

August 4/5, 2018
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“Humble Unity”

St. Paul UMC, Omaha
Ephesians 4:-1-16

Once upon a time, there was a flock of doves that flew in search of food led by their leader. One day, they had flown a long distance and were very tired. The lead dove encouraged them to fly a little further. The smallest dove picked up speed and found some rice scattered beneath a tree. So all the doves landed and began to eat.

Suddenly a net fell over them and they were all trapped. They saw a hunter approaching carrying a huge club. The doves desperately fluttered their wings trying to get out, but to no avail. The lead dove had an idea. She advised all the doves to fly up together carrying the net with them. She said that there was strength in unity.

Each dove picked up a portion of the net and together they flew off carrying the net with them. The hunter looked up in astonishment. He tried to follow them, but they were flying high over hills and valleys. They flew to a hill near a city where there lived a mouse that could help them. He was a faithful friend of the lead dove.

When the mouse heard the loud noise of their approach, he went into hiding. The lead dove gently called out to him and then the mouse was happy to see her. The lead dove explained that they had been caught in a trap and needed the mouse's help to gnaw at the net with his teeth and set them free. The mouse agreed saying that he would set the lead dove free first. The lead dove insisted that he first free the others and her last. The mouse understood the lead dove's feelings and complied with her wishes. He began to cut the net and one by one all the doves were freed including the lead dove.

They all thanked the mouse and flew away together, united in their strength. Unity that provides strength in a time of challenge or distress is a true gift. We need it in our day and time. The Apostle Paul, in our lesson from Ephesians, provides a key for us to such unity and strength. It is humility.

A few weeks ago I was feeling pretty good about my accomplishments at the Cornhusker Games. I ran in the Masters Division in the 2 mile, 1 mile and ½ mile races. These are distances much shorter than I usually run. I usually run 5-7 miles every other day at a pace that is much slower than the Cornhusker Games distances and competition demanded. I felt great about the results and I felt better that I did not strain or pull a muscle in the midst of the races. A few days later while I was sitting on my perch of accomplishment my brother sent me a note about his daughter (Hannah) and her husband (Andy). Andy runs ultra-marathons with his two brothers. The weekend I ran the Cornhusker Games in Lincoln Andy ran in a 100 mile run in Vermont near where they live. He was having a particularly difficult time in the midst of this 100 mile run and his wife, my brother's daughter, who is physically fit but not a runner was particularly concerned when he stopped for aid from his support team at the 70 mile mark. To give him encouragement and to make sure he did not faint or otherwise collapse she decided to pace him for a while. Hannah, his wife, ended up running beside him for the last 30 miles. When I read that I was impressed by both of them and quite humbled as I reflected on my short races. Yet reading about them reminded me of a story about Dwight Moody since they graduated together from Moody Bible Institute in Chicago a few years ago.

D.L. Moody was the most famous evangelist in the world in the late 1800s. People came from around the world to attend his Bible Conferences in Northfield, Massachusetts. One year a large group of pastors from Europe were among the attendees. They were given rooms in the dormitory of the Bible school. As was the custom in Europe, the men put their shoes outside the door of their room, expecting them to be cleaned and polished by servants during the night.

Of course there were no servants in the American dorm, but as Moody was walking through the halls and praying for his guests, he saw the shoes and realized what had happened. He mentioned the problem to a few

of his students, but none of them offered to help. Without another word, the great evangelist gathered up the shoes and took them back to his own room where he began to clean and polish each pair. Moody told no one what he had done, but a friend who interrupted him in the middle of shining the shoes and helped him finish the task later told the story of what had happened. Despite the praise and fame he received because of God's blessing on his life and ministry, Moody remained a humble man.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God and King of Heaven, had the right to honor, praise, and worship. Yet to be our Savior, He laid all of His privileges aside and became a lowly servant. He truly is the model for us to follow. Moody did so. Paul captures this spirit in his letter to the Ephesians noting that walking in the footsteps of Jesus includes a good dose of humility. A humble spirit can lead us to unity with others and even connections with others that we might not have otherwise.

I do believe that God delights to honor the gifted yet humble person as he/she maintains the heart of a servant leader. Booker T. Washington, the renowned black educator, was an outstanding example of this truth. Shortly after he took over the presidency of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in the early 1900's, he was walking in an exclusive section of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. Not knowing the famous Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her.

Because he had no pressing business at the moment, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. A little girl recognized him and later revealed his identity to the lady.

The next morning the embarrassed woman went to see Mr. Washington in his office at the Institute and apologized profusely. "It's perfectly all right, Madam," he replied. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend." She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his humble and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute. Humility can be a connecting point between people.

This last Wednesday I hosted the first session of our August study here at St. Paul that I will help host with Pastors Brabec and Wheeler this month. The study is regarding the work of the *Commission on A Way Forward* that recently shared the report of their 18 months of work with all in the United Methodist Church. I was struck by the humility of the group as they strove to maintain unity as they worked on the contentious issues of United Methodist policy regarding marriage of same-sex couples and ordination of LGBTQ individuals.

At the request of the 2016 General Conference the Council of "Bishops nominated and selected 32 members to serve on the Commission, focusing on a diverse body that represents our global church. In the Commission there are persons from nine countries with a variety of theological perspectives. The Commission is one third laity, one third clergy, and one third bishops and includes younger persons, gay persons, professors, administrators, pastors, youth ministers, campus ministers, lay leaders, large church pastors, and persons identified with renewal and advocacy groups. There is Korean, Hispanic, African- American, Filipino, European, and African representation."(Final report, p.4)

The report also says, "The Commission worked diligently to continually condition ourselves to have hearts of peace. This essential work gave us the ability to get beyond our positions and to seek and discover the interests we have in common in terms of our faith, our Biblical understandings, our love for The United Methodist Church, and our Christ's mission to reach the world with the transforming power of God." (Final report, p.3)

Paul requests the Ephesians to maintain a humble spirit in their work with the hope that this will result in a witness to the unity that can be found in Christ. As we saw earlier, great leaders like Dwight Moody and Booker T. Washington maintained a humble spirit and it resulted in unity among people in their midst. Our own *Commission on A Way Forward* likewise maintained a humble spirit in their work which has provided a witness to the larger world on how to maintain unity when dealing with divisive issues. We too are called by Christ to maintain a humble spirit as we strive for unity in our broken world.

Finally, humility with a sense of humor is always helpful.

A newspaper reporter was interviewing an old rancher and asked him to what he would attribute his success as a rancher. With a twinkle in his eye the man replied, "It's been about 50 percent weather, 50 percent good luck, and rest is brains."