

COMBINED SERVICE – UNITY SERVICE JULY 31, 2011

TITLE: WE ARE BETHANY, WE ARE ONE

READINGS: Acts 2:42-47, Ephesians 4:1-16, John 17:20-26

Remember Peter? It was Peter whom Jesus designated as “Cephas” the rock, his rock of faith upon which the church is built. But Peter realized as the church grew that she would face difficult and troubled times. When Peter wrote his first letter to the churches in Asia Minor from Rome between the years 64 and 67, the church was facing very difficult times. Paul had already been martyred; persecutions, torture and death were all intensifying under the Emperor Nero and many Christians were becoming martyrs as well as being tempted to give up or renounce their faith. It was important that Peter remind the community of believers who they were and whom they served. It was important that they remember who would sustain and strengthen them, that they be encouraged to support and fortify one another for difficult days ahead. “Like living stones,” Peter says to the churches and also to us, “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” 1Pet.2:5.

It is not much different for us today. We may not face the daily fear of being arrested, tortured and put to death for our faith as were those early Christians, but men and women as well as churches, are being drawn apart for a multitude of reasons. There are all kinds of attacks upon us today. We are being forced in so many different ways to renounce our faith. We are being manipulated and dominated subtly and not so subtly by our world. It reminds me of the story of the henpecked husband who went to a psychologist. He was tired of being dominated by his wife. The psychologist told him not to accept his wife’s bullying. “Go home,” he said, “and let her know you’re your own boss.” So he went home, slammed the door when he came in and went straight to his wife. “From now on you’ll do what I say,” he insisted, “you’ll get my dinner, lay out my clothes and wait for me while I go out with the boys.” Then he said, “By the way do you know who is going to tie my tie for me?” “I sure do,” said his wife calmly, “the undertaker.”

Paul, too, had his troubles with divisions within churches especially the church in Corinth. “Finally brothers and sisters,” he says, “listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” 2Cor.13:11. There are few things that grieve the heart of God like a church divided

and there certainly is nothing more beautiful to God than a church that is united. In the selection from the Acts of the Apostles we just heard today, Luke tells about the life in Christ of the early Christians and how they lived in unity and victory. "They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Acts 2:42. Then again Paul in our second lesson from Ephesians points out how very important it is for us to realize that the Holy Spirit binds us together making us one in peace and love. "There is one body, one Spirit," he says, "just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all who is above all and through all, and in all." Eph.4:3b-6.

Harmony in the body of Christ is the most important thing. We may argue about points of theology, we may argue about conservative VS liberal interpretation of Scripture but our walking together in the unity of Christ is even more important than that. Over the centuries the body of Christ has been torn by theological and Scriptural conflicts and unfortunately we have been handed and are tempted to hand on a sorry history of not getting along with one another. As someone had put it, "Division drives our Lord away. Harmony invites him into our fellowship." We need not only to remind ourselves today of our unity, but we need to pray especially as we gather together in our combined worship, that we are Bethany, we are one.

Once there was a young lion and a mountain goat. Having been away from water for a long time, both were extremely thirsty and headed straight to the watering hole. Both arrived there at the same time and began to argue about who would drink first. The disagreement becomes so heated that each decides he would rather die than give up the privilege of being first to quench his thirst. As each stubbornly confronts the other, their anger turns to rage. Just then something distracts them, and they both look up to the sky. Circling overhead is a flock of vultures waiting for the loser to fall. That is all they needed to end their quarrel. There are those who have long waited for the church to fall. The vultures are circling overhead. We do not have the luxury of waiting to see who would be still standing or who may be the greatest in the Kingdom of God at Bethany. Christ calls us to unity and to service, now today. Each one of us must make that happen in the body of Christ here.

If there is any kind of legacy I would want to leave at Bethany as I pass along the privilege of shepherding the people of God, I would want it to be the open-armed loving welcome experienced by those who came to this church; that oneness in unity and love which is the indispensable cornerstone of beautiful Bethany. It is important

for us to realize that we need to pray for unity for the church universal and for the church local. Pray that we grow in love for each other. Pray that God's will be done here in our midst. Pray that we will be the kind of church that leads people to Jesus. Just listen as Paul pleads with us as he did to the Christians at Corinth long ago, "Listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you." **Amen.**

Pastor Barney