

# ***MAKING THE MOST OF OUR DIFFERENCES***

A sermon by Pastor James R. Blades  
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, CA  
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Text: Ephesians 4:1-5, 11-13

I want to talk to you this morning about our differences. Why do we have them? Because we are all different from each other. We have different histories and experiences, different tastes, perspectives, and preferences; different propensities and talents, every one of us. Take any two human beings, even the most like, and because they are different, they will inevitably have their differences.

The question is not will we have them, you see, but how will we respond to them— what we will make of them.

One of the things that attracted me to this church from the beginning was its broad range of differences: Differences of theological and political perspective. Differences of taste in music and worship. Differences of age and of even religious background.

It's part of the strength of this church, part of the self image we celebrate, stated right there in your bulletin jacket every Sunday:

**“We are a diverse church** in our theological and political views but we are united by a common purpose: to grow together into all that God calls and equips us to be.”

Before I came here, I was an interim pastor in Chicago while Debbie finished her master's degree. Knowing roughly when my tenure there would come to a close, I had the opportunity to interview at leisure with half-a-dozen different churches in various parts of the country and even in Puerto Rico. I learned some things talking to these search committees before I finally met with yours. The first thing several of these committees would try to do after cordial greetings and a nice dinner was pin down which side of some controversial issue I was on; and it was a big red flag for me because it told me something very important about their churches: that their differences had become divisions.

When I interviewed with the search committee from First Pres of SLO, almost four years ago, it struck an immediate note with me that, though there were evident differences in theology and style and preference right there on the committee, they still worked together as a team. And, though they were very interested in what I thought about various important issues, theological and otherwise, they were not trying to find out which SIDE of these issues I was on. That was an attraction, aside from the fact that Mike Suddarth was such a smooth guy.

Here's something you may not know and that I'm not sure I've actually said before. The reason I am here is because I like our differences. I like the fact that you can find people in this church who are Republicans and others who are Democrats. I like the fact that we feature and appreciate different styles of worship. I like the fact that we have people who lean more to liberal Biblical interpretations and others who appreciate the more conservative. I like the fact that our pastoral and program staff all bring different talents and perspectives and styles to their leadership role. I like the fact that, though this is a Presbyterian Church, we don't all come from the same denominational heritage. I like being enriched by our differences.

“Birds of a feather flock together,” goes the saying. Have you noticed? It tends to be true of churches. Churches that insist everyone sign on to the same interpretation of doctrine. Churches that have one or another worship style. Churches that are mostly young or old. Church growth experts say that such uniformity is a vital ingredient for church growth: that people look for a church of people like themselves. While it may be the natural human tendency for “birds of a feather to flock together,” for my money, I would rather hang out with all different kinds and colors of birds than be bored with just one kind and color.

True, sometimes our differences cause tensions. Sometimes they brew up into church divisions and denominational tensions and ecclesiastical power struggles.

Like the parody of the old hymn: “The strife is over, the battle done; the church has split and our side won.”

Some of us have been wounded in such battles. But let us never say that it was our differences that wounded us. No, it’s how we respond to our differences that makes the outcome: whether they end up enriching or undoing us.

How do our differences become divisions? Here is one of the chief causes. Remember the old jingle: “My dog’s better than your dog, my dog’s better than yours”? It’s the “mine is better than yours” approach that turns our differences into divisions.

Back in the first century, the church at Corinth was suffering from all kinds of divisive elements. They had the “my spiritual gift is better than your spiritual gift” problem. In 1Corinthians 12, Paul addresses this division: “Every gift is important to the church’s function,” said Paul. They also had the “my preacher is better than your preacher” problem. Some said, “I follow Apollos,” who was a fiery and charismatic preacher. Others said, “I follow Paul,” who didn’t have much charisma but was a forceful and tenacious leader. Others still were most attracted to Peter, who was a sanguine and spontaneous soul. “What?” said Paul in 1Corinthians 1. “Is Christ divided? Are not Peter and Paul and Apollos all working in the same garden? One plants, another nurtures, and another harvests but God is the one who makes things grow.” Then there was the Hebrew vs. Hellenist split. Many came into the church out of their Hebrew heritage and others came in with their Gentile culture. And so you had the two camps squaring off and saying: “My approach to the faith is better than your approach.”

Isn’t that where division and trouble and fighting starts? Not with differences but with our attitudes about them. It becomes “us and them.” Our camp and their camp. Our leader and their leader. You can hear it in the way we talk. We refer to a group as “*those* so-and-sos.” Those conservatives. Those liberals. Those literalists. Those Pentecostals. Those flighty choruses. Those dusty old hymns.

It is our approach to our differences and not the differences themselves that lead to divisions and factions and harm. How tragic. Because there is so much that our differences have to offer us in terms of enrichment and blessing.

In Ephesians 4, Paul lays out the key to enrichment path. “...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bear with one another in love, make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Take a closer look, particularly, at that one portion: “...the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Because that’s the key.

Unity, what is it? Not uniformity. Not sameness. Unity is the working together of many different parts. Back in 1Corinthians 12, Paul addresses the divisive spirit that afflicted that church with the use of an apt illustration of unity.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member (had the same form and function) where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.”

Do you see the similarity of what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians to what he is saying in Ephesians 4? We have our differences because God delights in variety, says Paul. It is not the uniformity of gifts or talents or propensities that God looks for in the church, but the unity of them. And where is that unity rooted? Not in all the parts having the same function or style. No, it is our common faith, our common devotion, our common Lord and the sharing of a common Spirit. There is the root of our unity.

Now take a look at the rest of that statement in Ephesians 4: “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” I like that word “bond.” A bond is glue that holds things together. There is the bond of the marriage covenant. There is the bond of love. There is the bond of friendship and common cause and camaraderie. The bond which holds us together in the diversity of our differences, says Paul is “the bond of peace.”

What do you think of when you think of peace? There is peace as in the absence of tension and conflict. After the Civil War, Union General U.S. Grant said in his presidential inaugural, “Let us have peace.” After a nightmarish conflict like that, it was clear what the new president was saying: Let us have no more such fighting and conflict.

That’s what most of think of when we think of peace. But the Biblical concept is something quite more. Peace is not only the absence of conflict, it is wholeness. Peace is all the various parts working together in harmony. It is all the parts being enriched by the differences of all the others. The body at peace is not where all the parts are the same, but where all the parts contribute their part and draw equal benefit from all the other parts. Think of a symphony with all kinds of different instruments paying in complete harmony. Think of a well-tuned engine with all its variant parts purring together in perfect synchronization. That is peace.

The *bond* of peace is the covenant, the agreement, the stick-to-itiveness that keeps us working together, keeps us engaging each other, keeps us being present and in dialog with each other, even when the friction of differences enter into the picture, as it surely must and inevitably will.

“Honest disagreement,” said Gandhi, “is often a good sign of progress.”

Well, we have our differences and disagreements here at First Pres and I for one am glad of it. I don’t want to serve a church where everyone thinks the same, or looks the same or shows off the same talents. I don’t want to serve in a denomination where everyone holds to the same narrow theological perspective or where people of different and new and challenging perspectives are put out of the church. I say “praise the Lord!” for our differences, yes, even when those differences lead to some friction and tension and debate and challenge! Celebrate, I say! Why?

Because our differences enrich our effectiveness. Henry Ford once said, “I use all the brains I have and all that I can borrow.” Aren’t you glad that if you’re not very good at teaching, somebody else is? Aren’t you glad that if you’re not very good at preparing your taxes, someone

else is? Aren't you glad that if you are not very good at knowing how to treat an illness, especially when it's your own, someone else is? Aren't you glad that when you don't know how to fix your car or unclog your drain or build a clock, that someone else out there does know how? Aren't you glad that instead of just my style of pastoral ministry, you have Andrew's style and Eugenia's style? I can't do what they do. I can't offer the same perspective they offer and I dare say they can't offer mine.

I say "viva la difference!" Because our differences enable us all bring gifts to the world that others with different talents don't bring. That's what a healthy community is all about. What a healthy economy is all about. What a healthy church is all about.

Our differences enrich our effectiveness. They also enrich our perspective. How so?

In her book *Up With Worship*, Anne Ortlund has a neat illustration which I have used before. "Suppose," she says, "a little boy looks through the knothole of a fence to see a parade. If he sees a clown pass by, he's tickled. If he sees a lion, he's afraid. If there's a space in between, he may think the parade's over. If someone blocks his view, he may think there's no parade at all."<sup>1</sup>

Now, says the ancient apostle, we see through a glass darkly. "Now" writes Ann Ortlund, "we see through a knothole."

That captures our human situation doesn't it? We never see the whole parade. We never view the whole vista of reality and truth. We see through a knothole. Even our broadest powers of awareness yield to us but a thin sliver of life's vast panorama.

Now let's drive this allegory a bit further and hope Anne Ortlund doesn't mind.

I am looking at the parade of life through my knothole and you are looking at it through yours. As I look through my knothole, I exclaim, "Look! Elephants!"

"Elephants?" you reply as you peer through your knothole, "I don't see elephants. I see Shriners on motorcycles." And so we have our differences.

If we both insist that the part of the parade we see through our knothole is the whole parade, we are fitting ourselves for an argument. If, on the other hand, we both have the modesty to admit that there is more to the parade than either of us can see, then there is an opportunity for us to listen to each other's description of what we see and for each of us to see through the eyes of the other.

How tragic that we should miss this opportunity; that we should go through life only seeing through our own individual knotholes!

Conservative or Liberal knotholes.

Republican or Democrat knotholes

Contemporary or Traditional knotholes.

Younger-generation or Older-generation knotholes

Our-camp or Their-camp knotholes.

How much more of the parade we might see, how much more of life we might experience if we would learn to look not only through our own eyes, but through the eyes of others who see things differently.

The key to being enriched by our differences is to *embrace* them. The key to being enriched by our disagreements is always keeping in view that there is another way to look at things, that there are gifts unlike our own that others can bring to things that we don't bring; that we don't have all the goods. The key to being enriched by our differences is not just flocking

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Ortlund, *Up With Worship* (Broadman & Holman)

together with birds of our own feather but seeking out the colors and perspectives of birds of a different feather.

Which brings us back to the guidance of our morning's Scripture text:

“With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bear with (that is stick with, stay in conversation with) one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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. But each of us has been variably graced and gifted according to the measure of Christ's gift. Some have this gift others have that gift. All are for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

This next week, we are about to embark on another adventure of celebrating our differences. We are starting a third worship service whose style will be different from the other two, which also happen to be different from each other. As we pray together to commission this new service and its constituents, we are grateful for the strength of this church's diversity and we glory in the Spirit and faith and Lord that unites us.