

The Harmony Way

1Cor.12:12-20

Ephesians 4:1-16

As mentioned last week, Ephesians has two easily identifiable sections: Ch's 1-3: the "wow" section—what God has done for us in Christ (I'll summarize that in a moment). Ch's 4-6: "now": how shall we live it out. We now come to the "now" section of Ephesians.

Last week we reflected on Paul's prayer, which concludes the "wow" section: a prayer that we would know the height, depth, width, and breadth of God's love, and that we would be strengthened inwardly as we are rooted and grounded in that love. Not rooted and grounded in ideas, or beliefs, but in the ongoing experience of love, which strengthens us inwardly.

So, here is how the "now" (living it out) section of Ephesians begins:

4I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

The next three verses (8-10) are about the ascension of Christ, and Paul quotes from Psalm 68, which is about a king leading a victory procession. However, Paul reverses the imagery: instead of a king who *takes and keeps* the spoils of victory, Christ ascends and **gives** gifts to everyone, all along the way of the procession. This is not a powerful ruler who generates wealth for himself by

conquest, but ruler who is powerful in another way, because he gives, generously, out of his abundance. Continuing with verse 11:

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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. ¹⁴We 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. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, (literally, 'truthing in love') we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from 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.

This is the word of the Lord

A couple years ago I enjoyed watching a two-hour documentary about one of my favorite rock bands of the late 70's and early 80's: the Eagles. They called it a "Rockumentary." And during the documentary they interviewed various band members, including those who quit the band over the years for whatever reason, and, of course, those who remained with the band.

In the course of talking about the band breaking up at one point and then getting back together years later, one of the founders and main vocalists, Glenn Frey, said something that got my attention. He said, "Every good rock band is always on the verge of breaking up." Partly because of the creative tensions that exist among talented musicians, who have strong opinions about the music and the lyrics and so forth. But also because of the tensions that are created because of the egos involved—who gets to be the lead singer on this song, or who plays

lead guitar on that song, who gets paid what, whose name is on the marquee, etc.

But mostly the “always-being-on-the-verge-of-breaking-up” is due to how good they are as musicians, and the creative tensions and energy.

And because almost all of the apostle Paul’s epistles in the New Testament address conflict, and therefore also contain the appeal to unity, I wonder if Paul would say that, like a good rock band, many churches seem to always be on the verge of... fracturing in some way. Maybe not breaking up, but struggling to keep unified; because of creative tensions among gifted people, and, well, the egos in involved (often starting with the pastor!).

Theologian and commentator Karl Barth once quipped, “Thank God for conflict in the early church! If there wasn’t any, we wouldn’t have Paul’s letters.” Well, that’s a positive way to look at it!

We don’t know specifically what the conflict was in Ephesians, like we do in other letters, so this is a general appeal to unity. It’s the overarching theme of this passage: unity. Or, to use a musical term, harmony. “The harmony way” is also a phrase that native Americans use to describe their way of life, and their outlook on everything. The majority of indigenous cultures around the world have some form of the harmony way worldview, and way of life. And that’s the appeal he is making: to follow the harmony way of God, in Christ.

I'll get to this theme in a moment, but first...

Paul begins this densely packed section with an earnest plea. He makes a statement that in effect is in all caps (if he were texting, or emailing, it might be all caps), bold letters: he says "I beg you, lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." If we could see Paul in our imagination, he's on his knees, hands clasped together, looking up at us, pleading with everything in him. He's begging God's people: live a life worthy of the calling to which you were called.

What is that calling? The calling that he is speaking of here is not a special calling that's only for a select few—for example, the call to be a missionary in a faraway place or something like that. Rather he's speaking about *everyone's* calling, and that is: the call to belong to Jesus Christ; the call to be beloved; and to follow the Way of Jesus Christ. That's our calling. It's the call to discipleship. The calling to respond to the amazing grace that has been given to us out of God's riches. It's the calling to respond to the "wow" of what Paul said in chapters 1-3.

And he begs us to live worthy of that calling. The word "worthy" here means consistent with. Congruent with. The Greek word refers to a set of balancing scales, where the treasure on one side is consistent with the weight on the other. Paul is saying: put all that God has done for you on one side. Put your life, living on the other side and do your part to make it congruent, consistent.

This has nothing to do with earning our salvation or making our sacrifice equal to Jesus' sacrifice. *That's not possible.* We can't earn anything. It's all gift. What this "live your life worthy" simply means is to lead a life that reflects the worth of what God has done for us in Christ. And, what has he done? Here's what Paul has told us God has done (quick overview of ch's 1-3 since we didn't read it all):

- We are blessed with every spiritual blessing;
- We are adopted as God's children;
- And as God's children he has given us an inheritance out of the immeasurable riches of his grace in Christ;
- God has made us alive with Christ; we have been raised with him; united with him;
- We're told that we are God's masterpiece, God's work of art, and God continues to mold and shape us into that beautiful work of art, for the sake of blessing others;
- He has torn down walls that divide and has made reconciliation, peace, and community available between all kinds of people; therefore all have free and equal access to the grace of God, and therefore belong, together;
- God's power and love are ours without measure, to strengthen us inwardly as we're being rooted and grounded in Jesus' love; and that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly, beyond all that we can ask or imagine (according to that power at work within us).

Now, Paul says: live a life that reflects the worth of all of this—a life which is consistent with these wonderful truths.

And the rest of Ephesians fleshes out this living in a way that is consistent and congruent with, or reflects the worth of, our calling in Christ.

This morning's section addresses the need for unity, as we journey toward maturity ("growing up into Christ").

One of the expressions of unity and maturity, we are told here, is having our gifts for service identified and affirmed.

The gifts that Paul lists here in Ephesians are a representative list, not an exhaustive list. We have other major lists, for example, in 1Cor.12 (which you heard), and Romans 12, and when we combine all of those lists, with other places where we are called to serve the Lord, we get a fuller and more complete picture of the wonderful variety of gifts God gives his people for service.

But Paul makes a grand affirmation here in speaking of the gifts: he says, "Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." The key words here being "each of us." No one is excluded. There is no such thing as a member of the body who is not graced, or gifted in some way. Each of us is given grace, is grace-gifted, for service. So the question is not, "Do I have a gift?" but "What is my gift(s)?"

To use Paul's own words, one of the ways that we "speak the truth in love" is to speak into one another's giftedness—to see gifts in each other and call them forth. In our highly individualistic culture, we think we need to discover our gifts on our own, and for a long time we have taught people to discover their gifts in that way: go home and take this assessment, take this spiritual gift inventory, study the lists of gifts in the Bible, then come back and tell us what your gift is.

And we've gone about this all wrong. In the Bible, no one ever says, "I have the gift of..." It is always said about them *by someone else*. It's the body that builds itself up by calling forth the gifts that people see in each other.

A wonderful Biblical example of this is Barnabas. In Acts 4 he comes on the scene as Joseph. That's his name. But the community of faith nicknames him Barnabas, which means, "Son of encouragement." They saw the gift in him and they changed his name. Joseph didn't come on the scene and say, "I have the gift of encouragement; so, from now on call me Barnabas." No, it was the community that saw it and called it forth in him. And later in Acts, it is said of Barnabas, "He was a good man; full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great number of people were brought to the Lord." All because the body of Christ saw and affirmed his gift.

So, my encouragement to us: go treasure hunting with each other! Look for and find gifts in each other. Do your 'truthing in love' in this way. And in doing so you fulfill the goal of helping the body "*build itself up* in love." That's the message of 1Cor. 12 that you heard. We need each other. We need diversity, we need to honor one another in our uniqueness, in our learning trajectories, in our strengths and experiences. And it doesn't matter if we're younger, older, newer Christian, seasoned Christian; whether we are full of faith or full of doubt; whether we're new to church, or been going to church as long as we can remember. We need each other. All the gifts are needed.

So... be a treasure hunter! Find the treasure of one another's gifts, affirm them, call them forward, because everyone is needed.

I'd like to go back to the beginning of the passage for a moment and reflect on the opening words (following the begging part...). I'm going to read them again, slowly. Because when I read and re-read this passage after last Tuesday's election, these opening words emerged, for me, as significant; and I found myself going back to them. It was like putting an old cassette tape on rewind as I went, "Wait, what did he say?" And I had to sit with each of the words here, and the call I have felt to live into them in the coming days.

In living out our response what God has done for us, he says, do so “*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” Let me read that again. Live, now, “*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”

These are timely words, aren't they? Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Bearing with one another in love. Maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Both our church life—our life together as a congregation—and each of our Monday through Saturday lives in other contexts and with other people, will require humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love in the days to come. Not to mention trying to work toward unity and peace!

I'd like to point out something Paul says here about unity and peace—in the church, mainly. But unity exists and peace is called for wherever God is, so in my mind this also applies everywhere else. Again, unity is a theme in *all* of Paul's letters. There isn't one of his letters or writings when he doesn't address the issue of unity in some way. Jesus himself addressed it in a variety of ways with his disciples, and on the night of the last supper, before his betrayal and arrest, the

apostle John records a lengthy prayer of Jesus, and it's a prayer for the unity of those who would become his followers, his church.

Because the church is a collection of people who wouldn't normally or even naturally come together—people are part of the church because of a *common calling*—because of all that, the church's challenge has always been to keep themselves united, and working together. Like a rock band! We're rock stars! Look at it that way...

So... here is something to point out. In this morning's passage Paul says, "Maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." I'd like us to carefully notice that he says "maintain the unity of the Spirit." He doesn't say "*create*" unity in the Spirit. And because he says "maintain" the unity of the Spirit, and not manufacture it, that tells us that *unity is already present*. It's already here. The Church's unity is a gift, it's a reality. Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in blessed unity and community. God is one ("one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one heavenly father of us all"). Unity is *God's nature*. It just is. We can't create it. So, what Paul is saying is that unity is the *church's* nature as well. We can't create it; we can only maintain it. Or not. That's the challenge.

It could be compared to inheriting a well put together house with a beautifully landscaped yard that was thoughtfully planted with a variety of plants

and shrubs and trees—a kind of ecosystem that works together on that property, and with the house. And the person we inherited it from gave instructions, saying, “Please make every effort to *maintain* this house and landscaping.” It’s already built and put together, and planted. We just need to *maintain* what’s already there.

I realize in using that illustration that not everyone enjoys outdoor yard work, or housekeeping! So maybe another illustration works better. Like inheriting a beautiful car that literally fires on all cylinders, and we’re to maintain it... Anyway, find an illustration that works for you! The point is, to receive the incredible and generous gift we’ve inherited and *maintain* it.

Same with the church and its unity. It exists already. And we maintain our unity by remembering that our unity is *in Jesus Christ*. It’s in Christ, and in our common calling to belong to Christ, and to follow Christ, in gratitude and in our giftedness. Christian unity is not in social or economic status, or in our social lives, or our ideologies or who we voted for, but in Christ. And *from* Christ comes a unity of purpose. Eugene Peterson captures this well in his translation of verses 4-6: “You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction; so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly.” That’s a good image, and way of saying maintain unity in spirit, and in purpose.

We are the body of Christ. We are united, spiritually. It's a spiritual reality. And true Christian unity will always feel a little uncomfortable for us, and will take some effort to maintain, because true unity can only be had when we are learning to love people we don't naturally feel like loving, and working alongside people we don't always like working with. But if we're united in spirit and purpose, then how I feel about someone isn't a deal-breaker. I have to get over myself and learn to love. That's the "bearing with one another in love" that Paul talks about in the opening lines.

Here is how Paul puts it in Philippians 1:27:

Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (sound familiar? He repeats himself a lot!), so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving *side by side* with one mind for the faith of the gospel.

The great image here is 'side by side.' Side by side. As I often say to young couples in premarital counseling, and in wedding homilies, the married couples that have high marital satisfaction, to my observation, and who are strong in their relationship, are those that have figured out how to do the *side-by-side* thing well. They do the face-to-face thing well; but they know that isn't enough. They also need to do the side-by-side thing well so that their marriage has an outward focus

and purpose, serving the greater good of humanity and the world. That is God's good design for marriage. It's God's good design for the church too!

If we can learn to walk and serve side by side, with our eyes forward and outward, together, in following Christ, with common purpose, we will be built up, and we are able to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

I want to reiterate something I've been saying for a while (and that I opened the service with this morning): we need each other, and will continue to need each other, especially after last week's election. It will be easy, and tempting, for people to turn on each other, or become suspicious of others.

Two or three times this past week I've heard someone say that they were in some place, say, a grocery store for example, and as they were looking around they caught themselves looking at people and thinking, "I wonder who that person voted for; I wonder who they voted for; they look like they voted for _____." And if we catch ourselves doing that, or catch ourselves thinking uncharitable thoughts about people around us, we need to find the strength to let go of judgement—against another, but also to drop judgments against ourselves if we're frustrated with our attitude or how we once again dug ourselves into a pit of despair. We need to be kind to ourselves at this time. We need to remember that we are being strengthened inwardly as we are rooted and grounded in love;

we need to remember that we are graced with gifts for service, and then make an effort to use our gifts, alongside others, to bring wholeness and peace. To follow the harmony way.

This takes work! And Paul is realistic about this because he says, “*Make every effort...*” to be unifiers and harmonizers. Make every effort. This suggests that it will take work.

And, it will take all of us remembering that God isn’t surprised by anything. God isn’t caught off guard, God isn’t freaking out, as if God hasn’t seen or handled tumultuous times in history before. God walks with us if we’re distressed, and strengthens us and gifts us to live the way we are called to live, no matter what.

We celebrate God, the generous giver of gifts, the giver of life, as we sing “God Whose Giving Knows No Ending.”