

Becoming As One

Just what does that call to become as one found in Ephesians and other places in Scripture mean? I am not sure we ever really give it to much thought; our culture seems to pride itself so much on its history of independence and individuality ever intend to move in that direction. Yet this is an issue which we need to recognize as just that...an issue and a problem for us which has created many fault lines in our ability to become what we are called to be in many areas of life...as citizens of this nation...and more importantly as disciples of our Lord and citizens of the kingdom of God. It has also created many problems though as I am not sure that very many of us...especially those of us born and raised in this country which for us historically in our ability to get along and form that “more perfect union” described in our foundational documents for this nation of “United States”; those fault lines are once again becoming more evident daily in our inability to even talk to one another across perceived differences of opinions. The Ephesians text and the Mark text do not seem to have much in common at first, but within them are messages we need to hear. Our gospel passage from Mark is a rather disjointed text which has two significant stories omitted from it, but the remaining verses contain some important things for us to take note of as well. The first portion, Mark 6:30 begins with the return of the disciples from their first ministry tour—their inauguration into apostleship—being sent out to proclaim as Jesus was doing. Exhilarated and exhausted, they have returned; they have stories to tell Jesus—thrilling stories of healings, of exorcisms, and effective evangelistic campaigns. Perhaps they also have darker stories in the mix as well—stories of failure and being rejected. Some hard stories they need to process privately with their Teacher. Whatever the situation, Jesus senses that the disciples need a break; they are tired, overstimulated from their experiences, underfed and in significant need of solitude for as Mark records: “many are coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” Jesus, himself is probably not feeling that great himself as he may still be processing the news of the death of John the Baptist. So Jesus says to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” One translation puts it more simply, “Come away with me.” So Jesus and the disciples get in a boat attempting to go away and be by themselves, but like all of us, sometimes even Jesus’ best laid plans go astray. According to Mark, the crowds anticipate Jesus’ destination and hurried there on foot so when they get there the quiet sanctuary is filled with a great crowd. What Jesus seeks in nowhere to be found. “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them; because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” Jesus’ response is to have compassion for the needs he sees in the crowd; he teaches many things and then sees that they are fed. The middle portion of today’s reading comes after the crowd’s needs have been met. Jesus dismisses them and sends the disciples back across the water while he goes up to the top of the mountain to attend to his own need: he went up on the mountain to pray. There are many such glimpses, usually brief in Mark which show us clearly Jesus’ humanity. These glimpses take nothing away from Jesus’ divinity. Instead they make it richer, fuller and all the more mysterious. They remind us that the God of all the Universe—in the incarnation—hungers, sleeps, eats, rests, withdraws, and grieves. In all of these mundane ways—our Incarnate God is like us. The final portion of today’s reading comes after Mark record’s Jesus’ joining the disciples in their boat which was had not yet managed to cross to the other side. They were terrified when he came toward them walking on

the water, and not really reassured when the wind calmed when he joined them because they still did not understand his identity. When they came to shore, again crowds gathered to bring their sick for healing and he responded to their needs. If you begin to look for them, you can find many verses that refer to Jesus' human nature, we just tend to emphasize those about his divine; yet we need to understand that Jesus was human; had those needs and made time for them, yet also when he saw others in need, his response was to show compassion. Within us there is always this tension between self-protection and the impulse to show compassion; often love of self wins more often than is needed to truly protect the "self". It seems Jesus would call us to err on the side of compassion. When Jesus responds to the needs of the crowds, we often focus on the healing that he does, but in Mark 6: 34 we are told that Jesus' response was to teach them, in the Greek it is put this way, it's just the word *polla*, meaning much. In our colloquial terms Mark is saying he taught them a bunch of stuff. But what would Jesus have thought it important that these people that he viewed as "sheep without a shepherd" needed to learn and needed to hear most of all? The image that Mark presents of the crowd of being sheep without a shepherd is one of people who are vulnerable, people who are unable to care for themselves, who are liable to get lost and or injured. Jesus, viewing these people like, undertakes to teach them. That is not the approach that we usually view as what needs to be done when we see people in need...the modern approach seems to be to give them stuff. Eventually, Jesus will see that those in the crowd are fed from those five loaves and two fish, or those who later are brought to him need healing are healed, but first he senses that they need to learn a few things about God, creation, and their relation. Eventually, when the content of the teachings begin to be clear that there will be some requirements for self-sacrifice the crowds begin to fade away...that part of the message is still not very popular. At this point in the gospel narrative the crowds, like the disciples do not understand and they continue to crowd around. As the gospel narrative unfold it becomes clear that Jesus' call for disciples to come and follow him is a call for them to sacrifice the sense of self; not to totally stop using the personal pronouns "I" and "me", but to place them in a different context of who we are in relationship to Jesus and to others. We claim that we belong to God, but do we really reflect on how being owned by Christ, the shepherd of whom we are but the sheep of his pasture, looks or should look in our day to day lives? In the letter to the Ephesians we are reminded that God has drawn near to us in Jesus so that we who once were stranger, aliens, without hope are now made one with God. Of course, in the culture which surrounds us daily the idea...the concept that we belong to anyone except ourselves is totally foreign...after all we are Americans...independent and owe no allegiance to anyone...right? Ephesians 2:14: "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." This comment was address to a congregation of believers formed by ethnic Jews who had converted to the newly forming faith in Christ and believers who had belonged to any other tradition—and were termed Gentile which covered all others from the Jewish perspective. The writer of this letter is trying to encourage these diverse people to understand that God's vision is to bring all people together into God's household. That God has a vision of there being one humanity living together in peace. And if that if God's vision, we are not doing a very good job of trying to make it happen...even within this body known as the church. If you consider this whole messy thing which is known as the church...every tradition, location, size and group when the national discussion around racism

and other things dividing us continues there are two important truths which need to be pointed out: The church is the most diverse body of peoples on the planet and at the same time the church does a lousy job of living out this truth of being one humanity. The words from Ephesians seem to mean that becoming one humanity is central to our purpose and identity...but there seem to be more dividing walls not fewer. In this letter, the writer of Ephesians is specifically addressing the divide between Jews and Gentiles, but there is the larger issue addressed in all the epistles: God has formed a new humanity, a united gathering of peoples, through grace in Christ. Neither male, nor female, slave nor free, etc. as well as Jew and Gentile. This new humanity, reconciled and united in Christ, is how God creates a new world of peace. This new humanity comes together not through laws. Not through war, but through grace and reconciliation in Christ. The new humanity is created through love, the love of others called for by Jesus in his teaching. What the church is called to do is be the reconciled community of every race, tribe, nation, sex, class and language. That is not a call to force uniformity upon the world; it is a call to exist in a peaceful diversity in the world and thereby change the world. In order to do this, we need to show love toward those who are not like us; those who do not agree with us; and recognize that unity can be achieved without being uniform, but that each of us as individuals needs to recognize and place the concern for others found in our lexicon and language into a form which is enacted, not just given lip service. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.