

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

18th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 4:1-6

We like our neighborhood. We have some great neighbors who are a delight. But through the years and even to the present we have experienced the difficult reality of living in proximity to other human beings. We had one neighbor who had a volatile temper. He once went ballistic at a kid simply because the kid was trying to retrieve a ball that had rolled under the guy's car. Laurie, the easiest person on the planet to get along with, almost got into a physical fight with that guy once. There was a stuffy little man who lived on our street that once complained because Laurie's parents parked their RV in one of the guest parking spaces in the neighborhood. It wasn't against any rules and it didn't inconvenience him in any way, he just didn't like it. There's another guy who is so annoying that two of the neighbors who lived closest to him sold their homes and moved to different locations not far away just to get away from him. There was a woman who felt Laurie teaching piano in our home was an issue because you're not supposed to run a business out of your home. That woman runs a business out of her home!

Getting along with people is not an easy task. Clinical therapist Dominique Talley says, "As humans, our innate tendency is to be selfish." Given this bent, it is hardly surprising that we all have trouble getting along.

On May 25, 1961, President John F. Kennedy announced in a speech to Congress the goal of landing a man on the moon by the end of that decade. It is easy now to not be aware of what an outrageous idea that was. When he proposed that goal, the equipment required to do that did not exist. We didn't have the launch pads or the rockets necessary to get people to the moon. We didn't have the suits that would be required to keep astronauts alive in the vacuum of space, nor the computers that would be required for navigating in space. There were no computers at that point that could even do real time computing. No one was sure how to fly a course to get to the moon, nor were they certain about the math for docking two spacecraft. Not only did they not know the solutions to many of the problems, they didn't even know what problems they would face. And yet, in one of the most remarkable efforts of human effort, ingenuity, engineering and sheer determination, just eight years later, 50 years ago yesterday, Neil Armstrong stepped off the Lunar Excursion Module onto the dusty surface of the moon. That our nation was able to accomplish that was astounding and in the opinion of historian Arthur Schlesinger, it will be in history's light the most significant event of the 20th century. But here's the human problem. 50 years later, human beings still have the same struggles we have always had. We still can't get along with each other. Our nation and our world are still torn by conflict, strife and dissension. In light of this, today I want to talk about something that many might consider the impossible dream. It only exists in fairy tales and fantasy stories. Yet it is something we all long for, and more important, it is something God calls us to. Let's look at Ephesians 4:1-6.

UNITY IS ITEM ONE

Last week we remembered our calling and its enormous value, and we saw that we are challenged by God to live in a manner worthy of our calling. But the calling we have received from God is the greatest gift we could ever receive. This gift was obtained for us at a cost that cannot be calculated. It required the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. What could we do that would be worthy of that sacrifice and that gift?

Back in 2007 and 2008 there was a man named Jerome Kerviel who worked for the French bank Societe Generale doing arbitrage trading. Unfortunately, it turned out he was doing fraudulent trades to the tune of billions of dollars. When it was discovered that he had lost billions of dollars of the bank's money, he was charged with fraud, tried, and convicted. He was given a prison sentence of three years and he was ordered to repay the bank the \$6.7 billion that he had lost. His salary at the time of his shenanigans was \$66,000 per year. How is he supposed to pay \$6.7 billion? If they took every penny of his salary and put it toward that debt it would take 100,000 years to pay it off. I feel safe in predicting he won't live quite that long. The impossible task of paying that enormous sum would be easier than for us to do something that is "worthy" of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

It is both easy and common to hear this call to live worthy of our calling as a demand, that we have to earn it, or at least live such good lives that we deserve to at least keep it. If we had to live life worthy of the calling we have been given in order to earn it or deserve it, that would destroy us. We would live with a constant sense of failure and hopelessness and guilt because we know we're not measuring up. But that is not at all what God wants to happen.

Fortunately for us God gave us that gift freely by his grace. He wants us to live worthy of the calling not to deserve it, which we absolutely can't do, but out of gratitude for what he has already done for us and given us freely. We were reminded last week that this calling is a gift. You don't earn a gift. It is given by grace, and should be simply received gratefully.

We also, as I said, would be stumped to come up with anything that is worthy of what Christ did for us. Nothing is of equal value to the sacrifice he made for us. However, God has his own kind of calculus that he applies when it comes to deciding what is worthy of the gift that he has given to us at such terrible cost to himself. He says there is something we can do that he considers worthy of our calling. In verse 2 he tells us some ways we should live, and in verse 3 he says, "Make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." The qualities he mentioned in verse 2 preserve the unity of the Spirit. It is unity that is worthy of our calling. Notice this repeated theme in verses 4-6. There is one body, one Spirit, we are called to one hope, there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God who is over

all. The word “one” is used seven times in those three verses. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that oneness – unity – is the goal, the thing God considers worthy of our calling.

Psalms 133:1 says, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity.” Humans need to belong, to be part of strong, unified relationships. Having such relationships is important to our physical health. A study done by psychologist Sheldon Cohen exposed college students to a cold virus. The results revealed that students who have strong and close friendships were half as likely as others to catch the cold they were exposed to. I have heard people talking about foods to eat, vitamins to take, ways to exercise to strengthen your immune system. What I don’t hear much about is that one of the greatest factors in strengthening our immune system is strong, healthy relationships! A study by AARP showed that isolation from others is a significant predictor of poor health. Unhealthy relationships or the absence of relationships are known to correlate with depression, decreased immune function and higher blood pressure.

Laurie and I took our granddaughters to a playground near Michael and Carissa’s home. They enjoyed the swings, slides and other equipment. But Ella in particular is very social. At the playground what she most wanted was to play with other kids. There were quite a few kids there, but generally they had friends from the neighborhood with them. They mostly did not welcome this new girl into their circle. One interaction I observed was particularly sad and typical. There was a group of four boys who were all a couple of years older than Ella. They seemed to major in calling each other names. But at one point they tried to organize a game in which the whole point would be to make Ella an outsider. This is classic human behavior of creating your own little circle of insiders and make it clear that another person is not included. It started to really irk me, but before they could put their scheme into action the group splintered and fell apart due to disagreement, bickering and name calling. It was like a microcosm of all of human history right there on the playground.

We all want to belong, and to strengthen our sense of belonging to a group we exclude someone so we can feel special, but the sense of belonging is soon shattered by selfishness and power struggles.

More important than our longing for unity, not only does it feel good to us, God considers it to be hugely important. It is worthy of our calling. Why? We have seen this before, but it is important to remind ourselves of it. It is because it is an inherent aspect of the character of God. God is the God of peace. God has relationship within his own being as a triune God. There is perfect unity in him. He desires that we declare his praises. We are in his image. When we truly live in his image and express truth about him not only through our words but through our actions, we will live with other believers in unity. We will be saying something about God that is true. But when we are divided, at war with others, we say something about God that is absolutely not true. We bring dishonor to his name.

While we were staying with Carissa recently during our pregnancy watch we watched a TV show with her. Two of the characters on the show are brothers, the younger in high school, the older now out of school. They are living together because they've essentially been abandoned by their parents, who are divorced. Their relationship is filled with tension, and at one point they get into a physical fight. I found it disturbing, almost painful to watch because something in me wants the two to love each other. They did eventually come to a truce, but the dysfunction between them says something very loud about the dysfunction between their parents. What their parents are is reflected in the unhappy relation between the two of them. *And when we have broken, dysfunctional relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ it says something awful about our God.*

It is good when God's people live together in unity. It is simply a good thing, a desirable thing that inside we all wish were possible and want to have happen. In his book *The 10 Dumbest Things Christians Do*, Mark Attenbury wrote that people, "Want nothing more than to be part of a loving church family, but nothing in their experience tells them such a thing exists." That breaks my heart. The church should be that place of unity, that loving church family where people experience real love and real oneness. But in our day churches tend to mostly be organizations that roll along with all their programs and plans, hiding the dissension and dysfunction that lurks behind the curtain.

The truth about the human race is we can't get along. Part of the reason God makes unity such a major focus is that it is a powerful witness to his existence and his might. When people do encounter believers truly loving each other and living in unity they know that this is something only God can accomplish, because humans can't, and they want to be a part of it.

Much of the second half of Ephesians is practical instruction for maintaining unity. But this passage gives us some important direction. What will it take to have this kind of unity?

UNITY IS OF THE SPIRIT

Paul says this unity is of the Spirit of Christ. It is not something that we create. It is something that the Holy Spirit produces. Jesus is not at war with himself. So if Christ is in a group of people, if his life is flowing in them, they share the same life, the same Spirit, the same heart. That is going to create unity. An example might be our own bodies. The parts of my body are very different from each other. My small toe is not anything like my eyes. My heart valves are nothing like my elbow. These parts look different, they serve very different functions and they act in very different ways. Yet they all have the same DNA in them, the same blood flows through them all and so they are all part of one body, and they work in complete harmony. I don't create that harmony. God makes it. Occasionally a part will not operate under the orders of the brain in the way that it is supposed to operate. For instance, one day a few weeks ago I got a twitch in my eyelid. It wasn't a big deal, but it was kind of

annoying. It was moving pretty much of its own volition and not according to the entire body's plan. It's not good when that kind of thing happens.

The unity Paul wrote about here is not a unity that comes from agreement about doctrine. It doesn't come from commonality of interests. It is not a unity based, for instance, on the fact that everyone in the church is an ardent Padre fan. It is not based on nationality or culture or race. If we try to create unity on the basis of any of those things we will inevitably fail. This unity is a divine creation that no human can manufacture.

I think it likely that you have experienced this unity. I will share with you an experience I had that I think likely is one you can relate to because you've had the same thing happen. Laurie and I were on an airplane coming home from vacation. It was a late night flight. Laurie was sitting in a window seat and I had the middle seat next to a man I had never met before. It was late, I was tired, but I can't sleep on planes, so I was awake. After a couple of hours this man and I struck up a conversation. As we chatted the thought came into my head, "I bet this guy is a follower of Jesus. He is a brother in Christ." He hadn't said a single thing that would hint at that, but somehow I had a sense that it was true. Shortly after that he asked me what I do for a living. I told him I am a pastor. He just lit up. Sure enough, he was a believer in Jesus and he was very happy to learn that I was, too. So how did I get that sense that he was a brother in Christ before he had said anything that suggested that? I believe that somehow, in a way that defies human explanation, we can sense that unity of the Spirit of Jesus with another person.

If we try to create unity with other people based on human effort and commonalities, it will be a limited unity with very narrow boundaries at best. And of greater concern, it will not last. True unity that can transcend differences, disagreements, conflicts and the inevitable hurts and disappointments of all human relationships, must be a divine creation. It is something God puts in place, something far greater than anything we can do.

UNITY MUST BE PRESERVED

We don't create unity, but Paul says we must do all we can to preserve it. I think of it a little bit like our car. If you think about it, our car is a remarkable piece of engineering. It very reliably transports us safely and comfortably where we want to go. It keeps us cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It enables us to talk to people by phone while driving without physically using the phone. It plays music and can tell us how to get where we are going. I did not create the car. It is way beyond my abilities and resources to create it. I am very grateful for it. My life would be difficult without it. But in order for us to enjoy it we have to preserve it. I have this curious expectation that is not based on anything in reality and I don't really know where it came from. The expectation is that things will just work as they are designed to and will keep on working that way always with no effort from me required. In my head I know that entropy is the way of things in this world. Without effort, everything

tends toward disorder and breakdown. I know that, but somehow I still kind of think that our water heater, the dishwasher, fridge and furnace in our house won't fail, the floors won't wear out, the walls won't need to be painted again and our car will run and stay in prime condition with me doing nothing. And none of that is true. In my fantasy world we just put gas in the car and it will run perfectly forever. But that's not reality. We have to change the oil, rotate the tires, change the transmission oil, replace the brake fluid and take numerous other steps to keep the car in running order. Even with all that it will still gradually degrade.

Given that entropy is an ever present reality, what do you suppose will tend to happen to the unity that God has created? If we don't put energy and effort into maintaining and preserving it, should we not assume it will tend to break down? That is the way of this world. So just as I must make an effort to keep my car in tip top condition, so I must do the same for the unity we have been given in Christ. So what must we do to preserve it?

We don't create unity, but we can sure destroy it. There is a powerful weapon that just annihilates unity. It is a weapon that every human is armed to the teeth with and unfortunately employs on a regular basis. That weapon is selfishness. It doesn't require an extreme narcissistic selfishness to blow up unity. It only requires the normal addiction to self that is characteristic of every human being.

I was reading recently about antimatter, which sounds to me like something out of a science fiction story, but is a real thing. Some antimatter particles have been produced by particle accelerators. But antimatter is astronomically difficult and expensive to produce, and once you have it, how do you store it? Because, as you likely know, when antimatter comes into contact with matter it immediately annihilates it, so what do you store it in? I bring this up because I want you to think of self as anti-unity. When self comes into contact with unity it immediately annihilates it.

That is true every moment of every day everywhere we go and in everything we do. At every moment to the degree that we are serving self we are introducing anti-unity in the equation of our relationships. At every point where that anti-unity touches another person, even down at the atomic level, it is annihilating unity. This is true in our marriages, families, church, friendships, every context where we have any dealing at all with other humans.

This week we got a phone call from Toby and Anna. They were with their kids and needed to talk to us. Ella, who is off the charts when it comes to verbal ability, kept talking. After a bit Anna said, "Ella, you've had your turn to talk, now Mommy and Daddy need to talk to Nana and Yapaw." Shortly after that Ella interrupted and started talking again. Anna said, "Ella, you had your turn. It's not your turn to talk." Ella said, "But I *want* to talk!" I want. Do you know what that is? That is pure anti-unity. What I want is what is important. I assure you that for a few moments, Ella's little anti-unity obliterated unity in her family,

Laurie and I went out to lunch with my mother and we sat at an outdoor table next to a very attractive young married couple. But immediately I could tell that all was not well at the table next to us. They weren't talking, but the body language of the two people radiated tension and unhappiness. We tried to ignore it because it was none of our business. For a time they said nothing to each other, but after a while they started talking. She was hurt and angry because he had not taken her side in some conflict they had with his mother. I didn't know the specifics. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to know any of their issues, but there was no way to avoid hearing what they said to each other. He tried to explain himself, but that was a no go. He realized that was a losing position so he admitted his wrong. He said she was right. He told her he was sorry. But that was not enough. She was hurt and angry at him, and she continued to be angry at him. They eventually left even though nothing had been resolved. I don't think that woman was an unusually selfish person. But her feelings were hurt; her husband had not met expectations. Her focus on herself, on her disappointment and her hurt was anti-unity. It totally destroyed any hope of unity. I have no idea what happened to that couple, but I know that the only way there would ever be unity between them would have required that she let go of self.

Every bit of our innate and persistent focus on self is anti-unity. When we are thinking about ourselves, protecting ourselves, trying to get something for ourselves, promoting ourselves — we are destroying unity in some way. We may not intend that, we may not perceive how we are doing it, but that is exactly what is happening. When self comes into contact with unity it destroys it.

In his book, *Christian Unity*, the late Martin Lloyd Jones wrote, “Most of our troubles arise chiefly from the fact that we persistently start with ourselves...Sin puts man himself in the center. It makes me feel that I alone am important and that what I feel and what is happening to me is what really matters.”

So Paul tells us we must be completely humble, gentle and patient with one another. We must bear with one another. These are all ways of refusing to serve self. Biblical humility is not modesty. It is not playing down our great achievements. Neither is it thinking that we are terrible or worthless people. It is really just not being concerned with ourselves at all.

In Philippians 2:3-4 Paul wrote, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.” Real humility is about valuing others more than yourself and about looking out for their interests rather than your own. This doesn't mean we have to think everybody else is better than us, that we are terrible, or that we don't matter and they are all more important. It means I need to learn to be secure in who I am in Christ and content with what God has given me to do, where he has put me today, so that I don't need to be about

myself. Instead, I can focus on valuing other people, loving them, giving to them, blessing them, seeking their good rather than my own. That is real humility.

That is what will make us gentle and patient with others. Paul says we are to be bearing with one another. That's because other people will at times almost seem unbearable because they are insensitive or insistent on their own way. But this term means a lot more than just tolerate others. It carries the connotation of actually receiving or embracing them.

We hired a painter to paint our kitchen cabinets last year. It was a big relief for Laurie, because the last time they had to be painted she did it. It was a laborious and time consuming job. But I remembered something that happened when she did the job. In the first place, most people would say, "Hey, Rick, how come you didn't do it? You're a man, so why did your wife have to do that task?" She did it because she wanted it done well, and she knew if I did it she wouldn't be happy with the result. That's the unfortunate truth. I'd make a mess of the kitchen, no matter how hard I tried. I knew this, and I felt guilty that she was having to do it. At one point while she was painting I came into the kitchen and I noticed some trash on the counter. As soon as I came into the kitchen she sort of gently began suggesting I should go elsewhere because she has learned through bitter experience that wet paint and her husband make a bad combination. But I wanted to be at least a little helpful. I wanted to clean up the trash. I said, "I'll just throw this trash away." She said, "No, no, Rick, I'll take care of it." But I said, "Don't worry, I'll be careful." And I was. Our trash is under the sink. The cabinet door to the trash was open because Laurie had just painted it. So I was very careful to avoid touching any of the cabinet area as I put the trash in the can with my right hand.

Unfortunately, as I bent over to throw the trash away I unconsciously rested my left hand on the top of the cabinet door. I got paint on my hand and I left a handprint in the wet paint on the door. It would be nice if Laurie had a husband who could do those normal household things, but barring that, who at least wouldn't work against her. She had to stop and help clean up my hand because she knew if she didn't she would find paint transferred to some other spot in the house where it shouldn't be, and she had to go back and repaint the top of the cabinet door. The reasonable reaction to that incident would be for her to be impatient and frustrated with me. You would expect her to say something like, "It would be nice if you could ever do something useful around the house, but since you can't, could you please not make it harder for me? Just get out of the kitchen." But she didn't do that. She didn't just tolerate me or blow up at me. She just laughed, told me she loved me and said, "Maybe you show go in the living room and watch a ball game on TV." Her husband is a klutz, but she embraces him and loves him despite his many deficits, and that's what it means to bear with each other.

Unity, to be real, must transcend the inevitable disagreements, hurts and conflicts that happen in human relationships. The real test of our commitment to God-ordained unity comes

precisely when others disagree with us, hurt us, disappoint us, or annoy us. Will we, in humility and gentleness, embrace even them?

APPLICATION

REMEMBER THE VALUE OF UNITY

Most important, remember how valuable God thinks unity is. What can be of equal weight on the other side? God says *in his accounting system unity is of equal weight to the sacrifice Jesus made for us*. In other words, it's a huge deal to God.

It makes a huge difference to belong and be unified. I was thinking about the fact that Laurie's and my life could look really boring to some people. We almost never go to concerts or plays, we don't even go to movies much. We go to sports events almost never. We don't rock climb or go white water rafting. But honestly we love our lives and we have all the fun we could ever want. That's because we can have fun going to the grocery store as long as we're together. We can do the most mundane things and have a great time because we are together, and being together is the most fun we have, no matter what we're doing. For my birthday Laurie asked what I would like to do most. I didn't even have to think about it. I wanted to be with our kids and grandkids. I wanted to be with the people that I belong to most. I find that going to a wedding reception where I don't know anyone is infinitely easier if Laurie is with me. I even find going to the dentist a bit more bearable when we go together.

My point is not, "Well lucky you, Rick." It's that at the end, life is about relationships; and what makes it full, more bearable and joyful, is belonging. That's not just true of a marriage. It's true of having a family of believers that we belong to and being unified with them.

DON'T EXPECT IT TO BE EASY

Verse 3 tells us to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit." Effort is a significant word. I am amazed at times how lazy I can be. We have a sound bar that sits in front of our TV. The problem with that is that it blocks the receptor on the bottom of the screen that gets the signal from the remote. The remote works as it is supposed to for changing channels, but to turn the TV on or off I have to stand up, get near the TV and hold the remote at a high angle so the signal hits that receptor. We have been staying at Carissa and Michael's house when Michael is away because the doctors don't want Carissa to be alone. They don't have a sound bar in front of the TV so I can just sit on the couch and hit the power button on the remote, and the TV turns on. I have found myself dreaming of changing our situation so I wouldn't have to make all the effort to turn the TV on and off, but could just sit on the couch like I do at their house. Yeah, I'm that lazy.

The issue is, I have to make the effort. I'll do it at home because watching TV is important to me. (And how sad is that statement?) But we will make the effort when it is important to us.

When Paul talks about effort, that tells us that keeping unity will require work. We don't create it, but to maintain it will mean putting out effort. My point is that having unity among us as believers is important and wonderful, but keeping it won't just happen. We will have to make preserving unity a priority. We will have to put time and energy into it. We will have to deliberately be patient and humble, not serve self and will have to bear with each other. We must work at it. We must decide it is important, so important that we work at it, we choose it over our natural anti unity self-interest.

FOCUS ON THE FATHER

Paul reminds us in these verses that there is one Spirit, one Lord and one Father who is over all. There is the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All live in perfect harmony. That is the model for us. As we focus on him we remember he is over all. He is the one this is all about. Life is not about us. It is not about us being comfortable, successful, popular, well liked, powerful, rich or famous. It is about him. As we all focus on giving him glory, on being like him, we will be drawn together in a way that no human could manufacture.

Do you remember the incident in Isaiah 6 when Isaiah had an experience of seeing Almighty God on his throne? Angels were floating around proclaiming, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." He got a glimpse of the glory and pure, blazing holiness of God. The poor guy was devastated by the experience. In that searing light he saw the darkness in himself. He said, "Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips." In other words, everything that comes out of me is polluted. In today's colloquial he was saying, "Oh, no, I am toast!" Here's my question: Do you think there was a moment when he thought, "I'll bet this is better than anything Jeremiah saw. I'm going to be more famous than he is." Do you think he was thinking, "You know that guy that criticized me and said I'm too negative? That hurt my feelings. I need to come up with some way to get back at him."

In light of the glory of God, all the selfish stuff — all the anti-unity so common in the human heart — was obliterated. The best thing we can do is keep focused on the glory of God, and remember that's what we are all about.