

We CAN Do It!
Ephesians 4:1-6
Don Lincoln

How many of you are lifelong Presbyterians? Any have experience in the Southern Presbyterian Church? Northern Presbyterian Church? Not sure?

When I graduated from Seminary, there were two primary Presbyterian denominations in the United States. The United Presbyterian Church in the USA – known as the northern church, and the Presbyterian Church in the US – the southern church. Northern and Southern. You might be able to imagine when that came to be. Yeah – the Civil war.

I grew up in the Northern Church in Cincinnati. In 1980, when graduating from seminary, I was under care of my home church as a candidate for ministry – a northern Presbyterian church. But I went to a wedding at Christmas time of a seminary classmate **in Galax, VA**, and I met the cousin of the bride who was on the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee of a church in Charlotte, NC. The SOUTHERN CHURCH. And, of course, the unthinkable happened. We liked each other and they extended a call to me to be a pastor there.

Now in the northern church, you were to be ordained in the church under whose care you were. Your home church – the church who knew you and (hopefully) loved you. In the Southern Church, you were to be ordained in the church to which you were called. Because **THEY** were the ones who should be discerning your fitness for ministry.

My home Presbytery needed notice of “a call” in order for me to be ordained. But the Presbytery in Charlotte didn’t want to send a call to a Northern Presbytery – they wanted me to transfer my candidacy to the Southern Presbyterian church, and be examined BY THEM for ordination. Especially since I had not attended either Davidson College or Union Seminary in Richmond, VA. I have no idea whether my last name being Lincoln had any effect as well! After some negotiation and phone calls and I’m not sure what else, reluctantly, Charlotte sent the call north. I was ordained in Cincinnati, and transferred from the Northern to the Southern church as a fully ordained Presbyterian minister. It CAN be done.

Three years later, something momentous happened. A family that had been **fractured for 122 years**, finally took down fences, healed old wounds, agreed to let bygones be bygones and had a family reunion.

Video transcript:

As the duly elected moderators of the concluding General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, we declare to all assembled here and to all the world that these two churches each by the procedures specified in this constitution have approved the plan for reunion. And that this service of Holy Communion convenes the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. which is the 195th General Assembly of Presbyterianism in this land. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. is now constituted as a part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (clapping follows)

Presbyterians – divided by a war that divided a nation – finally agreed to be family again. It took the two predecessor denominations fourteen years to develop the plan for Reunion. And in June of 1983, the two groups agreed to get together as you just saw to become one church, and they marched through the streets of Atlanta – thousands of Presbyterians led by bagpipes.



Can you imagine? The largest gathering of people in the streets in Atlanta in decades.

One of the first things the new denomination determined to do was develop a new statement of faith. A **committee** was formed (surprise). They wanted a concise statement, in accessible language (you've already spoken a portion of it), useful for worship. The committee worked for 4 years, then brought it to the General

Assembly – our national body. It was then distributed to every congregation in the denomination across the country for review. 15,000 response forms were returned to the Committee.

Long story short – over the next three years the statement was amended, went through two more committees, two more General Assemblies, and was finally sent to the 171 Presbyteries for a vote, came back for one more General Assembly (which I happened to be attending). It passed and was added to our Book of Confessions.

It's amazing what we can do when we put our mind to it. Or perhaps, when we allow our minds to be transformed by the Spirit of God to make us something we are not; to make of us something we cannot be in and of ourselves or seem to accomplish even over 122 years. A Brief Statement of Faith was written in celebration of what God **CAN**

DO in and through us. And a family torn apart by a devastating war – and living with deeply embedded boundaries for 122 years – agreed on a statement of faith that would lead us forward.

I could tell some of you were surprised when I asked how many lifelong Presbyterians there are in the congregation – how few hands actually went up. Or that only two of our four pastors were raised as Presbyterians, schooled in the biblical mandate for committee meetings, decent and orderly practices, and all things Presbyterian.

I rejoice that we're not all Presbyterian in birth. For here is a sign of the unity God's Spirit can bring to people who follow Jesus – Christians – who belong not to denominations, traditions or inherited faith, but belong to Jesus Christ. As Paul says in our text today, **One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism**.

For centuries Christianity has struggled with division and disagreement, infighting and out-casting, name-calling and bad-mouthing and “my church can beat up your church”. North and south were really good at that for a long time!

Mark Twain once said he put a dog and cat in a cage together, to see if they could get along. They did, so he put in a bird, a pig and a goat. They too, got along fine, after a few adjustments. Then he put in a Baptist, a Presbyterian and a Catholic; soon there was not a living creature left.¹

Division, disagreement, diversity is nothing new to the church. In the early Church, the apostle Paul was wrestling with divisions. Divisions of knowledge, of tradition, of experience, of heritage.

We think we have it more difficult these days than the early church. Yeah, right! Look at how homogenous most mainline churches are – except perhaps for politics and preference of worship music. An early house church in Corinth could've included Jew and Gentile, Roman and Greek; rich and poor, men and women, slave and master, wise and uneducated, people of every race and class. And in a season when unity was not considered a virtue in Paul's world.²

Yet unity is exactly what Paul is preaching. Unity – NOT uniformity. It's a primary reason Paul wrote today's text. They were struggling with division. They had forgotten their center. **One LORD, one Faith, one baptism**. They were worried about all the stuff around the edges – the peripheral stuff instead of focusing on the center.

That doesn't mean disagreement didn't exist in Corinth. Far from it. It didn't then, and it doesn't now. The **Brief Statement of Faith** was the FIRST confessional document – and you've already said the words - that affirmed women and men in ALL the ministries of the church. The first document in our Book of Confessions – approved in 1991 – that affirmed women's ordination.

And not everyone agreed. The church had split over that in the 60's and 70's, and there are still factions of the Presbyterian family that departed over that issue – who still don't ordain women. Who are still our cousins in the faith. **One Lord, one faith, one baptism.**

The Brief Statement is the first to avoid exclusively male language about God. You heard Jon, in the assurance of pardon, from the statement: "...like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still." The Brief Statement speaks about the fact that we "threaten death to our planet" – written not in a time when they were worried about climate change, they were worried about nuclear holocaust. Not everyone liked Presbyterians speaking out about that. But it was the right thing to do.

Since that statement was made we have had bitter fights inside and outside the church over ordination of individuals regardless of sexual orientation. Like ordination of women, forbidden for 2,000 years. In 2010 ordination standards changed; and some weren't happy. But Presbyterians moved forward.

Same gender marriage became legal in Pennsylvania in May of 2014, and one month later in the Presbyterian Church, USA. This congregation and its leaders studied that issue, and ultimately agreed our pastors have always had discretion about whom they could marry, and so long as it was within the standards of the state and the denomination, it would be allowed. It was not an easy time, and while some of our church family left because of that decision, we believe we are better for having made it. But those that left – are still family. One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. And perhaps one day, like North and South, and possibly this side of heaven, we will have a family reunion.

You know what? Having lived half my ministerial career below the Mason Dixon Line, I think the most miraculous thing I've seen is Northern and Southern Presbyterians getting together!!

After the reunion of Presbyterians north and south in 1985, I took a call to a church in Roanoke, VA. The husband of one of the members of the Pastor nominating committee informed me that I preached my candidating sermon in Roanoke on the anniversary of Lincoln's Assassination – April 14. And that my first day of work, a month later, was on the birthday of John Wilkes Booth. He said it jokingly.....for the most part. Old wounds die hard.

Traditions are not easily let go of which is why Paul tells us how we are to get along. By holding to the center – One Lord, One Faith, One baptism – and not worrying about agreeing on everything around the periphery – around the edges. And how are we to do that? He writes, "I beg you to 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." Humility, gentleness, patience – bearing with one another.

Friends, we still have much work to do. Along with the issues of women in leadership and welcoming and affirming the LGBT community, there are still the challenges of

human trafficking; poverty, hunger; addiction; clean water, mental health; racism; affordable housing; political entrenchment. All of which – thanks be to God – this congregation has shown its willingness to be engaged with and attentive to. May **this band** of Presbyterians continue to be evidence of what God can do in and through us!

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace?
2. Charles Erdman, The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians