

How The Many Are One

“One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.”

“*E Pluribus Unum.*” I know, it is Latin, and you don’t speak Latin, but you should know this phrase. It has been printed on all your coins since 1873. I think you know what it means. It means, “Out of many, one.” It means that we are fifty different, sovereign states that form one nation under the Federal government.

We could adopt this Latin phrase for our congregation. We are 572 individual people who make up one congregation. I think we sometimes forget that. Well, that is the main point of our reading from Romans. May the Holy Spirit move us to see ourselves as one, not because we are all the same, but because we are one in Christ.

I. One, not because we are all the same.

We are a very strange group of people. We are, at least in the eyes of someone living half way across the world. Let’s say a family comes here from one of our missions in Africa. Our missionary over there looked us up in the directory and told them they can worship here because we are in fellowship. They would appreciate hearing the same teaching they heard in Africa. But imagine their letters back home. They would say, “These Christians in Arlington are nice people, but they are so strange. They don’t open their mouths much when they sing. And they are so lazy; they can’t take their offering up to the altar. They drop it off in a box or someone has to come and get it from them. And they take a perfectly clean piece of cloth and blow their noses into it and stick it back into their pockets.”

But if you visited their home church in Africa, you would also say they are strange. You would sit on a dirt floor for church. Can’t they care more about God’s house and have pews? The service would seem agitated, even distracting, with a lot of moving around and loud singing. And they don’t pass the offering plate around. Instead, each person dances down the aisle to place his offering on the altar and dances back. I would pay good money to see some of you do that!

Odd, isn’t it, how we can be so “one” in the faith, but so different at the same time. We may not worship as they do in Africa, and they may not worship as we do in Arlington, but we are united together as one. We are because of something called *Adiaphora*, or I like the German word better, “*Mitteldinge*,” or “middle things. There are some things God commands in the Bible. He commands us to love him more than anything else, to love our neighbor, to worship him, pray to him, to listen to his Word, to respect all those in authority. There are some things God forbids like stealing, adultery, gossip, disrespect, lies. But there are things in the middle, *adiaphora*, which are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, things like dancing to the altar with your offering or passing the offering plate.

We have that in our reading from Romans. ***“One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.”*** Try to imagine this congregation in Rome. Some of those Christians use to be Jews. They are use to worshipping on Saturday, observing Passover and other festivals, and avoiding certain foods as unclean like pork.

And then you had some members who were a little afraid to eat meat. You see, some of the meat sold at the market came from pagan temples and was used in the sacrifices. There was nothing wrong with the meat, and it is no sin to eat it, but they couldn’t erase the idea of this meat being offered to a false god, so they chose not to eat it. In fact, they gave up all meat to be safe and ate only vegetables.

And then you had members who were probably gentiles, or non-Jews. They wanted to worship on Sunday because Sunday is the anniversary of Jesus’ resurrection. If you raised the idea of a Passover service, they would ask why. They didn’t want or need to have any other special days like Passover. And potlucks? Bring on the meat. They understood that the meat in the markets was acceptable to eat even if it was sacrificed to a pagan god before.

Which ones were right? Which ones were wrong? In a sense, no one is wrong. Want to eat meat? Do so. Want to eat only vegetables? Go ahead. One church may still have Advent services. More power to them. The next church doesn’t have Advent services. Fine. God lets you have your opinion on *adiaphora*, these middle things that are neither commanded or forbidden.

But *adiaphora* can sometimes cause problems. Let me read to you a couple verses before our text: ***“The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God accepted him.”*** Some in this church may despise or look down on the others as over pious people who think they are better because they want all sorts of special services and stay away from meat. Those who still wanted Saturday church or Passover or those who thought Christians should stay away from meat could condemn the others as some wine-drinking, Sabbath breaking, meat eating people who were conforming more to the evil world than to God.

Do you see what can happen? My opinion on marriage is defined by God. But on things he doesn't command or forbid, you can have three Christians with three differing opinions. The danger is we consider opinions in matters of freedom, adiaphora, as if they were moral right or wrong. Want to find out? At your next family gathering or at work, ask, "What do you think of the upcoming election?" God doesn't command you join one party or another or stay independent or don't get involved. You can have a congregation of Christians who belong to different political parties or none. Some drive trucks. Some drive smart cars. Some put on their pants starting with the left leg. Some put then on starting with the right leg..

The problem comes when you look down on others as some how inferior if they don't agree with you on adiaphora. If the devil can't split you with false teaching, he will try with arguments over which God gives us freedom. Ideally a church discusses a matter which is adiaphora, like, what color of carpet to lay and they vote and everyone accepts. The devil wants us to argue with each other and leave if the vote didn't go our way or hold a grudge against the winning side. How well can a divided church worship God, share Christ, or grow in faith?

The Scriptures are clear. God gives us freedom to have an opinion on many things. But we are one not because we all vote the same way or eat the same food or if we all use the same hymnal. We are one because of Christ.

II. One because of what we have become in Christ.

The entire world is united even though it speaks hundreds of languages and practices millions of customs and is constantly fighting. The world is united in its condemnation before God. All have sinned and all have fallen short of God's glory. The world shares one common ancestor, sinful Adam, and the world shares one sinful nature inherited down throughout the generations, the world shares one fate as we return to dust, and the world will share one judgment before God, a judgment of eternal death.

But God changed that. He dipped a sinner into Baptism and he comes out a saint, just as holy and pleasing to God as Jesus himself. Sinners approach Communion with the weight of sin upon them and they walk away forgiven and clean. Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world, and now, through his Word he transformed us from the image of man into his likeness. Instead of being one, united against God as sinners, we are united with him and Christ as one. It doesn't matter if your ancestors were German or Hindu or Barbarian.

"For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living." This is how we can prevent adiaphora from dividing us. If you want to eat only vegetables, you do it to the Lord, as your personal way of worshipping him. If you want to enjoy meat, do it to the Lord to worship him. If church has Advent services, do it to glorify God and not yourselves so you can brag you worship more than others. If a church doesn't have Advent services, then don't start them because you feel guilty or less pious. Jesus died and returned to life so he can be the Lord of us all. That is what unites us. He is the Lord of those who worship on Sunday and those who worship on Monday or watch at home. He is the Lord of both Democrats and Republicans and independents and those living in different parts of the world.

And not just when we are alive. He is also the Lord of the dead. Think about that for a moment. Dead Christians are still his. Their names may have been taken off our membership list, but not God's. He is still their God because he will raise them to eternal glory.

E pluribus Unum. That's us as a nation. That's us as a congregation. Because of adiaphora, God allows us to be different on so many things. But we are united by one Lord, one faith and one Baptism. Don't let the devil shatter that. Don't let sinful pride or stubbornness destroy that. Don't let elections ruin it. Thank God for this freedom. Thank God he has given that freedom to others. Thank God he unites us who are so different as one in Christ. Amen.