

8th Sunday After Pentecost

Ephesians 4:1-16 - Unity Within the Community

Humility, gentleness, patience: the hallmarks of maturity, and good virtues to have on hand in any community ... also the first things abandoned when feelings get hurt, tempers get hot, or toes get stepped on. In this third of four weeks on the Letter to the Ephesians, we continue with the theme of unity.

Last week we discovered that, although the letter was titled “to the Ephesians”, this label was added to the letter several generations after it was written. Evidence shows that it was most likely the lost letter written to the Laodiceans, referred to in the letter to the Colossians. Although written in the style of Paul, it was not actually written by Paul. Using a well-respected, well-known person’s name, imitating their style and signing their name to a work, was a very common and accepted practice.

Last week, the unity presented was between two separated groups. Today we are presented with the deeper unity within the community of individual believers. The author writes that the recipients of this letter should: “Always keep yourselves united in the Holy Spirit, and bind yourselves together with peace”. They are to equip the saints or believers for ministry “until we come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s son that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ”.

The unity of the church is a reflection of God’s gift of reconciliation in Christ. The argument here follows logically upon the previous verses where the author has elaborated upon the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles that God has brought about in Christ. The repetition of the word “one” highlights the message that the church is “one new humanity” created by Christ. The mystery of the faith is that through the one body of Jesus, God has brought together two disparate groups under one plan of salvation. While both Jews and Gentiles once lived according to the flesh, Jews were nevertheless “near” to God, while Gentiles were “far off.”

Last week we learned that the Jews were members of the Southern Kingdom or “House of Judah” - comprised of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The “House of Israel” or the Northern Kingdom made up the other ten of the twelve Israeli tribes. Having been captured by the Assyrians and scattered throughout Asia Minor amongst many different peoples and cultures, they intermarried with the pagan populations, taking on their customs and gods. Essentially, the “House of Israel” became the Gentiles who broke away from Yahweh and his laws. By uniting the Jews and Gentiles, that is the Houses of Judah and Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel were re-united – were once again “one”.

Through Christ, the two groups are now joined together and draw nearer to God. In the resulting closeness with God, the Jews and Gentiles formed one body with Christ as its head, and one structure with Christ as its cornerstone.

The church is called to reflect upon this unity. However, the author makes clear that the perfection of the church is a process and not a completed event. Christ has equipped the church with gifts so that the church as Christ’s body may reach maturity. He writes: “However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ” and “Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.”

The church is depicted as growing into its own body. Christ is already “mature” or as translated from the original Greek, “the complete man”. Yet the church, which is Christ’s body, must keep building up the body until it arrives at the stature or completion of Christ. The author writes: “This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.” The image evoked is that of the body growing up to meet its head, that is Christ.

All members of the body of Christ are given gifts for the benefit of all, though not all are gifted for what we often think of as “leadership roles.” And that’s okay. The truth still is that all are given gifts and that “He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is

healthy and growing and full of love.” All members of the body contribute in their own way to the growth of the whole, and at the same time to the growth and maturity of every other part or member of the body. Children, youth, young adults, and every other adult grouping or generation, each have something to teach the other, and together we will help the body of Christ grow.

The gifts given by Christ appear to be identified with various leaders, whose job it is to train all the saints or believers or members. By contrast, the “gifts of the Spirit” of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians - the ability to give wise advice; the gift of special knowledge; special faith; the power to heal the sick; the power to perform miracles; the ability to prophesy; the ability to know whether it is really the Spirit of God or another Spirit that is speaking; the ability to speak in unknown languages and the ability to interpret seem to be gifts that any believer may possess and use for the good of the body. Only the Holy Spirit decides which gift each person should have. This passage in 1 Corinthians may be appealing because the whole church shares equally in the gifts of God.

The focus in today’s Epistle is more on the purpose and work of the body and how the diversity of gifts given work together to get the job done. Here, the gifts lifted up relate to faith formation leadership roles within the community (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers). The purpose is laid out for these roles: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” and to build up the body of Christ for the spiritual maturity of all. These are a good description of faith formation.

Leaders are provided to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” so that faith formation is not just for the benefit of the body of Christ, but also to equip that body for the work of ministry, for service, the ministry of Christ in this world. Service and mission work contribute to faith formation so it is a beautiful cycle of growth and love.

This could also be read as a recognition that good leaders are necessary for the church’s unity. The author has already assumed that God has given grace as a gift to every believer. Nevertheless, certain people are gifted in particular ways for the building up of the body, and this is a gift of God’s grace. The language here does not demand uncritical

obedience to leaders, but understands leaders as a gift from God to guide the growth of the body.

The unity to which the church is called can have challenging implications for contemporary churches. In the first century, many Jews and Gentiles struggled to accept the message of reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles - that is the houses of Judah and Israel. God's gift of reconciliation means that those who were understood to be "far off" are now those who are equally gifted by God. The "dividing walls" of today's churches might also be seen in this light, although in our case the more relevant categories would be those of gay and straight, black and white, rich and poor, young and old, men and women. In its unity, the church embodies the reconciliation made possible in Christ, who "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us".

In this letter, unity is not the same as uniformity. The mystery of God that is revealed in Christ and results in the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles does not obliterate the distinctions between these different groups. In the letter we read: "God's purpose was to show his wisdom in all its rich variety to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. They will see this when Jews and Gentiles are joined together in his church."

Part of the call here is to tolerance: "Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love." The assumption is not that all distinctions will cease, but that even with the persistence of differences, the church may nevertheless grow together as a body, growing up in Christ.

This unity is based in connections created by the Spirit given and shared in baptism. Believers themselves have not attained, reached or otherwise brought upon themselves the great gifts of God. Having been given these gifts; the one Spirit, Lord, and baptism, and filling everyone with a whole new life, there is a calling inherent in the bond and unity. The activities of those called and in-spirited by God, summarized by living worthily, include bearing with one another, maintaining the unity of the Spirit, speaking the truth in love, and growing up into Christ.

Why would a body truly united in one Spirit with one Lord, thoroughly permeated by Godself, need to be reminded of this calling? The first reason is rooted in the self-conscious hierarchal nature of ancient societies based on familial and patronal loyalties that were seen to serve the general welfare. Benefits and obligations made the ancient world go 'round. Loyalties and rivalries were taken for granted as part of daily life in the ancient political, social, religious, financial economy. To set such matters aside in this unified body, or persons not related by blood or patronage, would be very difficult.

Another reason for the reminder of the calling is based on the disunity that emerges from the differences among the gifts, differences that could result in competition for authority. Such competition is not unknown among us. The writer reminds us that all the gifts God's people receive were given according to the "measure of Christ's gift" and for the sake of growing into the "measure of the full stature of Christ". Gifts are given to us that enable us and call upon us, the recipients, to grow in Christlikeness, "created in Christ for good works".

A third reason for the reminder is that believers are seen to be in need of a warning to "grow up". Growing up in Christ is an interesting idea for us. In our age of rapid and unedited communication, the winds of opinion and doctrine fly faster than we can keep up, without time for reflection and good decision making. How do we slow down enough and build enough trust with one another to speak the truth in love?

We are reminded of the relationship between our being called by God and the subsequent assignment of a calling in the world. And the result of being called is that the faithful now have callings where they lead lives marked by humility, love and patience.

It is easy to get confused about the dual nature of a call. Being called and having a calling must be distinguished but never separated. Our relationship with God simultaneously involves a relationship with neighbour or community. And these callings are multiple, as it is impossible for a Christian to not be in some type of calling at all times of his or her life.

Just as God is active in every nook and cranny of creation so God uses God's people to make sure people are fed, clothed, comforted, educated, protected, and so on. A calling should never be pared down to a job or occupation. This would mean wide stretches of human experience would be outside of God's providence. God calls us not only to work, but to friendship, family life, and citizenship.

A contrast is made here between children, who are "tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching" and those who "grow up in every way more and more like Christ", and contribute to the building up of the body of Christ. Knowledge of Jesus' identity is linked closely with unity in the church. We often think of being in the body of Christ as mainly a social activity. We gather together to bear one another's burdens or we work together to address a need in the community or the larger world. These are important expressions of the body of Christ. But, the body has a "mind" as well.

So, it is important for congregations to know what they believe and why they believe it. We live in a time that tends to undermine any claim to truth out of fear of being divisive or intolerant. But the Epistle advocates "speaking the truth in love". In other words, our bearing witness to the truth is grounded in a deep humility. After all, we are passing on what we have received and not what we own. Like John the Baptist, we do not possess the truth, as much as we point to the truth in the person of the crucified and risen Christ.

Today's two readings are lessons in life together. Put another way, using the metaphor provided by the accompanying Gospel from John, we are invited to figure out how to get along in the vineyard. The vine grower has done a masterful job cultivating several varieties of productive vines. In a different place and time, any one of us might have been a Buddhist or a Jew or a Hindu or a Muslim. It happens that the vine to which I was born, the story of my belief, is the Christ vine. So when John attributes to Jesus the words, "I am the true vine", I need to slant it just a bit. From the branch where I hang, perhaps what he meant is, "I am the vine to which you are truly grafted." That leaves room for other vines of faith to thrive in God's vineyard too.

Our epistle says, let's just all grow up and start bearing the fruit of God's extraordinary love instead of being sucker shoots that deceive, diminish, and destroy one another. We struggle to recognize God's gifts in ourselves and others. We wrestle to make meaning and find purpose in life, under assault from images and messages that tell us we are profoundly insignificant. We live in a society with exponential growth in sub-cultures such as FaceBook "groups", yet with fewer shared real-time experiences.

We belong to lots of things and are incredibly busy but we don't seem to gather around any one thing or spend much time together – not in worship, as witnessed by diminishing numbers; not around the family dining room table. As the writer of the epistle said in so many words: Our growth is stunted. Somehow we got stuck in the "spoiled brat" phase. *Me, me, me* and *my, my, my* salvation/satisfaction over *we, we, we* for the good of the world. Growing up on the Christ vine in today's world might mean finding new ways to restore one of the primary benefits that different faiths offer, drawing people out of themselves, gathering them into community, providing an experience larger than, and a purpose greater than, any one life. Might there be a connection between the Islam call to prayer five times a day and the fact that it is the fastest growing religion in the world?

The writer of the epistle, like John, also has the "One True Faith" thing going in today's reading. I hope we've grown up enough to put that into a more mature context, one that is more expansive and inclusive of all faiths. Given the state of the vineyard today, that just might be the most humble and gentle and graceful thing to do. Perhaps this excerpt, paraphrased with imagery from John, will help us grow in that direction.

"... speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the Vine, into Christ, from whom the whole vineyard [world], joined and knit together by all the vines with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly [producing fruitfully], promotes the vineyard's [world's] growth in building itself up in love."

Amen.

Prayers of the People Pentecost 8 - July 23, 2023

Gracious God, we bring our prayers and praises before you, confident that you not only hear them but also trust that you will act according to your eternal purposes for our sake and for your enduring love of the world. Bring stillness to our hearts, empty our minds of other things and direct our thoughts to you and all those who especially need our prayers.

When we reflect on how you have supported and cared for us in the past, we cannot fail to give you thanks. When we consider how you give us courage and help for each new day, we are filled with a sense of gratitude and praise. When you lift us from the pit of doubt and despair, our whole being feels renewed and refreshed. What a comfort it is to know the love and support you bring to us through your Son and by your Holy Spirit.

In our joy, let us not forget those this morning who know little else but sadness and a sense of hopelessness. In our sense of gratitude and praise, let us not forget those whose lives are filled with regrets, shame, guilt, and heartbreaks. In our feeling of support and guidance, let us not forget those who feel they have struggled against life's difficulties and disappointments alone and uncared for.

In our desire to give You praise, do not blur our vision of the hardship in this life: the despair of the homeless in our communities across the country; the feelings of guilt by parents who cannot adequately feed or provide care and safety for their children; the worries and fears of those in hospital or who are ill; those living in isolation and the lonely; those experiencing the deep sense of loss in their bereavement.

In our comfort, we see and pray for those dealing with the devastating effect of climate change: floods in Himachal Pradesh, India, Nova Scotia and northeastern USA; deadly heatwaves in China and southern Europe; drought in central and southern Africa and Australia;

heating of sea, lake, and river waters affecting fish, including on Vancouver Island, and sea life found in coral reefs; the numerous forest fires all across Canada. Protect all fire fighters who risk their lives and who have already lost three of their brave colleagues. Keep them and our communities safe.

In our complacency, we can easily forget the wars, conflicts, and violence that ravage the lives of so many people, especially those in Ukraine as Russia tries to seal off ports vital to the international food supply. These conflicts, wars, and food shortages are creating millions of refugees seeking safe homes, medical aid, and nourishment for their children.

Creator God, you are not only the maker and source of all life in this world, you are the benevolent and loving ruler of your heavenly Kingdom. Strengthen us while we live out our lives on this earth, showing through our actions and words the compassion and the caring of Jesus. Hold before us the reality of your Kingdom come, where there is no suffering, pain or regret, where wholeness and wellness are experienced by all, so that we may share it with those who are without hope.

We offer these prayers in the name of the patient, insightful, and healing Christ who taught us to pray

Our Father ...