

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-16

¹ I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: ⁴ there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

⁷ But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it is said,

"When he ascended on high, he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."

⁹ (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ He himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Last Sunday, I told you that our scriptures for worship would be based on scriptures from Ephesians. Ephesians is a letter written by Paul while he was in prison in Rome, to the faithful growing congregation in Ephesus. It was written as encouragement to the Christians, not to address any specific heresies or problems in the church. The Ephesian church existed during a time of deep divisions of all sorts in society. Paul was an apostle called out to deliver the gospel message to both the Jews and Gentiles, which was a growing part of God's plan to bring salvation to everyone, not just a chosen race.

The first half of the letter is more of a theological discussion of the nature of the church. The church is built on Jesus Christ. The heart of the church is not a building. The church of Jesus Christ is people, his people, of every race and nation, who love Jesus and are committed to serving him. The church is the people.

Last week we dug into the prayer Paul offers for Christians which we find in Ephesians 3:14-21. He prays for an infusion of the power of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the church members; for love in their hearts to be rooted and grounded in Christ; and for the fullness, the unimaginable greatness of God to be known in their hearts. Following this prayer, Paul's letter becomes a piece sharing practical applications to his theological writings.

Today's text begins with the word "therefore," signifying a pivotal point between his theological discussion about the nature of the church that reminds us that God has showered us with grace and blessings, and our response of gratitude to this. I really like how *The Message* interprets these first three verses because of how it describes the response we should have to God because of what he has done. Petersen writes in *The Message*: "In light of all this, here's what I

want you to do. While I'm locked up here, a prisoner for the Master, I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run!—on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline—not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences.”

I hear that our response of gratitude to God is expressed through our unity: unity in purpose, unity in action as we answer God's call in mission, unity as we honor our diversity and love each other in spite of our differences.

In the first three verses, Paul sets the groundwork for helping us to understand that unity is not uniformity. Thinking the two are one-in-the-same is a misconception that in fact causes division. We might wish that everyone would look, think and believe the same. We think that would make life easier; but that's just not the case.

In the article, "Confusing Unity with Uniformity," published in the Spring of 2021, in the publication, *Reflections on Faith*, Tim Westminster cites the following examples of unity without uniformity:

“A sports team wears the same uniform—a word that shares a linguistic root with the word “unity.” So yes, the players look the same, and they are, indeed, united by a shared goal. But while they are united, the individual players on the team are not identical in their roles. The quarterback is not the same as the nose tackle. The pitcher is asked to do something very different than the designated hitter.

A business enterprise, similarly, is united in purpose. But it would be a mistake to assume that everyone who participates in furthering that mission has the same function. The finance manager serves a very different purpose than the marketing specialist. The salesperson isn't asked to manufacture or assemble the product she is asked to sell.

In our country's history, the original 13 states—who came together under the motto “E Pluribus Unum” (Out of Many, One)—were not identical. They each had different—and proud—histories and cultures. In uniting together to become the United States, they were not for a moment asking that those histories should be forgotten or dissolved or erased, but instead had an instinct that they could come together—with all of their differences—to form something stronger than any of them individually: “a more perfect union.”

These may be obvious examples of the difference between unity and uniformity, but the same holds true in the body that we call the Church—made up of different parts or members.”

In verses 4-6 then, Paul writes we should all be able to travel together in faithfulness to do God's will because we are made one through God, the Father, Christ the Son, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. All Three, each having their own role yet being One, fulfill who we each are and bring us together as one. So, just as the Trinity being three is one, so are we to be.

Paul says in verse 7 that this does not mean we should all look, speak and act the same. Too often, I observe, Christians welcome this belief...until they run into someone or a group who wants to do something differently, who has a different interpretation/understanding of scripture, who believes and therefore lives differently, bringing about disunity in the church.

Now here is something to think about. We understand that the church is the Body of Christ; however, there is no disunity in Christ; so, if there's disunity and divisions in the church, does that mean it is not the body of Christ?

And if we believe that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son as a sacrifice for our salvation, and if Jesus was so full of love that even while he was dying on the cross he looked down and said "forgive them for they know not what they do", yet the church turns around and does the opposite, fights, draws lines in the sand, even divides, within its own body, what does the church communicate about Christ? Again, is it really the body of Christ when Christians allow this to happen.

Paul said we are blessed with unconditional love and grace from God; and likewise, we should have the same with each other. God's love and grace are within all who truly proclaim and allow Christ to live in them, it's when our own selfishness is released within us, allowing it to take over that we shut the door on love and grace which would allow us to be united, even with our differences. Love and grace help us build bridges to overcome the divisions that can result because of our differences. When Christians feel the things that create disunity in their hearts, our prayer should include a strengthening of grace and love in our own hearts towards those we differ with.

There once was a carpenter who visited one of two brothers who had recently grown embittered with each other over a misunderstanding over the farm they had managed together for the past 40 years. The carpenter was in need of work; or so he said, and he asked the one brother if there was anything he might do to help him out.

"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor. In fact, it's my younger brother! Last week there was a meadow between us. He recently took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll do him one better. See that pile of lumber by the barn? I want you to build me a fence, an 8-foot fence - so I won't need to see his place or his face anymore."

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day -- measuring, sawing and nailing.

About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There wasn't a fence there at all. The carpenter had fashioned a bridge... a bridge that stretched from one side of the creek to the other, handrails and all! And the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming toward them, hand outstretched, meeting them in the middle, "You are quite a fellow, you know; to build this bridge after all I've said and done." Then hoisting his toolbox onto his shoulder, the carpenter departed. "I'd love to stay, but I have many more bridges to build."

That's just like the carpenter, Jesus, isn't it -- who would tear down the dividing walls of hostility and disunity, not just between us and God; but between us and others too? We allow Jesus to help us build bridges when we release the love and grace that he plants in our hearts.

Unity also happens as we use the gifts Christ distributes to us to use to build up the church. Paul says, "He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other," Unlike other lists of God given gifts we find in the Bible, this list sounds specific to leadership roles. However, these gifts are not limited to trained church leaders and pastors. Anyone of us can possess one or all of these gifts, and we may not realize it, or we may be too afraid to use it.

August 4, 2024 - "Unity...Not Uniformity"

A man once told his son the story about a peculiar fisherman from Minnesota. You see, this fisherman was very well prepared. He knew how to fish. He had everything you need to be a good fisherman. He had poles, nets, bait, and even a really nice boat, but this fisherman had a problem. You see, for all his preparation he never caught anything. Not one fish. Not one, not ever. And you know why he never caught a fish? What do you think? The answer is easy: He never went fishing. He had all the knowledge and all the equipment, but he never got into the boat, he never left the dock.

Yes, we are called to use God given gifts such as Paul mentions here in Ephesians 4 for our mission in the world; but in the context of today's discussion, it is also very important for us to use them for building unity, and building bridges to heal any disunity in the church. Building bridges encourages spiritual growth and faithfulness in the church. It grows the church.

That qualifies our testimony of faith to the world. It gives credence to our voice to tell the world that there is a different way, a way that does not divide and cause destruction of mind, body, soul, of life, itself. Our unity, not uniformity, should point to the source of all unity, Jesus Christ; and encourage hope for the rest of the world to embark on a different journey, diffusing the forces of evil that fuels disunity in all of the world.

We can learn great lessons of unity and its power simply by observing nature. For example, a single snowflake that looks beautiful and innocent. If it remains on its own, it can easily fly away or quickly melt away. On its own, it does no harm and poses no threat to anyone, does it? But when it unites with other snowflakes, they gain more strength and power. Those who live in New England know the power of the accumulation of "snowflakes" They have the power to work havoc and bring a whole administration to halt.

If that is the power of the united snowflakes, can you imagine the power generated when the people in the church are united? Amen.