

April 9, 2017

Who are you?

"As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace..."

Ephesians 4:1-3

In his final prayer with his followers before his death our Lord said, ***"My prayer is not for them alone. I also pray for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."*** (John 17:20-21) When we talk about what God wants us to be a major theme in the response to that question is that God wants us to be one; to be unified in him.

Unity is not a common theme in our world. We are divided from others by nearly every possible difference. There are certainly those among us who are creating that division intentionally and their efforts are working.

God did not call you and I to take part in this constant state of division. He has not given us permission to be filled with hatred, to judge and condemn others, or to participate with those who do. Instead God has called us to be one. Jesus' final prayer for us is this very unity which he says will validate to the world that he is the Son of God.

Paul, writing in our context for today, tells us that living a life worthy of the calling that we have received demands that we make every effort to maintain our unity, our oneness, with others. So, a part of who I am, if I am choosing to be what God has called me to be, must be reflected in my work to live together in harmony with others. But how do we continue to maintain unity in our relationships in a world so overwhelmed by the constant drumbeat of division?

Paul would tell us that it begins with humility. In his letter to the believers in Philippi the Apostle wrote, ***"...make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves...Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing..."*** (Philippians 2:1-12)

Humility is not the 'aw shucks, it weren't nothing' mentality that a lot of us think it is. Instead it is a very real emptying out of self. When I cease to see myself as the most important thing in my life; when I give up the pursuit of getting my own way, then I am being humble. Just as Jesus emptied himself, so I must empty myself, if I am going to maintain unity with others.

When I take Jesus' command to ***"...do to others what you would have them do to you..."*** (Matthew 7:12) literally then I weight every attitude and action against this measure; how would I want to be treated in this situation. When I have truly emptied myself then such a standard becomes possible. Selfish ambition and vain conceit would lead me to believe that I am above such measures. "But those people..." I might be tempted to argue.

Humility makes such arguments impossible. I can't make judgments about "...those people..." because I am "those people". My struggles are just like theirs. My challenges are just like theirs. I am them.

All of the rest of what Paul talks about as maintaining unity flows out of our capacity to be humbled. When I pour out my self; my selfish ambitions and my vain conceits, then I can live in unity with all others. In that unity I reflect that I am a child of God, a follower of Jesus Christ, and one among God's people.

