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**Pentecost 11 with reading from Pentecost 10
Ephesians 4**

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“Getting to Unity”

...make every effort to maintain unity in the spirit...

How many of you are coordinated? How many of you are uncoordinated? How many of you have been both? OK. That last is me. I’m coordinated in some ways – I can play the piano and type and I used to do gymnastics. And then, I’ve also managed to fall flat on my face before – and more than once!

Recently at the wedding reception of my son and daughter-in-law I overheard a conversation. Someone was asking someone to dance and their response was,

“Oh, not me! I’m just not coordinated enough! My feet have a mind of their own!”

My feet have a mind of their own. Well they didn’t mean that literally, obviously.

We’re lucky with our human bodies in that each part of our body does NOT have a mind of its own.

If each part had a mind of its own and your right foot wanted to walk and your right leg didn’t, that would be a problem.

If your right foot and leg wanted to walk forward and your left leg and foot backwards, that would be a problem.

If your right eye wanted to look right and your left eye wanted to look left, that would be a problem.

But luckily, fortunately, blessedly, our bodies have just ONE mind and that mind directs all of the other parts so we can do things like walk and talk and feed ourselves and clothe ourselves and all kinds of other things.

Paul uses the body to illustrate what it means to be the body of Christ, to be the church.

It’s a good analogy, but as we know, analogies only go so far; if you try to push them too far, they break down.

And where Paul’s analogy breaks down is that each of us members of Christ’s body DOES have a mind of our own!

And because we each have a mind of our own and are not always discerning the mind of Christ,

we have here Paul’s earnest appeal that we make every effort to maintain unity in the Spirit.

Paul urges each of us to listen to the head, to the mind of Christ, and to do as that mind directs.

So how do we do that? How do we discern the mind of Christ? How do we figure out God’s will for us?

I can think of 2 ways. Perhaps you can think of others, but the 2 ways I can think of are prayer & Bible study.

1. First, prayer....

Now I’m sure that most of you, if not all of you, pray.

You talk to God and you ask God’s blessings upon your life and the lives of the people you love.

You pray about situations and challenges and decisions you need to make.

You pray about issues in our world and you pray for our church.

You pray for help and for healing. And that’s a beautiful thing.

We also come here on Sundays and we pray.

I offer a prayer at the beginning of service. We have the Lord’s Prayer and the Offering Prayer

We have the Prayers of Intersession and they are beautiful

For they often remind us to pray for things that might not otherwise come onto our radar screen.

There’s also a beauty in praying the same prayers that other people around the country are praying that week.

And there’s a beauty in praying prayers that come out of the scripture lessons for the day.

These prayers at our homes and here in church on Sundays are good.

But those are not the prayers that will necessarily help us to discern the mind of Christ.

There’s a reason that Jesus said where a group of people gathers together

and they agree in the Lord about something and ask, then their request will be granted.

Jesus knew that while individual prayer is powerful,

if you have more people praying together – especially to discern God’s will – the power expands exponentially.

I can ask God what God wants for Salem and you can ask the same thing and God may answer,

but I believe it’s much more likely that God will answer when we pray together.

And I’m not talking about general prayers like, “God please bless Salem”.

To discern the mind of Christ our prayers need to be specific.

We need to be clear about a particular issue or challenge or decision.

What do you want us to do about this, God? What is your will concerning this decision?

How do you want us to proceed?

We did that several months ago when I didn't know whether or not God wanted us to sell to a particular buyer.

There wasn't total agreement among those who were voting so we prayed in church

and the prayer was, "God make it clear to us if you want us to sell to this man.

If you do, make it go through quickly and smoothly and if you don't, then make that crystal clear.

Through rather strange circumstances God made it crystal clear.

We have a chance to pray for things when we come together for worship on Sundays

and we also have a chance to pray for things when we gather at noon on Wednesdays on zoom.

The more of us who gather and pray and ask to discern the mind of Christ

for Salem, for other churches, and for our individual lives,

the more confident I am that together we will discern the mind of Christ, the will of God

So for unity in the spirit we need to discern the mind of Christ, and we do that in 2 ways: first, through prayer,

2. And second, through joint reflection on God's Word.

Now we may reflect on God's Word on our own.

And we may go to Bible studies that focus on learning about God and the Bible in general,

but those things are not specifically focused on jointly discerning the mind of Christ on a particular issue.

We're doing that in a way right now as I reflect on the Word according to how God leads me.

But better than just having me reflect to you, how much better would it be

if we were to all read and reflect on a particular text or theme

for the express reason of discerning the will of God on a particular matter.

So for unity in the spirit we need to discern the mind of Christ,

and we do that through joint prayer and joint reflection on God's Word.

The next step is that we need to do as Christ's directs, and that's where the real rub comes.

Because let's face it: we don't like to be told what to do!

That's why Paul uses the image of a husband and wife.

He's not really talking about husbands and wives here;

he's just using that example from his culture

to explain about a relationship where one party has authority over the other.

In that patriarchal culture wives had to submit to their husbands' authority.

And that could make for a heavenly or hellish kind of life for the woman.

A husband could be abusive or violent – it didn't matter – the woman would have to submit.

But what would make it a joy to submit, what would make it easier to submit for the woman,

would be if she knew her husband loved her.

Now the problem in our society is that we don't have very much respect for authority.

We don't want the government telling us what to do,

we don't want science telling us what to do,

we don't want our bosses telling us what to do,

we don't want neighbors telling us what to do,

we don't want family members telling us what to do,

we don't want ANYONE telling us what we to do!

There are not a lot of places in our society where we recognize and submit to authority.

But there is one analogy that I think still works – and that's the analogy of parents and children.

When we had children, Mark and I decided to raise them as vegetarians, and the pediatrician said that was OK if – IF! –

if we made them eat so many vegetables & fruits & grains & dairy products. He kind of put the fear of God in me.

So I was bound and determined that my children were going to get all the nutrients they needed.

I'd serve them the right amount of vegetables, fruit, grains & dairy products & the rule was they had to clean their plates.

It went just fine with Hans, but then came Conner.

Conner could probably have won the award for being the slowest eater in the world.

Even the things he loved he ate slowly. And if it was something he didn't like, well, let's put it this way:

there were times when he was still at the table with his uneaten lunch in front of him when it was time for dinner.

Were my kids happy that I was telling them what to do? making them do things they didn't want to do? Of course not!

Did I do it because I was a mean nasty person and wanted to make my kids suffer?

No! I did it because I loved them & I wanted them to be healthy & strong & I wanted them to live long and healthy lives.

And thankfully, they ended up being the healthiest kids I knew. And they eat pretty well, pretty healthily to this day.

So what happens when God wants us to do something that we don't want to do?

What happens when God wants us to go where we don't want to go?

What happens when God wants us to give up something that we hold dear?

I think at those times we need to remember that God is our heavenly father

who loves us so much that he will do whatever it takes

in order for us to have the best, most fulfilling, most productive, most joyous life that we can have.

Now that may mean that we have to eat vegetables that we can't stand.

God's doesn't make us do that because God wants us to suffer.

Rather God does that because God wants us to be healthy and strong.

Often times when we start doing what God asks we end up having second thoughts.

When God saw his chosen people in slavery in Egypt, it broke his heart.

He saw their pain and suffering and he wanted to deliver them.

And he did. He led them out of slavery in Egypt.

And then when they are facing the un-crossable Red Sea

and they can hear the hooves of Pharaoh's horses and the wheels of his chariots getting louder and louder,
they were ready to run back!

But they didn't have to run back because God parted the sea and allowed them to cross on dry land

while the waters closed down over their pursuers.

They made it through the sea and there they were alone in the desert.

It was supposed to be an 11-day journey and yet it ended up taking them 40 years.

Why? Because they did not have unity in the Spirit.

Instead they spent their time grumbling and complaining to God,

arguing and fighting with each other, and blaming their leaders and blaming God and wanting to go back to Egypt.

Even when they had the opportunity to enter the promised land they decided they were too scared & they didn't do it.

They knew the mind of God but they didn't want to follow.

Still, there were some that persisted and I think it was 2 of the original slaves who actually made it into the promised land.

Most of the people didn't make it, but their journey wasn't wasted because they secured the land for their descendants.

If they had not made that journey we would not be here today.

Paul begs us to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit

and to do that we need to discern the mind of Christ through joint prayer and joint reflection on God's Word,

and then when we know the mind of Christ, we need to be willing to follow.

The journey may lead us through seas or deserts or armies of attackers but the journey will be worth it.

Because I believe that God has in mind for Salem

things that we haven't even asked for, things that we have not yet imagined.

And I believe that's true for each and every person here, too.

If you are still alive, your journey is not over.

Have you all accomplished everything you wanted to do?

Have you experienced everything that you wanted to experience?

Have you received everything that you asked for or imagined?

Well if not, there's an exciting journey still waiting for you.

And I don't care how old you are.

If you're ready to follow where God leads, then there is so much more in store for you.

There is more excitement, there is more peace, there is more love, and there is more joy than you have ever imagined.

There's more for you and there's more for Salem.

That's why I'm here – because I don't want to miss out on what God is going to do!

As we pray together, as we reflect on God's word together, we will discern the mind of Christ,

and if we trust in God's love enough to follow where God leads,

we will not only get to the promised land, we will experience an amazing joy –

the joy of the unity of the Spirit. Amen