

Unity & Diversity

Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-13

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

When I received the phone call yesterday morning from Marilyn Demarest, saying, “We have a problem,” and that Gary was in excruciating pain in his back and leg and would not be able to preach, I assured them we’d, “muddle along with a purpose,” - an expression Gary often used with our staff at La Canada Presbyterian, where Don and I served with him from 1976-1988, until Gary began directing the General Assembly’s evangelism ministries. And since Tom Erickson and Jeff O’Grady have both stepped in for me when I was supposed to preach, but was unable to, it’s my turn!

As I began to read the Ephesians scripture and pray, I realized this is a perfect text to highlight the unity we have in Christ, not only at San Marino Community Church, with other local followers of Christ, but also with our global brothers and sisters in Christ whom your Malawi GO Team got to know, serve with, admire, and respect. Likewise, this is a perfect opportunity to share some ways our unified GO Team’s diverse gifts, skills, and talents worked together on our 2011 transformational Malawi journey in July. Ephesians 4 may also be one of my very favorite chapters in the Bible.

Paul’s letter to the Christians at Ephesus is called the Queen of the Epistles, because it is written, not as most of his letters are in Koine’ or “Street” Greek, but in Hellenistic, that is, scholarly and artistic Greek by this spiritual genius who introduces 82 words not used in any of his other letters, while he enhances the meanings of many other words. In the first three chapters of Ephesians, the Apostle writes about God’s eternal purposes for people, as one new humanity under the Lordship of Christ, and prays twice that the triune God will bless Christ’s followers with wisdom, love, roots and growth.

Ephesians 4 is a hinge chapter, linking that theological foundation with the practical, living out of our relationships with Christ and one another. I get that “hinge and linking”. I’m sure you know the first and last years of us Baby Boomers are being born between 1946 and 1964. ‘46 and ‘64 are the hinge years. As a 64-year-old, who was born in ‘46, I am a hinge person – maybe that’s another reason why Ephesians 4 is special to me.

Paul was writing from prison to this church he founded on his second missionary journey and where he lived and worked, taught, and served on his third journey for three years. His tone is urgent. He exhorts the Ephesian Christians (and us) to lead lives worthy of our calling. He uses “calling” and “called” three times in today’s text.

And what or who are we called to be? Christ's people! Women and men, youths and children, growing to be more like Jesus in our thinking and feeling and speaking, our actions and responses and reactions (those are the toughest for me, I don't know about you), and our relationships with God and with people.

In preparation for our 2011 transforming journey to Malawi, all the participants let the Design Team know who they were, where they are on their faith journey and sense of call to observe and serve and share with others in Malawi and back home. The GO TEAM spent an evening and a major chunk of a day in relationship-building, learning about helpful and hurtful ways to enter new and old cultures, as well as discovering our bond in Christ and our unique strengths and talents. What we are called to do emerges out of who we are called to be. When God calls people in scripture, often there is a change not only inside them, but in their names. Remember Abram and Sarai were called by God Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of many nations. Simon was given the name Peter by Jesus. Petra means rock, which Peter and his confession of faith became by God's Spirit. Jesus saw something in him, named it, and called it out.

You may recall the story of a Dodger pitcher in the late 1980's:

Tommy Lasorda was the manager when this young pitcher joined the team, a skinny, mild-mannered, stoop-shouldered pale kid, named Orel Leonard Quinton Hershiser IV. He didn't intimidate anyone and he was struggling in the bullpen.

One day when Orel was on the pitcher's mound and his pitching was not going well, Tommy went out and kind of shook Orel by the shoulders and said, "Orel, you know when I look at you, do you know what I see? I don't see a scared, skinny, uncertain kid. I see a fighter, I see a man with some guts...with some fire in his belly. I see a bulldog when I look at you. So from now on, I'm not calling you Orel Hershiser IV anymore. I'm calling you 'Bulldog.'" ¹

That was a turning point in Orel's career. He started to pitch like a bulldog. Later on, he and Lasorda referred to that talk as "The Sermon on the Mound." Bulldog Hershiser went on to win the Cy Young Award in 1989, and he had one of the most amazing seasons that anybody has ever had, a perennial All-Star, the MVP of the League series and the MVP of the World Series.

¹ Ortberg, John Sermon titled "You Have a Calling," Menlo Park Presb. Church, April 29-30, 2006

Orel was a real hero to our son who had the privilege of meeting him, and we just knew the Dodgers were going to beat the Mets in the play-offs. In the seventh game, Hershiser was pitching for the Dodgers, and the Mets' pitcher was named Ron Darling. We knew the boys from Chavez Ravine were going to win, because Tommy Lasorda was in the dugout yelling, "Get this guy out, Bulldog!" The Mets' manager, Davey Johnson had to stand in his dugout and yell: "Throw strikes, Darling." No way!

You may also remember meeting in Acts 4, Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus who sold a field and brought the money and deposited at the Apostles' feet. The disciples called this man Barnabas (that word again), meaning "Son of Encouragement."

One of our GO Team gained a partial new name, a nickname of sorts, a term of endearment. Molly Woodford is now called "Classic Molly." She brought her much-appreciated guitar, and provided music not only for the GO Team, but for the "Bebbies" at Ministry of Hope's Crisis Nursery, and at the Community-Based Orphan Care Center, as we were waiting to help serve a meal of nsima - one of two meals a week provided in this difficult economy. Classic Molly is a very good sport. Actually everyone was! There was great unity and oneness on the GO Team, and that was crucial as we encountered unexpected challenges like long lines for diesel fuel and anti-government protests that changed our itinerary and travel.

In *The Message* translation by Presbyterian Pastor Eugene Peterson, the opening verses of Ephesians 4 says:

While I'm locked up here, a prisoner for the Master, I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run!—on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline—not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences. 4You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly.

Of first import to Paul in the opening three verses are unity and oneness. Unity in Christ that builds mutual support is key in the Body of Christ, and certainly was in our microcosm that was the Malawi GO Team of 14 individuals from ages 15 to 64.

Verses 4 to 6 demonstrate an organic, interrelated unity, as experienced by Paul and us. Count how many times "one" and "unity" are used in verses 2 to 6. I count eight times, in addition to his writing about "one another."

By the way, “one anothering” is also a great New Testament expression that is rich to plumb. Some excellent small group materials by Presbyterian Pastor Dick Myer are entitled “One Anothering.” “One anothering” really happened within the GO Team as we shared our resources: Pete Kutzer’s phone enabled us to keep close touch with home, as did Janet Wells’ and Lisa Link’s computers. “One anothering” happened with our Malawian hosts and new friends of the heart.

We women had been invited last June, by Phoebe Chifungo, a gifted teacher, mother, and wife of CCAP Nkhoma Synod Leader, to present information from the Bible and life experience on Women in Church Leadership, as the Nkhoma Synod has just begun in the past couple years to ordain women deacons and elders. Our San Marino Community Church congregation is so healthy and blessed with gifted servant-leaders, who are church officers, as well as leaders in their fields of expertise and respected in their spheres of influence. So, it was important for the women of Nkhoma Synod to see and hear from Deacon Penny Hunt, Elders Cindy Jenkins, Janet Wells and Classic Molly, as well as Foundation Directors, Laurie Mitchell and Janet Wells.

It was my joy to teach a brief survey of women leaders in scripture and bring perspectives on some of the Apostle Paul’s “problem passages” that we hear have freed our Malawian sisters-in-Christ to begin new ministries already. Hallelujah! I wish all could have heard the prayers and songs of joy that these dear sisters shared after receiving Bibles of their own, translated in Chichewe and English, as a gift from our Women’s Retreat Design Team, a couple of women’s small groups, and several individuals.

Even when there is some difference in language, the oneness in Christ communicates, as does appropriate loving touch. When we were at Ministry of Hope’s Orphan Center, Molly, Cindy and Lindsay Jenkins, and Andy Link led our folks in music, then the children sang for us, prayed, and shared scripture. After I had shared a brief scripture story, with a translator. Motions for “HE’S GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS” and “PHARAOH, PHARAOH” and “THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE” communicate when language does not and are sung around the world.

Our two visits to the Crisis Nursery were very tender times as we held essentially abandoned babies and toddlers. The love from all was amazing, but seeing Courtney Jenkins, who is so articulate about her faith holding little ones, as well as the challenges Andy Link faced with his little charge, and watching Pete Kutzer feed a little one mashed papaya, were all Jesus-style relating.

In our corporate worship at the Nkhoma Church and Kaning'a Church (both CCAP-Central Church of Africa Presbyterian) on the two Sundays we were in Malawi, our oneness was so evident, spoken in Chichewe and English, we shared the Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer, as well as proclamation from the Bible. Clearly we are one body with one Spirit, God's Holy Spirit, with one Lord, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all who are baptized into the faith we share.

One of the bonuses of having five young adults with us was how naturally they related to their Malawian peers and younger children.

The Apostle Paul balances his enthusiasm about unity with a short introduction about the diversity of gifts needed and available in the Church. Function of members of the Body with Jesus Christ the Head. In verses 7 to 12, Paul reminds us that each one in the Body of Christ is gifted by God's Spirit and is able to serve in ministry to build up Body of Christ, be it here or on the other side of the world in the Southern Hemisphere, be it in the developing or developed world.

The short list of gifts in Ephesians 4 is a teaser, and Paul describes more and other gifts in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and 1 Peter 4. And even the Hebrew scriptures highlight special gifts of music, art and craftsmanship for worship and its space in the temple or our sanctuary, even as we see those today in the outstanding musical gifts of Lisa and our choir and their leader, as well as stitchery in paraments and the artistry of the stained glass and architecture. Some have counted 39 gifts of the Spirit in scripture.

As a GO Team, we needed each one with his or her special talents with us:

- **Scott Jenkins'** passion for coordinating and doing physical labor, making something with Malawian expert plasterers they teamed with, and hanging windows and doors in a Ministry of Hope staff home. As many of you know, Scott is a great source of humor and comic relief, which we needed and enjoyed.
- Likewise, **Katie Mitchell's** laugh and insights as we reflected biblically and theologically were treasured, and she was a great instigator of fun.
- Our youngest team member, 15 year-old **Thomas Kutzer**, a water polo champion, not only wowed the Orphan Center kids with his juggling, but he also shared his artistic gifts in completing banners about Jesus' love for the children written in Chichewe by SMCC's 4th and 5th graders.

- **Lisa Link**'s leadership in organizing the computer project, how the men and young adults related and taught the secondary school boys the basics, from how to turn on a computer, to how to cruise the internet. Lisa's commitment enabled a couple of women's small groups learn how to access the internet. It was amazing.
- Thinking of leadership and organizing, as well as communicating care, elder Janet Wells, my co-leader & US Ministry of Hope Board member, was amazing in her budgeting, scheduling, facilitating everything from meals to money-changing, which Scott helped with and nearly all had partial responsibilities for carrying Malawi money called "Kwacha".
- It seems that often one of the **Jenkins** has a birthday on these transforming journeys, so this time we celebrated with **Lindsay**, who had quite an eventful birthday, seeing her first shooting star in the southern sky, and being sung to by Malawian waiters after our safari jeep got stuck in the wild in the dark!
- While the men of all ages were doing the hard labor, all of us females helped in diverse ways one day at a MOBILE MEDICAL CLINIC which served 383 patients in about 5 ½ hours. These folks were all lined up when we arrived about 8:30 am. These patients had walked, mostly with no shoes, from surrounding villages for this monthly visit - their only medical care - for measuring body weights, temperatures, blood pressure taken by our team, a 45-second consultation with a nurse-clinician, and then they were given meds previously packaged by the GO Team according to the clinician's prescription. Those of us in the makeshift pharmacy were hustling to fill orders, as the pharmacist guided us.
- It was so great to have Red Cross blood expert, **Penny Hunt**, serving in the lab which tested children and adults for dreaded malaria. As is so often seen, nothing is wasted in God's economy.

All of us who had the privilege of this travel and service through our church with our fellow Christians in Malawi are so grateful for your support in prayer and notes, your generosity in making it possible to deliver computers and Bibles, as well as medicines, diapers, and buckets of love on home visits.

There is so much more to tell, so much more for which to thank you.

Our GO Team and the HOME Team for which we give thanks invite all ages to join us Sunday night, September 25th for an early typical dinner, more sharing about how

growth and maturity in Christ is an important by-product of this amazing adventure, as we love those near and far. We'll have photos, music, video, and you will get to hear personal stories from team members.

A number of us have recently finished reading *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* by N.T. Wright. In his next-to-last chapter, he writes about unity and diversity very descriptively. Let me leave you with this:

“The church is like a tree. The single seed, Jesus himself, has been sown in the dark earth and has produced an amazing plant. Branches have set off in all directions, some pointing almost directly upward, some reaching down to the earth, some heading out over neighboring walls. Looking at the eager, outstretched branches, you'd hardly know they were all from the same stem. But they are. Unity generates diversity.”

“The church is like a river. In the last book of the Bible, John the visionary sees a huge throng of people from every nation, kindred, tribe, and tongue coming together in a great chorus of praise. Like the river, they all started in different places, but they have now brought their different streams into a single flow. The image of the river reminds us forcibly that, though the Church consists by definition of people from the widest possible variety of backgrounds, part of the point of it all is that they [we] belong to one another, and are meant to be part of the same powerful flow, going now in the same single direction. Diversity gives way to unity.”²

May it be so – here and now, everywhere and eternally. Amen.

2 Wright, N.T., *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, Harper, San Francisco, 2006 Pp199-200