

Ephesian 4:1-16

Unity in the Body of Christ

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, 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, making every effort to maintain 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 was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

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

(When it says, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?

He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, 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.

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. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted 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.

Stay Together

I want to begin by reading Peterson's translation of our passage because it points to how I arrived at our theme today. While the New Revised Standard Version is great because of its scholarly interpretation and translation from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, Peterson's interpretation gives us, I hope, some new insight. Chapter 4 is the cornerstone of the entire letter, and gives us Paul's primary message. Let's read Peterson's interpretation:

To Be Mature

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.

You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness.

But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift. The text for this is,
He climbed the high mountain,

He captured the enemy and seized the booty,
He handed it all out in gifts to the people.

Is it not true that the One who climbed up also climbed down,
down to the valley of earth? And the One who climbed down is
the One who climbed back up, up to highest heaven. He handed
out gifts above and below, filled heaven with his gifts, filled earth
with his gifts. 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, efficient and
graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully
developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.

No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate
babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for
impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth
and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from
Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in
step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us,
nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in
love.

On our first trip to India, we ended the trip in Mumbai. Mumbai is
one of the most densely populated cities in the entire world. Take
the population of New York City, multiply it by about 10 or 20,
and you get an idea of how many people are packed into this
city. So anyway, we were going to participate in a Christmas
program in one of the Red Light Districts, and it required a bit of
a walk through the worst part of the slum to get to the center. Our
leader wanted us to stay together, due to the fact that we were
clearly the “other” in this situation—we were white, foreigners,
and didn't belong here. So the six of travelled together, both
physically and emotionally, through a dangerous neighborhood to
get to our destination.

One of the things that we lose in Peterson's translation is the very
important word “Therefore.” Therefore, in Paul's letters marks a

transition in thought or idea. When we see this word, we know that Paul is shifting course in some way or another. In this case, as I mentioned last week, we are at a major transition in the letter. We are moving from how God created the church to how we are to participate in it. And the first imperative we are given is to “stay together,” according to Peterson. But this is not an abrupt transition. Peterson points out that Ephesians 4:1-16 is transitional, easing us along so that we don’t abruptly shift our attention from God to us and thereby lose our distinctive church orientation: head *and* body, Christ *and* us, in continuous and reverent conversation.

Here we have the central message and theme of Paul’s letter: Unity. Paul’s theology centers on this idea: We are One in the Spirit, in baptism we are made One with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and with each other. Let’s not miss that piece, friends.

In a world that tells us we are not unified, we are not One, Paul tells us we are. In a world that divides us among party lines, gender roles, and social status, Paul says none of that matters. In a world that works so hard to divide us, Paul tells us, clearly, to stay together. It is really important, I believe now more than ever, that we hold onto this idea, friends. We live in the *United States* of America. We don’t have to agree on everything to be unified. But, Peterson’s translation, or rather, interpretation, is important. He interprets Paul to be telling us to travel this road not just together, but with intentionality. Peterson’s interpretation reminds us that we are to “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.” It’s not that we are all one and cloned to think and act the same way—we are not. We should note our differences, but quickly mend the fences that tempt to divide us and separate us.

Our choral call to worship was written in Otis Skillings in 1971. Much like our current state of affairs, the 70s had its own set of issues that tempted to divide our nation. and yet, Skillings knew this bond that unifies is stronger than any fence that tempts to divide us. So stay together, bonded together in Love.

The second important piece that comes from this central text is the concept of calling. The calling, Peterson points out, gives us a destination, determines what we do, shapes our behavior, forms a coherent live. We live into the world and the relationships into which we have been called.

As Presbyterians, this language should be familiar to us. In fact, we've talked about this idea of "call" recently, as we came across it the first time a few weeks ago. But I want to offer you a definition of call that has always stayed with me. When I worked as a Christian Educator at Sunrise Presbyterian, I had my first hang-up with the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, and the pastor asked me how I understood "call." Being a "new" presby, I didn't really have an answer for him. He explained to me that he understands a call as that which we can do no other. One of the reasons this explanation was really helpful for me is because part of the reason the CPM said "wait," is because I was vacillating on what exactly my call was. I was in the midst of a residency in clinical pastoral education, having the opportunity to explore chaplaincy. I at one time felt I wanted to go into academia. I was still deciding whether or not pastoral ministry was my call. In the midst of all this confusion, came a single line of clarity: A call is that which you can do no other.

Now, on the individual level, this makes sense. I started wondering if I could do anything *other* than be a pastor. Could I be a chaplain? Maybe, but I'm not sure I'd be very good at it. Could I be a teacher? Sure, it's in my blood, but I may not be fulfilled, which would then make me a not-so-great teacher. Could I go into academia? Perhaps, but I wouldn't be able to

make a difference in the world from the Ivory Tower of higher education. At the end of the day, the individual call was very clear: Pastoral ministry is that which I can do no other.

Paul, once again, is addressing the collective “you” here. He is addressing the Ephesian church as a whole. He is expressing what is the foundation for how we as Presbyterians do church—a call. Each of you, if you have joined this church has responded to questions that affirm this call.

The question then becomes, what is that which this church can do no other? The answer is clear from Ephesians. That which we can do no other is to stay together in love. That which we can do no other is journey this road together, so that we arrive at our final destination in love and unity. That which we can do no other is to celebrate our unique gifts that God has bestowed upon us—teachers, pastors, apostles, preachers, leaders, sheep and shepherds—and use them. We use them for good, to make a change in the world, to proclaim the gospel in a way that turns our divisive world upside down. We stay together.

Stay together, friends, rooted and grounded in love. Stay together so that we once again are one in the bond of love. Stay together, so that we do that which we can do no other—love all of God’s creation. Amen.