

***“What Matters Most”***  
**Isaiah 55:6-9; Ephesians 4:1-6**  
**Bridgewater Church of the Brethren**  
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I'll never forget the moment. Years ago William Sloane Coffman was at the college for an endowed lecture and his topics for the evening's address were militarism and homosexuality.

Just before this liberal theologian began his address on those inflammatory topics to what he knew was a conservative audience, he said this, *“I always allow for the possibility that I might be wrong.”*

And I thought, *“What a brilliant way to begin what he knew would be a very controversial address.”* For by acknowledging the limits of his own knowledge, his own perspective, he disarmed his audience and invited them to listen in a less hostile and defensive way.

In addition to being brilliant, he was also being biblical. Anticipating the imminent appearance of God to deliver the people from their exile in Babylon, the prophet Isaiah calls the people to repent of their sins and seek the Lord's presence.

*“Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon”* (Isaiah 55:6-7).

And then speaking on the Lord's behalf, he reminds these exiled Judeans, and us, that no one fully knows the mind and the ways of God.

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”* (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Reminds me of a *“For Better or Worse”* cartoon I saw years ago where the father, whose offer of advice to his young son had just been rejected, called his son a *“Know-It-All.”* *“I am not a Know-It-All!”* the son protested, and then thought to himself, *“I am a Know-It-Some.”*

Especially in this season of presidential campaigns, one could wish the world had more *“Know-It-Somes”* and fewer *“Know-It-Alls”* because it would more accurately reflect reality and we might all get along better on this increasingly polarized planet.

All of us, after all, know some things. But when we presume to know it all; when everyone who disagrees is ignorant at best and a heretic at worst, acrimony increases and heads begin to roll (sometimes all too literally).

This seems especially true in matters of religion where each side claims to be the sole possessor and protector of God's Truth (which of course makes everyone on the other side misinformed, misguided, or "the enemies of God"). And as we've seen throughout human history, things don't generally end well for "the enemies of God."

So it's good to be reminded by a prophet, a theologian, and a cartoon that no matter how convinced and convicted we are of the rightness of our position, none of us fully knows the mind and ways of God; and we must always allow for the possibility that we might be wrong, or at least that we're not in full possession of the truth. For when we do, we are freed to really listen to and learn from those with different perspectives and maybe come a little closer to the truth we all seek.

That's why I read a weekly news magazine (called *The Week*) that presents all sides of the issues and why I read letters and columns in the *Daily News-Record* that offer beliefs and perspectives different than my own (as difficult as they sometimes are to get through).

After dealing with matters of belief in the first three chapters of the letter of Ephesians, in chapter four the author addresses how Christians should live with each other and in the world in light of those beliefs. This is what you *believe*, Christians of Ephesus, therefore this is how you should *behave*:

*"lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:2-3).

The unity of the church is a gift of the Spirit, and these qualities of *humility, gentleness, patience* and *forbearing love* are required to maintain this unity the Spirit gives. And, it should be noted, this God-given *unity* is not *uniformity*.

The miracle of the church is that it breaks down barriers of race and class and gender and culture and brings together a breathtaking assortment of people who, for all their differences, are all united by their goal of a world redeemed in Jesus Christ.

And while unity is a divine gift, it is a gift that must be cherished, cultivated and protected if it is to be preserved. Quarreling and division in the church is not just unpleasant and painful, it can actually destroy the unity that the Spirit gives the church to fulfill its mission in the world. A church that is divided and preoccupied with its differences can hardly bear witness to the world of God's redeeming love.

I can imagine someone looking at all the turmoil and division in the church and conclude that if Christians can't get along with themselves any better than that, why would I want to be part of that mess? If the followers of this Jesus behave like that toward each other, either he's a joke or they've forgotten what he taught and how he lived.

Either way, the last place I'd want to go for an alternative to the division and intolerance and polarization I see all around me every day is another institution filled with division, intolerance, and polarization.

When the church allows its divisions and disagreements to undermine the integrity and power of its witness to the world, maybe it's time to reconsider what matters a *great deal* and what matters *most*?

Of course our personal beliefs matter deeply to us, and we should hold them and share them with conviction. But when we value our personal positions over the unity of the church; when we think that others in the body should believe as we do; when our belonging to the body depends on the body's agreement with us, that's a good time to remember no one fully knows the mind and ways of God; that's a good time to allow for the possibility that we might be wrong; that's a good time to ask if we are "*making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*"

After urging his listeners to do just that, the author names the underlying treasures that are the basis of its unity: "*There is one body and one Spirit, 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*" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

In other words, that which unites the church – *one body, one Spirit, one hope, one calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God* – is far greater than anything that could divide it. If all this unites us, how could anything ever divide us? If all this binds us together, how could anything ever tear us apart?

And that's a good thing to ponder as we receive new members into our body this morning and a good thing to remember as we face the challenges that lie ahead.

Since no one fully knows the mind and the ways of God in this world, may we understand that what matters most is not being *right*, but making "*every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" May it be so. Amen.

Robbie Miller