causes us to think about everything—even our membership in the Church—as starting with “me”. Paul writes of the Church as a body. Our culture causes us to approach that body image by thinking first about the individual parts that make it up. And yet we can hear as Paul speaks just how unnatural a way that is to think of a body. A body is first a whole. If it weren't for our self-centred culture, we'd naturally think of the whole body first and only then about the parts that make it up. Paul stresses the oneness and the unity of the body. It's a oneness and a unity born of our life in a common Saviour and the Holy Spirit

he has shared with us in common. Here's how Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:1-6.

I...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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.

Something happens when we pass through the waters of baptism in faith. Jesus unites us to himself, but in doing that he also unites us to an entire body of fellow believers. He gives us a new life and it's a life lived together and shared with everyone else who is also in him. We live with them for Jesus, for his kingdom, and for his mission. The Spirit shifts our priorities away from ourselves and to our brothers and sisters as we live out the unity Jesus and the Spirit have given. Instead of seeking our own, we show humility, gentleness, and patience to each other. We bear with each other. Think of all of Paul's talk in Romans 14 of the stronger bearing with the weaker and not putting stumbling blocks in front of them, even if that means prioritizing their spiritual well-being over our rights and privileges. We do this because we're eager—or we ought to be eager—“to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”.

But why is it so important to maintain the unity of the Spirit? That's the big question. On a practical level, the Church wouldn't last very long if we were all in it for our own gain or pushing our own agendas. Churches fall apart when that sort of thing happens and gets out of control. My job as a pastor, shepherding the flock, is certainly easier when everyone acts humbly and with gentleness and patience. But that's not ultimately the reason why maintaining the unity of

the Spirit is important. Bonhöffer hints at the real reason when he writes about our singing together uniting us, not only as a local church, but also uniting our local church with the whole Church of Jesus around the world. The unity of the church—the whole, global church made up of people from every tribe and tongue and nation, not only gives glory to God, but it does so by giving witness to the world of God's faithfulness. This is what Paul writes in verse 6 of Romans 15. (We'll get there in a few minutes.)

Why is that important? How does the Church's unity glorify God? Think back to something I've been saying for the last year-and-a-half. What is the over-arching theme of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome? It's that the gospel—the good news about Jesus the Messiah—reveals the righteousness of God. The good news, the royal proclamation, that this Jesus who died and rose again is Creation's true Lord reveals the righteousness or covenant faithfulness of God. The gospel proves that God makes good on his promises—that he *is* at this very moment making good on his promises. And the life of Jesus and the Spirit lived out in the corporate life of the Church witnesses this to the world. This is why it's so vital for the Church to maintain the unity of the Spirit. This is why the strong bear with the weak. This is why we give up our rights for the sake of others. This is why we our church communities are supposed to be places of peace and of reconciliation when the peace is broken.

It's easy to get annoyed with Paul or to tune him out as he repeats himself in these last few chapters. But there's a reason why he keeps adding fresh coats of paint to his argument. He understood that it's absolutely vital that Christians grasp just how important our life together is. Our unity glorifies God by witnessing his righteousness to the world. How does our unity glorify God? We'll get there in a minute. But it does and our

¹ Dietrich Bonhöffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), p. 61.

glorifying God is the most important thing we can do. Who remembers the first question of the Westminster Catechism? “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “To glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” To glorify God. That’s what we were created for and it is what Jesus has re-created us for and enabled us to do by pouring God’s own Spirit into our hearts.

So with that in mind, look at Romans 15:1-2.

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

Paul’s not finished with this talk about strong and weak brothers and sisters. Remember that background behind this. Christians in Rome were dividing up. Gentile believers worshipping here and Jewish believers worshipping over there. One of the main reasons for this was this was that the Gentile believers weren’t observing *torah*. They didn’t celebrate the Jewish feast days or observe the Sabbath. They also didn’t find it a problem to eat meat bought from the pagan temples, while the Jews considered that meat unclean. In some cases, Paul seems to hint, it was even worse than Jewish believers separating from Gentile believers, but some Jewish Christians may have abandoned Jesus altogether over these conflicts. Paul had reasoned and worked through these issues for himself. He knew that in light of the cross of Jesus, nothing was unclean. The Gentile believers understood that too—although it was an easy conclusion for them to make since they didn’t have Jewish backgrounds. Paul tells them: “Yes, you’re right. Nothing is unclean. In light of Jesus, it doesn’t matter what you eat. And it doesn’t matter what days you observe.” Like him, they were “strong” in the faith having worked

through the implications of the cross. But not everyone had. There were—and always will be—“weaker” brothers and sisters for whom these things are a stumbling block. Stronger Christians need to get their priorities straight. As Paul wrote in Chapter 14, the kingdom of God is about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit, not about eating and drinking. Maintaining unity and not causing your weaker brothers and sisters to stumble in the faith are more important than exercising your rights. Paul even went so far as to say that if it were necessary to maintain the unity of the body, he’d never eat meat again.

This is his point here. The strong, he says, have an obligation to bear with the weak. Our translation puts it in terms of the “failings” of the weak. I think that translation—and the ESV isn’t the only one to translate it that way—misrepresents Paul’s point. It would be more accurate to talk about bearing with the “weaknesses of the weak”, but what we really need to understand is what Paul means by “weak”. The Greek words here have the sense of being powerless. Being weak isn’t a good thing. Paul doesn’t make excuses for them. They need to do what he did and work through these issues for themselves, but that highlights the point. So far, they haven’t worked these things out. Maybe they’re brand-new believers. Maybe no one’s stressed to them the need to work these things out. Or maybe they’ve had bad teaching that, instead of helping them to work things out in the right direction, has actually reinforced their weakness. Paul’s point is that *at the moment* and *for the time being* they can’t help it. They are who they are and the stronger need to bear with them patiently, showing them grace, and not putting stumbling blocks in their path.

The time may come to give them better teaching. Many of them, as they mature in the faith will work these issues out for themselves. Some

of them may never work it out. But now isn’t the time to browbeat them with our best arguments to win them over to our side and now is certainly not the time to exercise our rights if we know that doing so will cause them to stumble, to separate themselves from us to form another church body, or—worst case scenario—to be so offended that they walk away from Jesus altogether. These are things we often do. We’d rather please ourselves. Paul may have really developed a taste for bacon-wrapped shrimp. He could have chosen to indulge himself at the church potluck even if it drove new Jewish believers away. He could have beat them over the head with angry Facebook arguments to prove he was right, even though very few people are ever convinced that way. But that’s not what he did. That’s the path of pleasing ourselves—proving our rightness or indulging our desires. We have ways of spiritualizing it or justifying it, but it’s really just pleasing ourselves. Instead, Paul reminds us, we need to act with grace and patience—and ultimately with love—knowing that Jesus died for those weaker brothers and sisters and that we ought to desire their spiritual well-being as much as he does. Instead of pleasing ourselves, we need to seek to please our neighbours—building up them, not ourselves. Building up ourselves breaks down the community for which Jesus died. Building up our brothers and sisters builds up the community Jesus died to create. That’s the point of verse 3:

For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”

Brothers and Sisters, do you see how Paul takes us back to Jesus as the reason for what we do and how we live? For the Christian, Jesus is the reason for everything. We need to think through, reason through, and work through everything in light of

Jesus and the cross. Karl Barth famously said, “Jesus is the answer. What’s the question?” Why do we seek the welfare and building-up of our brothers and sisters—even the weaker ones when it may cost us something? Why is our priority the unity of the Church? Because Jesus. This community was his priority. Jesus didn’t seek to please himself. Think of Jesus praying in the garden the night he was arrested. He knew his death was coming and he prayed to his Father: I don’t want to do this. If there’s any other way the mission can be accomplished, let this cup pass me by. But he knew it was what he had to do and submitted himself to the will of his Father. There was something far more important than pleasing himself. Paul quotes Psalm 69. In the Psalm, David cries out from the midst of despair. Everyone was out to get him.

Save me, O God!

For the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in deep mire,

where there is no foothold;

I have come into deep waters,

and the flood sweeps over

me.

I am weary with my crying out;

my throat is parched.

My eyes grow dim

with waiting for my God.

(Psalm 69:1-3)

Psalm 69 was seen by the Jews as their song. David may have sung these words to God, but he was the representative of his people. These were Israel’s words too, as she cried out to God. She cried out from her troubles and prayed for God’s judgement against evil. There’s much more to that part of the Psalm that we don’t have time for this morning, but it all leads to a triumphant song of praise in response to God’s deliverance. The psalm ends:

I will praise the name of God with a song;

I will magnify him with thanksgiving....

For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise his own people who are prisoners.

Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them. (Psalm 69:30, 33-34)

Paul knew that this was Israel’s song and he knew it was also the song of Jesus the Messiah, who had come as Israel’s representative. Jesus was the one crying to God in the garden and then from the cross as the waters came up to his neck and he felt his feet sinking into the mud. And that salvation came on Easter morning as God raised him from the tomb, overturning the false verdict of his enemies and declaring that Jesus is Lord. Instead of seeking his own pleasure, Jesus walked the path of the Messiah, summing up the obedience of Israel to God’s saving agenda.

In verse 4 Paul now reminds the Romans that they’d know this if they paid attention to the Scriptures. And this is where he points us to the “why” of unity. Okay, so our unity glorifies God, but why? He writes:

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Only a small part of what would be the New Testament had been written at the time Paul was writing this. When he writes about what was written in former days he’s talking about what we call the Old Testament. Lots of Christians ignore it. Some may just find it boring...although that just proves they haven’t really read it. Some think it’s irrelevant. Some may be subject to bad teaching. One popular pastor in the States recently preached that the Church actually needs to “unhitch” itself from the Old Testament. Paul would have had some strong words to say in response to that kind of heresy. Here’s why: If

the good news about Jesus reveals the covenant faithfulness of God, then the Old Testament is vitally important. Paul tells us that in Jesus God has kept his promises, how are we to know if that’s true or not unless we know what his promises were? How can we even know what Jesus was doing if we don’t know the story he came to fulfil? Those promises and that story are what we find in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the God-given story of how his covenant people were called to bring God’s salvation to his rebellious and fallen creation. It’s the story of how God’s people failed, but it’s also the story of how one was promised to be Israel’s representative—one who, like his own people, would suffer, but ultimately be vindicated and fulfil God’s promises of Creation’s redemption. Paul knew the Old Testament and so he knew that in calling Abraham and his family, he had created a people to take redemption to the whole world. Over and over Israel failed, but God was still faithful to see his plan fulfilled and we see this in Jesus. And the world saw God’s faithfulness on dramatic display in the First Century churches where Jews and Gentiles worshipped together. Here was the fulfilment of the Old Testament and of all of God’s promises. That this was why Paul was so troubled by Jewish and Gentile believers splitting up and forming separate communities.

In our day and our part of the world it’s not so much about Jews and Gentiles worshipping together—although that *should* still be happening—but that world also sees God’s promise of redemption of all people being lived out in the diversity of the church: people from every sort of background, rich and poor, men and women, young and old, poorly educated and highly educated, blue collar and white collar—everyone—united in one body centred on Jesus giving God glory in the process—maybe without even realizing that’s what they’re doing.

There's more, though. It's not only that the Old Testament points us to Jesus as its culmination and the fulfilment of God's promises, it also serves as the foundation for living in faith and hope as God's people today as we wait for the final day when every enemy has been put under Jesus' feet and God finally makes all things new. Seeing the Old Testament fulfilled in Jesus gives us reason to live in hopeful and certain expectation that what God has begun at such great cost to himself, he will finally one day complete.

Has Paul strayed into the weeds here? Not at all. He says this to make a point to the Christians who are "strong". Just as Jesus humbled himself and gave up everything that was his by right to fulfil his messianic mission, we too have to walk the same sort of path as we put the life he's given us into practice. As Jesus said to his disciples: the servant is not above his master. Paul makes this point very dramatically in Philippians 2:5-8, where he writes:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And we don't have this mind simply for the sake of having this mind. Our goal isn't merely Christ-likeness for ourselves. Remembering the story played out over the course of the Old Testament and fulfilled by Jesus, God's purpose is the creation of a people who will proclaim his good news to all of Creation. In Romans 15:5-6 he writes:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The harmony and the unity that come from following the way of Jesus the Messiah brings our voices together to glorify not only the Lord Jesus, but his Father. That's the ultimate goal: to make Jesus and his Father known as we live the life given to us by Jesus and the Spirit. Here's how Paul puts in the parallel Philippians passage:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
(Philippians 2:9-11)

In both passages, here and Philippians 2, Paul acknowledges that we aren't all on the same page. Ideally, we should be. But when it comes to non-essentials, realistically speaking, there are going to be differences. And the solution isn't to force everyone to think just like us—which is how we often do approach things. No, the solution to differences over non-essentials is to submit ourselves to each other in humility, seeking to do whatever builds others up. That's exactly what Jesus did. He humbled himself in the Incarnation, God taking on our flesh. And it's what he did as he submitted to an awful death on the cross, again, for our sake.

Dear Friends, we need to recognise our calling to sing with one voice. We end the service every week singing "Glory to God in the highest". We're good at *singing* with one voice when it comes to actual singing. We need to let our singing be a metaphor for the entirety of our life together. We need to live and to work and to weep and to

rejoice with one voice—so to speak—as one people united in Jesus so that when we go out into the world to proclaim that Jesus is Lord of Creation, the people to whom we preach can look to the Church and see for themselves the new world and the new people over whom Jesus rules.

Let us pray: Father, as we prayed in today's Collect, without you we cannot but fall. We live and we stand by your grace and your mercy. Cause us to stand we pray. Cause us to stand in the saving work of Jesus, your Son, and to be united in the life of your Holy Spirit that we will live as Jesus did, serving and loving each other rather than ourselves, that we might give you glory as we sing with one voice. Amen.