

“Walking in Step”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Seventh in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 4.1-6

February 23, 2014

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to walk in a way that is worthy of the calling you received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love, eager to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4.1-6

New International Version, adapted by GSY

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is a movie set in Mississippi during the Great Depression.¹ It follows three prisoners who've escaped from a chain-gang. Now they need a blacksmith, “a smithy,” to cut through the chain that is binding them together.

Let's watch a scene. You can see it here, or read the summary.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drvaZz3FWOI>

Summary: They are running to catch a slow-moving freight train. The first makes it. Everett scampers on and stands himself up. Then he sees, already in the boxcar, other down-on-their-luck guys who are riding the rails too. He starts asking if any is a “smithy.” Remember, he and his two companions are from a chain-gang, and they're still chained together. A blacksmith would solve that problem!

Meanwhile, as Everett's talking, we can see Delmar behind him, pulling himself into the boxcar. Pete's still running alongside. But he trips and falls. Still chained to him, Delmar gets yanked off the train, and Everett too. The trio tumbles down in a heap, while the train gets away.

They start arguing about who should be in charge. They vote. Pete votes for Pete, and Everett for Everett. Both look at Delmar. He looks at them. “Okay,” he says, “I'm with you fellas,” picking neither side.

¹ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Written, Produced and Directed by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen. 2000.

“Okay, I’m with you fellas . . .”

I think we’ve got ourselves there a picture of church! We are followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit has bound us together. Sometimes we trip and fall, and end up in a heap. Still, we’re bound. Funny thing is, I think that’s the way he’s meaning us to be.

II

That Bible passage we heard is a classic about our unity in the church-community of Jesus.² We are one. We can think about our particular congregation, and the unity we have with each other. We can think about the big organization we are part of, The United Church of Canada. We put unity in our name! We can think of our community with other Christians nearby – Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Catholics, charismatics, Baptists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Mennonites and so on. We can think of the global family of Jesus-followers, some a lot like us, most very different. Whatever scope we’re thinking of, we are all one in Jesus. That’s worth celebrating!

Sometimes, though, we see we’re chained with people we’d rather get away from. Some with whom we share the name of Christ are weird, disagreeable, troubling, embarrassing, infuriating, and just plain wrong sometimes. I could give some examples, but you can think of your own. Ever heard something, and said to yourself, *“I’m not that sort of Christian!”*? “That sort of Christian” is who I mean. (Don’t worry, they’d probably say the same about you and me.)

Still, we’re bound together, even when we’re tripping and falling over each other.

III

We best remember that God created the whole human family to be one. Not duplicate copies of each other, though. God fashions humans to grow into a wondrous diversity, different from each other – individuals, communities, nations, cultures. Yet our differences are to serve our oneness. God made us for flourishing, for wholeness, for peace. We only flourish when we bless one another. We are only whole when we complete each other. We only know peace when we are right with each other.

Too often and tragically, we trample this. Instead of welcoming, we fear and frighten. We make differences into divisions. We hoard abundance, and fight over scarcity. We shout well and listen poorly. We envy. We scheme. We tread each other down. We build walls,

² John R. W. Stott, The Message of Ephesians (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1979), p. 147.

and throw stones, and worse.

This letter to the Ephesians we've been reading is about God bringing everything back together, in Jesus. Groups of people, the entire cosmos, and each of us. Jesus is our peace. He has torn down the wall of hostility. He took our hatreds toward each other and turned them upon himself. In his own death, he killed their power. Jesus is making us into a new humanity, reconciling us together. From the very beginning, God's dream and determination has been *"to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, the Messiah Jesus."*³

IV

God makes the Jesus-community to be a monument to this. We are the launch and the symbol of Jesus' all-reconciling, all-gathering mission. See why our unity is so important? If we're not walking together with our sisters and brothers, then we are not being who God made us to be.

Our unity is not something we create. We are one. God, in Jesus and by the Spirit, makes us one. *"There is one body."* Notice Paul's wording. He doesn't say, "There should be one body." He doesn't say, "Get working to become one body." What he says already is. *"There is one body."* That's us: us here, and us throughout the world. One body! With the Messiah as the one Head – the source, the authority – of the one body.

There is one Spirit, the Holy Spirit who brings us together.⁴

There is one hope, the world-changing, life-saving, creation-healing, reconciling Jesus.

There is one Lord. Jews use "the Lord" as a respectful way of speaking the name of God. Remarkably and radically, Jesus-following Jews started calling him their one Lord.

There is one faith — Not a collection of beliefs we sign on to, but faith as trust. Faith makes a relationship work. We trust in the same Lord.

There is one baptism. Baptism brings us into the community, the Body. We have different ways of doing baptism, and different understandings of it. No matter, we're all talking about the same baptism.

³ This paragraph alludes to themes throughout Ephesians 1-3. The quote at the end is from 1.9-10.

⁴ Stott 150.

There is one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Paul finishes with a crescendo: the wideness of God's grace, the expansiveness of God's purposes, the reach and closeness of God's presence.

Notice the hints of the Trinity: one Spirit, one Lord, one Father. The Three who are One God. The church's oneness is an expression of God's oneness.⁵

We do not unite ourselves. God makes us one. God gives us our unity.

V

Still, we have work to do. Our calling includes maintaining and growing our God-given unity. Everett, Delmar and Pete were chained together, but they weren't doing so well at walking together.

Eugene Peterson tells this story.⁶ He and his wife Jan had a practice of walking to a park down from their place. They'd stroll around the pond, watch the birds and plant life, and talk about life together.

One day, as they were walking, a man on a bike went past. He suddenly stopped, and waited for them. Without any introduction or small talk, he blurted out, "*How long have you been married?*" Startled, they nonetheless replied courteously. "*Thirty-three years.*"

"I knew it!" he said. "*Do you realize that you walk in perfect step with one another? I mean absolutely synchronized perfect. My wife and I have been married five years and we haven't got it down yet. We are always just micro-seconds off.*" With that, he rode away.

Walking-in-step is no big deal, but it is a sign of something. Both couples – the 5-year and 33-year ones – are just as married, just as united. But years of practicing together gives a deeper unity.

We learn to walk together only with practice. And yes, we trip and fall over each other. Remember, we're walking with people who are weird, disagreeable, troubling, embarrassing, infuriating, and just plain wrong. People just like us.

⁵ Ibid, 151.

⁶ Paraphrased from Eugene H. Peterson, Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), pages 178-79.

Is that why Paul begins his teaching highlighting:

humbleness – not seeing ourselves as too much.

gentleness – this is not weakness, but the gentleness of the strong whose strength is under control.⁷

patience

bearing with one another in love

– tolerating things about others that bother us, because we love them.

Practicing these over time, we learn to walk in step. We're always bound together in Jesus, together part of his his Body. Amen.

⁷ Or "meekness," See Stott, 149.