

One!
Ephesians 4: 1-6

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**October 29, AD 2023
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This morning we gather as one church to celebrate our Presbyterian roots. One of the things I love most about our denomination is our motto. It was adapted from the great church father Augustine in the 4th century. In essentials, unity. In non-essentials liberty. In all things, charity. That is, in all things *love*. You can see how much Augustine's formula was sourced in our passage. Paul encourages the Ephesians to "bear with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." In other words, work hard to love one another and keep the oneness of the church a oneness of harmony, humility and kindness.

Another thing I love about our denomination is our theological clarity. Unity arises from shared core beliefs. We have a list called "Essentials of our Faith." Every pastor, elder and deacon takes a vow that they subscribe to these essentials without exception. These are basic affirmations about the Triune God, especially about the Son of God who became the Son of Mary and gave his life to reconcile us to his Father.

We go over these essentials in every new members class. We find that this joyful clarity energizes people. We're about Jesus, as he is made known in the Scriptures, and as his people have always affirmed. Another ancient church father put it this way, "Hold fast to that faith which has been believed everywhere, always and by all." The church of Jesus Christ has borders. We are called apart from the world in order to be able to offer the gospel to the world. We are called to be distinct, leaving the kingdom of self so that we can model the kingdom of God.

The borders of the church are made of the great confession that Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh, who died an atoning death, and rose in victory over death. He is now at the Father's right hand, the king of kings and the Lord of lords. One day he will return to set all things right. In the meantime, he sends his Spirit into the hearts of all believers, uniting them in one body. That's the beautiful story within which we flourish. To be outside that story is to be outside of Christ. To indwell that gospel is to be joined to the one body of which Jesus is the head, his beloved bride, the church.

You can hear Paul fairly singing as he writes of our essential faith, “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.” He’s been reminding them of how their lives once were: isolated, overwhelmed by desires they could not control, forced into the mold of the culture around them, unable to connect with God, unable to deal with the weight of guilt or the fear of death. But now they are organically connected to one another. They have the Spirit in their hearts filling them with God’s presence. They know the Lord of the cosmos and his grace fills their days with hope. They see the loving Father in all things, through all things and watching over all things.

When we bow the knee to Jesus, giving over our wills to his, these words flow joyfully from our lips. When we confess him as Lord and Christ, we grow with a sense of significance and worth. We gather as those who bow to Christ and so find joy in loving one another.

I think it’s so important to recall the unity of the one faith that gets expressed in many different ways. While we understand unity in essentials, we also understand in non-essentials liberty. We give each other some room on the beliefs and practices that are not part of this core.

That’s important in a church like ours. The members of our church who were born, raised and stayed Presbyterian is by no means a majority. Some new member classes might just as well be described Southern Baptists Anonymous. Or “I was raised catholic so please don’t tell my mom I’m joining.” Or “I’m from a non-denom church so I don’t understand half of what’s going on here.” That’s all good! We concentrate on the deep, ancient center stream of the Christian faith. We try to avoid cracking up against the rocks, or getting snagged in the weeds and shallows.

So that means we have members who differ in some areas. Some of us are all-in on predestination. Some of us think free will is the key. A lot of us see how both connect. Some of us are theistic evolutionists. Some of us are six-day, young earth creationists. A lot of us are still working through how old the cosmos appear and the way Scripture tells of creation. We’ve had women elders in church leadership for nearly half a century. Some of us can’t reconcile that with a plain reading of Scripture. But nobody is leaving our fellowship over any of this. We have lots of different views on the end times, but everyone relaxes into the crucial point that Jesus is returning. The non-essentials remain topics of loving, sometimes passionate, discussion. But we give each other liberty. That’s the culture and

personality of our church. Our borders on the essentials are clear and strong. So our working through the non-essentials can happen with respect and listening and interest.

This balance means we have freedom to press into Paul's great teaching. The church is the model to the world of how people from all different backgrounds, ethnicities, former religions and even political ideas can share the one cup of salvation, and break bread together as members of the one body of Jesus. It's why on the Sunday we celebrate the Scottish roots of our faith, we rejoice that there are Presbyterians all over the world, including millions in South Korea, millions in Africa, even a million in Mexico. That's why we all affirm our faith joyfully together.

It's in this spirit that we can hear Paul's admonitions to the Ephesians. Walk with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love. Be eager--not indifferent or half-hearted-- to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace. Confessing Christ Jesus means humility. Jesus is Lord. I am not. We share that consecration with the other hearts in this room. We realize we have been given to each other to walk together in serving Christ. We're who we've got. We can't snipe, or exasperate, or jockey against each other. We sing the songs on the Sundays they are our favorites and on the Sundays they're not. We jump in where we are needed whether it's our perfect gifting or not.

Living out our unity is of the highest priority to our Lord. Thankfully, we have years of harmony to stand on. We have a culture of secure borders: in essentials unity. We have culture of giving each other room: in non-essentials liberty. We have a culture of caring: in all things, love. Let's rejoice in hearing again the story of our heritage. Let's rejoice to say together our confession of faith. Let's have a great time hanging out together. So Christ might be shown to the world!