



Oneness and Diversity

Ephesians 4:3-7, Romans 12:4-8

Speaker: Rev. Annie Duncan

Disclaimer: This transcript was computer generated and may contain errors.

Good morning, BelPres. Good morning. My name is Annie Duncan. I'm the executive pastor here, and good morning to all of you here, as well as those that are worshipping online.

And a special thank you to Alvin and Bening. Thank you for leading us in worship this morning. We are experiencing what it looks like to be that revelation church where every tribe, tongue, and nation worships before the throne room. And this morning, we're talking about our shared unity and diversity in Christ. So you're leading us this morning just underscores everything that we're talking about. So thank you so much.

Well, back in 2012, I had graduated from seminary and was journeying through the ordination process to become ordained in the PCUSA. And one of the very final requirements was to write an essay and respond to the question, why do you feel called to the Presbyterian Church?

I didn't grow up in the Presbyterian Church. So this is a question among all the other questions they had you answer that I took really seriously. Why after 30 years of participating in Foursquare churches as well as other non-denominational churches, did I feel called to the Presbyterian Church?

And during these final stages of discernment, I met with one of my mentors at the time, and he said this to me, Annie, the reason I'm Presbyterian isn't because everyone thinks the same way that I do. No, it's actually the opposite. I'm Presbyterian because I'm surrounded by a community of people that challenge me, that think differently than me, because as Presbyterians, we agree on who Jesus is, and everything else is a conversation.

And the picture that he painted there was of a community that was diverse and yet had this shared core identity in what they shared and who Jesus was. And it sounds a lot like the scripture passages that Alvin just read for us, right?

And so here we are, we are finishing off a 10-week series of a sermon series called Life Together. For the past 10 weeks, we have been walking through 10 different statements of this Life Together document that lives on our website. The document's foundation is scripture, and it's the scripture that guides us in how we ought to behave and treat one another as we walk out our faith together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so the final statement that we're unpacking today is this: We celebrate our oneness and diversity in the body of Christ. And the two passages that Alvin just read help us understand why both our oneness and diversity are such critical values as followers of Jesus.

Ephesians 4 verse 3 starts off by saying, make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. And another translation puts that this way: make every effort to guard the unity, to guard the unity that the spirit gives. Paul, the writer of this letter to the church at Ephesus, makes an interesting point here that as followers of Jesus, there is a unity that we already have. And we must take every effort to keep it and to guard it. The unity that we have as Jesus' followers is Jesus himself.

This is the calling that Paul refers to in Ephesians 4, verse 1, when he says you must live up to the calling you received. And this calling that Paul is talking about here, it's not a vocational calling, but it's summoning people back to the heart of the gospel. It's as if he's saying, don't forget about what Jesus has done for you. Don't forget where your true allegiance lies, and that's to Jesus, our Lord and King.

As we seek to follow Jesus, it means taking every moment and every decision and tethering that to Jesus, our source of peace, the one true line. If you've ever heard me preach before or assist in different services, then you've heard me say often that Jesus calls us to live a life we cannot live apart from him, and Jesus calls us to live a life we cannot live apart from each other. That is good news.

We need each other to point us back to Jesus when we forget. We need each other to hold us accountable if we get off track. And this is what this series is all about. It's about how we live our lives together, not siloed, not isolated, but how we live and walk out our faith in Christ.

So let's unpack this a bit more, our oneness and diversity. In our unity in Christ, we celebrate it. That's the first thing. We celebrate it. In Ephesians 4 verses 4, 5, and 6, Paul uses the word one seven times. There's 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 overall and through all and in all.

And another way to say that word one is to replace it with the word same. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we're part of the same body. We share the same spirit, same hope, same Lord, same faith, same baptism, same God. As disciples who are following Jesus, we celebrate this shared identity and purpose, right?

And there are so many things as Jesus' followers that we have in common, and that goes across denominations. Just think about some of the songs that we sing here in Modern. These aren't Presbyterian songs, but they're songs that are shared and beloved and being sung in Christian churches all throughout the world.

But the statement that we're unpacking today doesn't just talk about the things that we share that are the same, but it also talks about our diversity. We celebrate our oneness and diversity in the body of Christ. So we also celebrate the things that make us different.

This week, we posted an online panel that was hosted by Sergio Chavez, and it featured people from New Hope, Seattle Chinese Christian Covenant, and BelPres, and as they shared in this panel, they shared ways that they experienced their faith here at BelPres in their different worship styles, right? And because the panel was so diverse, it just underscores how, yes, we have this shared oneness in Christ, but we also have diversity.

And I encourage you, if you want to check out that panel, you can find it at our website or YouTube channel, or you can scan the QR code that's up there right now. So we celebrate our oneness in Christ, and we celebrate the things that make us different.

This is why in Romans 12:4, it says, For just as each of us has one body with many members, these members do not all have the same function. The verse goes on to talk about the variety of gifts that we bring to the body of Christ, right? Prophecy, service, encouragement, leadership.

I mean, just looking around this room, it illustrates this point of the things that we share and the things that differentiate us, right? So we've all picked this modern worship service to come to this morning. We're all worshipping the same God, the same Jesus, and yet we all have a unique variety of gifts that we bring to the body of Christ.

We're part of the same body of believers, but we do not all have the same function. And as followers of Jesus, we need to live out those gifts that we've been given as well as affirm the gifts that we see in others. Because the gifts that other people have, that isn't a threat, but that's a feature, right?

In our unity, we must recognize and celebrate our diversity, because without diversity, it isn't unity, it's uniformity. And so our oneness and diversity is something that we celebrate. And second, it's also something that we maintain.

It might be hard for us today to really understand how central unity in Christ was to the early church, and why Paul wrote about it constantly in his letters, like we see in Ephesians and Romans. Paul calls for unity in the church, and here we are 2,000 years

later, with our built-in divisions within the worldwide church. I mean, just to name a few very large buckets, we've got Orthodox, Roman, Catholic, Protestant, and so on and so on.

Theologian N.T. Wright comments on this by saying, But whatever position we take today, and by position he means denomination, the one thing we can't do is pretend that this isn't a central and vital issue. Unless we are working to maintain, defend, and develop the unity we already enjoy, and to overcome, demolish, and put behind us the disunity we still find ourselves in, we can scarcely claim to be following Paul's teaching.

So what does it look like to maintain unity in Christ? And what does it look like to maintain our oneness and diversity in Christ? That word maintain, it just doesn't have as fun of a ring to it as celebrate, right? We celebrate, we maintain. Maintain.

I mean, just think about all the things in your life that you maintain, right? You eat well and maybe try and work out a little bit and get your yearly checkups just to maintain your health, right? You change the oil in your car every 20,000 miles, I think. Just to make sure it runs well, you do your homework and study to maintain good grades. You pray and read scripture with others to maintain connection to God, right? There's so many things in our lives that we just maintain.

And for many of those things that we maintain, it has a cadence, a rhythm to it, an order about how we go about the maintenance. For example, there's a pasta recipe that my friend Tiffany shared with me in my cookbook. It's titled Tiffany's Pancetta Pasta. I know all the ingredients. They're simple, but when you throw them all together, it's so delicious. It's pancetta, shallot, red pepper flakes, greens, red sauce, and heavy, heavy cream. So good. Simple, but so effective.

But while I can remember all of the ingredients, I sometimes forget the instructions. Do I sauté the pancetta first, or do I sauté the shallots first? And is it a half a teaspoon of red pepper flakes, or is it one and a half tablespoons of red pepper flakes? Don't get that one wrong. So when I forget, I reference the instructions that are in my cookbook.

Now, there are times when I can just do the recipe complete by memory, but then there are other times when I have brain fog and I can't remember the order or the steps or the quantity. This is a perfect metaphor for how we maintain our unity in Christ. Because as followers of Jesus, we have all the ingredients and the instructions that we need to maintain our unity in Christ. They are the scriptures that guide us and the community of brothers and sisters in faith that help us apply their instruction and hold us accountable to them.

Maintenance mode for our oneness and diversity in Christ, it's never passive, but it's always active. It's remaining close in our relationship with Jesus and walking with others in our community of faith. And as we maintain, it means acknowledging the gifts we bring, affirming the gifts that we see in others, and yes, engaging and working through

conflict. Because conflict has existed in the church since the early formation of the church, and surprise, it still is with us today.

And it's with us today because the church is made up of imperfect people. Scott Dudley said a few weeks ago about conflict: conflict in church is not a problem, it's a feature because it means that we are different and diverse. And that is what God intended because it shows his power—because that kind of community is not natural, it's supernatural.

Maintaining this oneness and diversity in Christ is like the check engine light that comes on in your car when you haven't checked the oil for 20,000 miles, right? But it's an active check-in point. It's saying, Jesus, are we good? And friends in Christ, are we good? It's a consistent, active, relational check-in.

One of the ways that I maintain unity within my family is I call my brother almost every Wednesday on my way to work. For my entire life—well, almost my entire life—I've lived within a five-mile radius of my whole immediate family: my mom, my dad, and my brothers. But four years ago, my middle brother moved with his family to Nashville. And so this cross-country move disrupted our family unity and our family rhythms.

My brother and I have always been really, really close, but as we've gotten older, there are things that we see differently, right? And like most families, sometimes snarky comments get made and assumptions get drawn. And if left to their own devices, my brother and I can vector very far apart from each other. So I call my brother almost every Wednesday. And there's no agenda for this phone call. It's simply a check-in, a relational check-in to remind both of us, hey, we're still in the same family. We still love each other.

The ways that we maintain our unity in Christ with other Jesus followers always starts with relationship. And again, it's like that check engine light that comes on, right? It's a consistent reminder that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we're called to be one in Christ and one with each other. So we celebrate and maintain our oneness and diversity in Christ.

And third, we guard it. What threatens unity in Christ? It's human to be anti-union, so there are a lot of things that threaten our unity in Christ. The devil would like nothing more than to divide brothers and sisters in the faith. And unfortunately, we see this all over the world, and even within the church today.

There are things that divide us as followers of Christ. And last week, Pastor Scott talked about the labels that we put on each other that can be harmful. And similarly, there are labels that we can tie to our identity as Christ followers that can threaten our unity in Christ. Things like, I'm a liberal Christian, I'm a feminist Christian, I'm a Trump-supporting Christian, I'm a conservative Christian. Any label that qualifies the kind of Jesus follower that you are threatens the unity that we have in Christ.

Because if I came up to you and I said, hi, I'm Annie, I'm a liberal Christian, and you maybe aren't liberal, that immediately puts us at odds with each other, right? It puts us on opposing spectrums, and it's really hard to be unified when that's our starting point.

In the great wide body of Christ, and here in this very church service today, we have liberals, conservatives, feminists, and more. Oh my, right? Can I get an amen on that though? Because we're all here together, worshiping the same God.

If the point of the church was for us to siphon off into our labeled Christian groups, then Bellevue Pres wouldn't be one group—we would be a thousand groups of churches, right? So a threat to our unity in Christ is when we immediately lead with our difference. But if we lead with our shared oneness, then that's a completely different posture.

So on the other side, if I came up to you and I said, hi, I'm Annie, I'm an imperfect follower of Jesus, not only is that accurate, but it's engaging and it's something that we share together. So if the metaphor for maintenance mode is a check engine light that goes on, then guarding our unity in Christ is a bit more dramatic—it's, oh no, the car won't start.

And when we get to those moments as we walk this community of faith together with our brothers and sisters, and we get to those moments of, oh no, the car won't start, we have to come together. We have to approach the things that threaten to divide us—and not alone behind our computer screens or iPhones—but we have to come together in relationship.

We continue in our relationship with Jesus so that our unified witness to the world isn't our uniformity—oh look at us, we're all the same—but our unified witness to the world is our diversity. Look how we recognize our differences and still come together as one and worship the one true God.

Two thousand years ago, that was Jesus' prayer—that we would be one. And so we guard our unity, not with our own human power, but with supernatural power from the Holy Spirit.

A few weeks ago, Pastor Scott said this about Biblical unity: Biblical unity is a supernatural transformation of the heart. This is something the Holy Spirit does—transformation of our hearts where we disagree in ways that show the world the power of Jesus to bring together different kinds of people.

One of the most powerful examples of Christians coming together and celebrating our oneness and diversity in Christ is actually how the Life Together document came to existence. The Life Together document that lives on our website was put together by four members of our session in 2020. They took an example of something that threatens our unity in Christ, and they met every Monday for an entire year to work through how brothers and sisters in Christ can still come together.

This was a long journey that took many, many hours, and there were hard conversations. But after a year-long process, four people that didn't agree on everything—but believed above their disagreement in celebrating, maintaining, and guarding the unity, and the oneness and diversity that we have in Christ—they formed this Life Together document. And again, the foundation of it is scripture. And to me, that makes the document even more beautiful in just hearing how it came to be in the first place.

So this week, we have a few ways for you to practice how we celebrate our oneness and diversity in the body of Christ. And the first is Community 101: say hi to someone you don't know. Bellevue Pres, this is low-hanging fruit. I know you can do this. Just after the service, say hi to somebody. All you have to do is start with your name. Hi, I'm Annie. And if it's awkward, they don't say anything in response. But if it's not awkward, they might just tell you their name too. So low-hanging fruit, Community 101.

Community 201: affirm a gift you see in someone else. Hey, I noticed you're good at [blank], and I really admire that in you, right? Again, that feels like low-hanging fruit as well.

Community 301: share a meal with others that think differently than you do and challenge you. And maybe that's not how you invite them to share a meal—"Hey, I really think differently than you, so let's go share a meal together"—but, you know, keep that in mind as you're deciding who to eat dinner with in the next few weeks, right?

As we close out this 10-week series on community, guess what? That does not mean that we are done practicing community. Community is vital for our spiritual formation. It's the air of discipleship. So remember this week that, again, Jesus calls us to live a life that we cannot live apart from him, and Jesus calls us to live a life that we cannot live apart from each other.

To close out this 10-week series, we are going to say together the 10 statements that exist in this Life Together document. So stand and say these words with me that will be on the screen. And we'll just say the words in bold. We won't say the scripture references. So join me now:

- We love because God first loved us.
- We affirm all people's full humanity made in God's image.
- We submit to the authority of scripture, which teaches us above all to love God and our neighbor as ourselves.
- We welcome all people as they are to BelPres and expect our leaders to strive to live in obedience to scripture in every area of their lives.
- We celebrate our oneness and diversity in the body of Christ.
- We lead with relationship, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth.
- We renounce sin in all its forms without prejudice or favoritism, and we address our own sin first.
- We listen to others' views with humility, honoring our God-given diversity and unity in the Spirit.

- We disagree respectfully and practice Biblical conflict resolution.
- We share with God's people in need, pursue justice for the poor, the vulnerable, and the outsider, and stand together against evil systems.

So Jesus, help us to do what we have just said. Jesus, we want to live this way because of you. We want to be with you. We want to follow you and do the things that you did. But Jesus, we need your help, and we need the help of this community to do that. So Jesus, fill us with your Holy Spirit and surround us with others that can help us live these things out. Jesus, we love you. We praise you. We worship you. And everybody said together, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- Verses 4–6 in Ephesians list several "ones" (one body, one Spirit, one hope, etc.). Why do you think Paul emphasizes this list here, and how do these truths help us live in unity?
- Verse 7 in Ephesians says, "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." How do individual gifts and callings contribute to the overall unity of the body of Christ?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What does it mean to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace"? How can we apply this practically in our church, family, or community?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

June 22, 2025

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.