

VITAL SIGNS

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

August 20, 2006 – Pentecost 11 [B]

If you become ill, you call your doctor or visit the MEA Clinic. The first thing doctors and nurses check are your “VITAL SIGNS” – [temperature, pulse, blood pressure, weight, respiratory rate]. This CRITICAL INFORMATION often gives a physician or other health care provider an early INDICATION of what might be wrong with us and what is needed to restore us to health.

Which raises a question: If there are important “vital signs” that can be used to reliably monitor a person’s PHYSICAL well-being – are there also “VITAL SIGNS” that can measure the “health” of a congregation? “Healthy” churches are generally thought to be those with LOTS OF MONEY, LOTS OF PEOPLE, and LOTS OF ACTIVITIES! But are there “indicators” that can be used to gauge a congregation’s SPIRITUAL well-being?

The Scripture for today suggests that there are. In the 4th chapter of the letter to the Ephesians – “Paul” is talking about the Church – and he mentions several “vital signs”, “indicators” of God’s presence and purpose that are absolutely ESSENTIAL TO HEALTH. And **the first is UNITY**. People who are “united” are CONNECTED by a shared experience, a common bond, or a common mission. Some years ago my youngest brother came to visit us while we were living in Starkville. It was Memorial Day, and MSU was hosting an NCAA regional baseball game with Florida State, with the winner going to the College World Series. My brother is an avid Ole Miss fan – but he went to the game with us, and as the afternoon went along, he got caught up in the spirit of the day and became [temporarily] one of the MSU “family” – and it was because we shared this common experience.

In the Scripture from Ephesians, Paul says the CHURCH is UNITED, too. We are bound together by God’s grace, by baptism, and by our incorporation into the family of God. God’s vision for His new people, the Church, is that we be ONE BODY UNITED IN CHRIST in which HUMAN distinctions [Jews and Gentiles, males and females, free and slave] fall away.

Paul says we are ONE body united in a common mission to be the presence of God, united in a common mission to share the Good News with the world.

And **SOMETIMES THE CHURCH IS ONE – and it SHINES**. It was the Christian community – not FEMA – that made the greatest impact in providing relief to people on the coast in the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina.

People of faith from every “stripe” of the Christian family – from fundamentalists to liberals, from Catholics to charismatics and everything in between – made the difference – and continue to make the difference. *And the world has taken notice.*

But if we can become “ONE” – **we can also lose sight of our calling and our mission** – and when we do that, UNITY is always the first casualty. In the movie *Gladiator*, Russell Crowe plays the part of a Roman legion commander named Maximus who is betrayed and forced to become a gladiator in the arena. There is a scene when Maximus and one group of gladiators are pitted in a battle to the death against another group of slaves. As they prepare to face their opponents, Maximus warns his fellow warriors: *If we stay together, we survive. If they divide us, we die.*

These are words we need to ponder today as well. God has made us to be ONE – for ALL of us are called to be conformed into the likeness of Christ. But **when a congregation loses sight of its mission and its vision fades, it quickly divides into factions with separate agendas and it DIES**. A healthy congregation is ONE in its mission and vision.

But – there is a PARADOX in Paul’s message. Not only are healthy churches those who are “one” [UNITY] – **healthy churches are also those in which there is DIVERSITY**. Contrary to what some may believe, Christians are not “mass-produced”; instead we are MADE one at a time. **And to each person God gives gifts [abilities] – DIFFERENT abilities**. These gifts are not to be confused with “natural abilities” – these are gifts/abilities from the Spirit of God; and whenever the Church uses its many gifts together – the Church is at its best. This means **DIVERSITY is something to be CELEBRATED, not merely TOLERATED**.

This theme of “diversity” is SO important Paul mentions it in at least 3 places [Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians] – and in 1 Corinthians Paul probes the mystery of “diversity” by using the example of the human body with its many parts working together to describe how the Church is to function. I’m convinced Paul used this example because people of his day were familiar with the human body. But I also believe that if Paul was writing today – he’d use a DIFFERENT analogy – like BASEBALL.

Let me show you what I mean. We are now in the late stages of this year's baseball pennant races. And the GOOD teams – the ones competing are those that have:

- a few **good starting pitchers** – players who can throw strikes and get batters out
- a few players with a **good “on-base” percentage** – people who “hit for average” and are patient enough to coax a “walk” out of a pitcher
- **some sluggers** – people with power enough to “go yard” [able to drive home base-runners]
- some people whose GLOVES will win some close games for you – **people whose defensive abilities are more important than their RBI total** or their batting average
- some **solid relief pitchers** who can step in and shut down any momentum the other team may be getting
- **a good manager** who knows what to do and can get the team to play together

Now – WHICH of these players are ESSENTIAL to the success of the team? ALL of them. Yet NONE of them bring exactly the SAME abilities to the “table”.

It's this way in the Church, too. **God gives every person GIFTS for ministry.** We ALL have SOME gift/gifts – but NO ONE is the “complete package”. I recognize I have SOME gifts – but I also know I am TOTALLY LACKING when it comes to others. Through the years I've learned to value the different gifts of others.

I've also learned that the role of a pastor is much like that of the “manager” on a baseball team. It's not the pastor's place to do ALL the work of ministry; OUR work is to help each member discover their gifts and find a way to use them effectively to carry out God's mission in the world.

And when we ALL use the various gifts God has given us to God's glory – it's a beautiful thing. The SAD thing is – FAR TOO MANY of us don't have a clue what our spiritual gift/gifts are.

There's one other “vital sign” Paul mentions here – and that's **MATURITY**. Maturity is defined in the New Testament as growing into the likeness of Jesus – loving God and others with all our being to the point where we exchange OUR ambitions and agendas for God's. God's goal for us is to GROW UP in faith. And people “mature” in faith when they take up the “challenge” to follow Jesus with PASSION and COMMITMENT, when they

DISCOVER their spiritual gifts, and when they USE them to strengthen God's people.

But these "vital signs" of **UNITY, DIVERSITY, and MATURITY are not possible without HUMILITY**. To be humble is to have a REALISTIC assessment of who we are – to be knowledgeable of our strengths AND our weaknesses. In *HAMLET*, Shakespeare has a wise father telling his son, "*To thine own self be true*". To be "true" to one's self doesn't mean "look out for #1" – it means that we owe it to ourselves to at least BE HONEST with ourselves. This is the essence of humility.

A few weeks ago, *Newsweek* magazine did a story on Billy Graham in the later stages of his life. The story tells of how Graham no longer considers himself a "literalist" [a person who takes every word of the Bible literally], and of how he wishes he had spent more time in prayer and reflection, and of how he regrets not making greater connections between faith and things like racial reconciliation and human rights. The article also described how Billy Graham now spends more time telling people about the love of God than he does making "pronouncements" on hot-button issues – and of the "humility" that characterizes him at this stage of life.

I mention this because we need humility to guide us and the use of our gifts. We need humility to be open to the ideas and work of the Spirit in others.

Brothers and Sisters – are we a healthy congregation? Is there UNITY? Do we welcome DIVERSITY? Are we evidencing MATURITY and living with HUMILITY?

How are our "vital signs"?

Let us pray....