

# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“OUT OF MANY, ONE”

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 4: 1-6

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, November 10, 2024  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Ephesians 4: 1-6

## Unity in the Body of Christ

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

## Out of Many, One

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Have you ever thought of the story of Ruth as a story of God’s faithfulness...of God’s providence?

Consider how it is that the story took place during the period of the Judges, which tells us at least two things: 1) it tells us that these events happened at a time in the history of God’s people that was marked by weak faith and irresponsible conduct, and 2) all of this happened before Israel had a king. In other words, we might say today that these were not the glory days...there were much better days to come.

Due to a famine in the land, a woman from Bethlehem in Judah named Naomi and her husband and their two sons moved to the country of Moab.

In our reading this morning, we are told that after some time, Naomi’s husband dies, and her sons also die. So, she finds herself in a foreign country with only her two daughters-in-law. Naomi decides to go home to her land and her people, and she implores her daughters-in-law to stay behind. One of them does, the one named Orpah...

You know at least one famous Orpah, though she is better known by the name she goes by today, Oprah.

Well, Orpah, in this case, decides to stay in Moab with her kindred, but Ruth decides to leave Moab, to leave all that was familiar to her behind, and to return with Naomi to her homeland – to go with her back to Bethlehem.

When they arrive, the women of the town, as if in wonderment, say, “Is this Naomi?” and Naomi replies, “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara, which means bitter, for the Lord has dealt bitterly with me.”

And so, it seems that all that is left...is apparent emptiness. “I went away full,” Naomi would say, “but the Lord has brought me back empty.”

But did He really? I mean, was Naomi left entirely empty-handed? She had Ruth, which we will get to in a moment, but, more importantly, and whether Naomi realized it or not, she also had God!

Now, we need to know that before the end of the book of Ruth, Naomi will have her name restored, Ruth will marry into the family and give birth to a son named Obed...and another thing we will come to find out is that Obed will become the father of Jesse. Jesse will become the father of David -- King David!

Friends, this dramatic turn of events doesn't just happen. It's not luck that reverses the otherwise tragic and downward spiral of events that we read about in this morning's Old Testament Lesson.

Make no mistake about it. What takes a traumatic story and turns it into a story of triumph? Naomi and Ruth's helper amidst the flood is none other than God!

And when we stop and think about it, it really is amazing how God accomplishes His good purposes and how God demonstrates His faithfulness. That divine attribute of fidelity, of loyalty, is enlivened in the lives of God's people...even in the lives of those who do not know God.

I'm speaking of Ruth, who started out as a Moabite. It wasn't until later, and after she demonstrated loyalty to Naomi and returned with her to Bethlehem. It wasn't until sometime after that when Ruth married into Naomi's family and was engrafted into God's redemptive history.

That said, I'd be remiss if I didn't add that, even as a "newbie," Ruth could see more clearly what the people of God should be doing than they did. In one of the more famous parts of the story, Ruth ordered a man of Israel to fulfill the law of God...and he did!

God used Ruth as an integral part of His drama of redeeming love. For her part, she was good clay in her relationships. She bore witness to such godly and foundational virtues as love, loyalty, and unity!

"Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

When Ruth says this, she is effectively telling us that at the heart of her relationship with Naomi was a blessed measure of unity.

In our reading from the fourth chapter of Ephesians, we are told that there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

In other words, our spiritual heritage is a unity with God, and the Apostle Paul encourages us to make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." You see, God has built unity into the fabric of our spiritual life!

When George Matheson penned the words, "O love that wilt not let me go," he was asserting that God's love never relinquishes its grip! God, in Christ Jesus, our Lord, chose to unite with us, to become flesh, and to dwell among us in grace and truth.

In this way, God has unity with us, and God doesn't let go! We are the ones who let unity slip from our hands, much like we might let slip away our peace or our joy!

I attended the funeral of a high school student many years ago and was surprised when his mother got up to speak. I couldn't tell you anything else she said, but one thing she said I will never forget. She said, "I will not let my joy be stolen."

The phrase "E pluribus unum" was built into the fabric of our nation's charter, and translated means "out of many, one." I dare say, in ways both sacred and secular, we must work to maintain unity!

Sometimes, that is easier said than done, and sometimes, we can't find our way to "trace the rainbow through the rain," as it were. But I would add that if the hymn writer Matheson could do that, and do so as a person who was blind from the age of 17, surely, we can do that? We can actually see the rainbow!

This is a weekend when we honor our Veterans...and express our gratitude for those chapters in their lives when they were united for the cause of freedom. And for their unity, we have a chance at ours! ...Our common heritage of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But how do we practice unity? How do we practice unity in our relationships? How do such divine virtues move from being something that we see in God to something that we experience with another?

Well, the first step is always to understand our unity as it relates to God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer used the image of spokes in a wheel to describe not only our unity but also our responsibility to maintain that unity as the Christian community. Each spoke is connected to the others only by its connection to the center — the hub of the wheel, which is Jesus.

And the closer we draw to Christ, the closer we also draw to one another, and the farther from Christ we go, the farther we become from one another.

What's more, in Bonhoeffer's view, our unity is not something we create on our own; it is a gift from God, and it is a gift that we are called to protect and nurture, to maintain!

And one of the ways we can maintain our unity is by being committed to it! Ruth chose to remain with Naomi; she chose to be loyal to Naomi. She could have stayed in Moab. She had family there and customs there. She had religion there!

But her best life was realized when she remained in a relationship with those to whom God had placed her in a covenant community!

I have always been struck by how faithful and loyal Ruth was...at a time when she didn't know the end of the story! We know the end of the story. We know that things turned out okay. For Ruth, everything was unknown. There was risk and uncertainty. Yet even in the face of uncertainty, the call to unity stood firm. It was mindful of the welfare of the other and trusted in God.

The Apostle Paul was quick to remind us that maintaining our unity requires humility, gentleness, and patience. It requires that we bear with one another in love.

And that doesn't mean that we have to agree on everything, but it does mean that we agree that in all things, we are brothers and sisters in Christ because, here again, Christ is the source of our unity, not us. In Christ, there is power, which means that there is also power in our unity.

The hymn, *Blest Be The Tie That Binds*, presents our unity like a tie, like a rope! It doesn't require much imagination to understand that a rope is not typically made of a single strand. It is usually made up of several smaller strands woven tightly together.

Individually, strands are quick to tear. They can fray under pressure, but when they are braided together, they gain strength and can withstand greater tension and heavy loads! Our unity as Christ's Church is similar in that. Our bond in the Spirit makes us far stronger together than we could ever be apart.

Each of us has different gifts and skills for ministry, different personalities, and different perspectives, but when we are bound together by the love of Christ and when we are guided by the Spirit, that tie that binds us together forms a bond of peace, a gift of God's grace. It provides us with the strength to withstand the trials of life and to be for God, a resilient community of faith.

The name Mother Teresa is not new to most of us. What a wonderful example of a person who bore witness to the Biblical admonition to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Through her work with the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, Mother Teresa served some of the poorest and most marginalized people in the world. In doing so, she maintained and even helped to build unity among people of different faiths, backgrounds, and nationalities.

Mother Teresa's approach was as simple as can be. She celebrated the unity she had with Christ by creating a bond of peace with everyone!

Everyone was treated with respect. Everyone was treated as a child of God! She often said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

Her actions tore down walls of division, and hers was a means of gracious and even radical hospitality, inspiring people from all walks of life to work together to serve those in need.

She demonstrated her unity with God, the calling to which she had been called. She bore witness to it by not only honoring the image of God in which she had been created but also honoring the image of God in which others have been created.

Maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is a unity not simply talked about. It is something that happens!

By God's grace, may it be so in our lives, and may we, the Church be called forth wherever she is found...may we work to make unity a blessing in every land and among every people...to the praise of God!

Let us pray.

"Who by the power at work within us can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."