

“The Power of One”

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¹I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift...

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16)

In 1982, in the small town of Cambridge, Minnesota, a young man named Tom Pagel was elected to his first term on the Isanti County Board of Commissioners. At 33 years old, every other commissioner was more than twice his age. They were all farmers; he ran an investment company. They were country folk; he had been raised in the Twin Cities and lived in a subdivision. It was obvious that they all looked upon him – and these are his own words – as a “punk kid” who wanted to change everything but knew nothing. Lloyd Stavem, one of his fellow commissioners, came right out and said what the rest were thinking: “I don’t know that I [even] want my name on the same letterhead as you.”¹

It was not a great start. Pagel kept at it, but when he announced his first re-election campaign things looked bleak. Right at the outset, the local paper, the Cambridge Star, had to print an unfortunate correction about their story on his campaign. “Isanti County Commissioner Tom Pagel,” the retraction read, “has 100-percent support from his family, not 10 percent, as was stated in last week's article.”² Not a hopeful message to the world, that even among his family members, only one out of ten was planning on voting for him.

Fortunately for Tom, that figure was wrong. The family was actually 100% behind him. When it came to their son, brother, and cousin Tom, the family spoke as one in their love and support. And with that backing, Tom grew and matured into a fine county commissioner, one who became known as someone who would listen to all, even those with whom he disagreed, one who always did what he thought was best for the people of Isanti County, Minnesota.

¹ Tesha M. Christensen, “‘Punk kid’ retires as commissioner after successful 22-year career,” <https://www.presspubs.com>, January 12, 2009.

² <https://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/u/unity.htm>



This is the same hope that Paul had for the churches he planted. He wanted them to do two things: he wanted them to **gather**, and he wanted them to **grow**. And this passage from Ephesians is about both of those things. It is about gathering as the church, and it is about growing in the church.

And in both cases, Paul says that the people of the church need to be united. We need to be one about who and what we are gathering around, and one with regard to the growth we are seeking. In order to make sure no one missed this call to unity, he repeated it like he was banging a hammer against a nail: “[Make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” he wrote. “There is one body... one Spirit... one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”

First, the gathering. As we look around this morning at our own gathering, we have to admit this is a diverse group of people. Each of us have different hopes, different needs, different conceptions of faith, and different perspectives on the world. But that does not mean that we are not called to be one as a body. As we just read in the gospel of John, this is the prayer of Christ himself: that we would be one. Referring to that prayer on the night of the Last Supper, my New Testament professor Frances Taylor Gench observes that “[Jesus] does not pray that we might all be the same, but that we might all be one, despite the differences that divide us, because the quality of our life together... is our most convincing witness to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.”³ In other words, our unity around that one witness is the best thing we can offer to the world.

The unity of our gathering is reflected in the windows all around you this morning. At ground level, the nave windows reflect key events in the life of Christ, from the nativity around to the crucifixion. Up top, the clerestory windows remind us that the body of Christ has always been, is now, and will always be encircled by a great cloud of witnesses... from Abraham and Isaac and key voices from the Old Testament... around to life-giving stories, parables, and teachings from the New Testament. And in the back, Christ is at the center, and at the top, surrounded by the words “Lo, I am with you always.” And at the bottom, key words from the Lord’s Prayer, reminding us that we are not in charge: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Not our kingdom... not our will... but his.

The reality described by these windows is not only our reality; it is the reality of every Christian in every time and every place. Christians in Scotland, France, and Spain... in Egypt, Iran, and Palestine... on the Korean Peninsula and all across Asia. It’s not just ten percent of us that are in it. It is 100% of us. The whole family is bound together around person and presence of Christ. One body... one Lord... one faith... one baptism... one God and Father of all. This unity is a powerful witness to the world.

But that is not enough. There is more. Yes, we gather to proclaim faith in one faith, one baptism, one God... but we also gather to **grow**. The plea to the Ephesians was strong: “I beg you,” the letter says. “I beg you to lead lives worthy of God.” And we need each other to do that. Remember how Tom Pagel described himself when he was first elected? A “punk kid.” A punk kid who wanted to change everything but knew nothing. I hate to break it to you, but that is you and me and everyone who ever tried to live lives truly worthy of God. We need help to do that... a lot of help.

And there are two great phrases the letter uses to describe the help we can give each other in the church: “equipping the saints” and “building up the body of Christ.” Paul is too

³ Gench, Frances Taylor. *Faithful Disagreement*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox (2009), pp. 14-5.

kind to call us “punk kids,” but he does say that we need to grow up... that we need to mature... that we have a long way to go before we become the people God made us to be. *“We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”*

I love that phrase, “equipping the saints.” Maybe it is my early experience as a Boy Scout, and the mantra of the official motto “Be prepared.” We never went car camping. We always went backpacking. And out in the North Carolina mountain wilderness, if you might need it, you better pack it and carry it. The same is true of faith. Leading with love in this world is a full contact sport. Living a life of authentic faith is the most challenging thing we can ever try, so we better be prepared for it.

The word the letter uses -- “equipping” -- is literally perfect. The verb *katartizo* literally means “to perfect,” so that, when God is finished with us, we will have everything we need in our spiritual backpacks. But the connotations go way beyond training and preparation. The kind of perfection this word offers includes restoration and healing, as in the setting of a broken bone or the care of a nurse when someone is near death. In the gospels, it was used to describe the work of fishermen on the beaches of Galilee, as they sat after a hard day on the water mending torn nets. To be “equipped” in this sense is to have our torn and frayed places repaired, so that we can go out and do what God needs us to do.⁴

This is the nature of the call that brings us here to the body of Christ. This letter wants us to be of one mind, in one accord, about why we are here, and why this body -- the church -- is so vitally important to us and to the world. And ten percent buy in is not enough. When the Cambridge Star told the world that only ten percent Tom Pagel’s own family was behind him, that was not a message of strength. But the real story – the fact that he began his career in public service with 100% support from his family – made it possible for a self-proclaimed know-it-all to be equipped, taught, prepared, mended, and restored... made it possible for a punk kid to mature into a selfless servant who made the world a better place.

That is the **Power of One**. God calls us to be committed and of one mind about why we gather... committed and of one mind in our hope to grow... dedicated to helping one another to be prepared for lives of faith and service, making each other better as we “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

When it comes to what God wants from you, from me, and from Larchmont Avenue Church, 10% is not enough. At the ground floor, for the most basic elements of the faith we profess, what God wants is for the family to be 100% committed on to a foundational set of convictions: “**one** body... **one** Spirit... **one** hope... **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism, **one** God and Father of all.” That witness is the greatest gift we have to offer to God, to ourselves, and to the world.

That is the Power of One.

Amen.

⁴ <https://biblehub.com/greek/2675.htm>