

Scripture
ASP Commissioning Sunday
June 11, 2017
Northminster Presbyterian Church

Ephesians 4: 1-7, 12-16 (CEB and NRSV combined)

Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. ² Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, ³ and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. ⁵ There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.

⁷ God has given his grace to each one of us measured out by the gift that is given by Christ.

¹² God's purpose was to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ ¹³ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son. God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ As a result, we aren't supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. ¹⁵ Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ, ¹⁶ who is the head. The whole body grows from him, as it is joined and held together by all the supporting ligaments. The body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love as each one does its part.¹

In today's text, we hear from Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus, or maybe not. Truth telling time — the scholars tell us that this letter we call Ephesians, which purports to be a letter by Paul to the church in Ephesus, may actually be neither. Its overall themes sound sort of like Paul, but the letter doesn't use his vocabulary or syntax, and it's far less concerned with the imminent return of Jesus Christ than Paul's other letters.

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Sermon: Constructing Unity: Building a New World
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Rev. Michael D. Kirby

It has been suggested that this letter is something like Martin Luther King's letter from a Birmingham jail — a general epistle discussing matters of concern in the church, though it probably was written about 25 to 35 years after Paul was dead. It was common in the day for students and followers of a particular philosopher or teacher to write in their names. All of that is to say that this letter has, as its principle concern, UNITY.

It's a word we throw around a lot — unity, oneness. In our ordination vows in the Presbyterian Church, we have to promise to uphold the "peace, unity and purity of the church." But that hasn't always been easy. The church split over slavery; the church split again over women in leadership; and, most recently, when the Presbyterian Church took a stance in favor of LGBTQ-ordained leadership and same sex marriage, over 100 churches left the denomination.

It was in the middle of that last conflict in the church that a friend of mine, the Rev. Ted Wardlaw, now the president of Austin Theological Seminary, observed something one day. It was at the end of General Assembly 16 years ago. It was yet another year when we had argued a lot about LGBTQ folks in the church but didn't get anywhere. Ted was on his way home and this is what he recalled:

"All of us sitting around at the gate, while planes came and went, while one flight had equipment problems and had to be cancelled, while many of us were waiting in vain on standby to get an earlier flight out of Louisville. It was a gridlock there at that airport — three thousand Presbyterians trying to leave a mid-sized town. And I looked up from my coffee cup at one point to see two people standing with luggage all around them looking intently at a ticket that belonged to one of them. One of them — I'm not sure which one — was being helped by the other in figuring out some confusing flight information. ... What was breathtakingly unusual to me was that one of those two people was Jack Haberer, a pastor from Houston and a committed evangelical Christian, and the other was Janie Spahr, a lesbian evangelist from California and a committed Christian, too. Jack and Janie are equally visible throughout the church, and have been on opposite sides of this important question. But there they were, working together on the shared project of being sure that they both got home."²

Unity is not a popular concept today. We live in a time of great division. But 13 years ago Jack and Janie, who to this day are good friends, modeled that we can work together; we can preserve the spirit of unity in the bonds of peace, to use the text's words — even when we are very different, even when we disagree.

² The original sermon, for which I was present, is no longer online. It was quoted here in a sermon by the Rev. Maryann McKibben Dana which includes the now dead link to the original sermon.
<http://www.idylwoodpresbyterian.org/blog/2014/7/1/confronting-conflict-with-courage-and-compassion-part-1>

Under conventional wisdom, Jack and Janie were enemies. That's the way it works in this culture, right? When we disagree, we dig in our media echo-chamber trenches and lob Facebook posts and tweets and Instagram memes at one another — like World War I soldiers in their trenches across France and Germany, enemies who don't even see one another anymore, let alone listen to one another.

And let's be honest. This whole Evanston to Kentucky thing, under conventional wisdom, it's not supposed to work. We aren't supposed to be able to work together. After all, in both Knott County and Magoffin County, 75 percent of those who voted in last year's presidential election voted for the current president. In Evanston, just short of 88 percent of voters cast their votes for Secretary Clinton.

In these counties of Kentucky, they are rural folks. The two counties together have a population of 29,679 in 662 square miles. We are city people, over 74,000 people in just 7.8 square miles. And one of the other greatest gaps in our culture today is economic. Median income for Knott County is \$20,373, 31.1 percent below the poverty line. Median income for Magoffin County is \$19,421, 36.6 percent below the poverty line. Median income for Evanston is \$60,033, 12.1 percent below the poverty line.

If we were just doing this on our own, by our own skills and wants, perhaps these divides would be too great to cross and we would just be seen as the city folks on safari among the rural poor, using our wealth and the privilege of time to put a band aid on their lives. But that is not what we are doing. We are seeking — not by our own power, but by the power of the Spirit — using our labor and humility and love and their bravery and strength and love to create a bond, whether for a week or a lifetime, putting love in action. And, by the Spirit, creating something that is strong and just and good. We are reminding them and us how we are all beloved of God, how we are all worthy of living in places that are warm and safe and dry. We are reminding them and ourselves that we were made to be one, made to live in unity, and so we are doing what we can to make that a reality. And just how do we do that? We will do that by building something, not just the homes we are going to make warmer, safer, and dryer.

The strongest bond, the strongest joint in woodworking, according to a 2009 laboratory testing by Fine Woodworking magazine³, is the bridle joint. One of the particular things about a bridle joint is that it takes substantial preparation of both pieces of wood. The end of one has to have a notch cut in the center of it that is the full width of the piece, cutting out the center. And then the other piece of wood has to cut away everything on the right and left sides of the end so that the end of the second piece of wood is the same size as the notch you've cut in the other piece. Each piece has to be prepared so that each makes room for the other and they fit together snugly so that glue alone or glue and a couple of screws can make something incredibly strong. The magic of the bridle joint is that it doesn't matter if the two pieces of wood are different sizes or types of wood, so long as the space that is cut away in one is the same size as the wood that isn't cut away in the other piece and the right glue is used.

³ <http://www.finewoodworking.com/2009/02/25/joint-strength-test>

What I hope we can do, starting next week in Appalachia, but not just there — what I hope we can all do as we seek to live with one another in this time, when division and difference seem to be tearing us apart, is to see that, in the places where we come together with others, we have to prepare ourselves, just like you have to prepare a piece of wood for a bridle joint. We have to carve away those stubborn places that prevent us from connecting. We have to make room for those we are made to be in relationship with, carving out enough space where we fit in their lives and they fit in ours.

And how do we hold it all together? Well that's the glue and the screws — love, most of all and finding our common identity as children of God. Perhaps the spirit of unity in the bond of peace is, in fact, the willingness to be glued to one another, not just interacting for a day, a week, a moment, whether it's a family we will meet in Appalachia, the co-worker who gets on your last nerve, the teacher you find intimidating, or the person you meet on the street who is down on her luck. Can we make space in our own lives; carve out room for compassion, curiosity and love?

Coincidentally, today is actually a Sunday about unity, not just because we are commissioning folks for ASP, but because it is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday when we celebrate the Unity of God in a mystery where we experience God in different ways, understand God in different contexts — Father, Son, Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; Lover, Beloved, Love — so many different ways and all inadequate to try to describe this one that is the source of life, the source of love, the source of time, the source of science. I'll admit it. I've always struggled a bit with the Trinity until I read author Anne Lamott's take on it. She wrote: "I didn't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the trinity, I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees."

It helped me not to lose the forest for the trees; it helped me to see that God is unity. That's the point of the Trinity. God in God's very self is a community. The best example of that I've ever seen comes from the Orthodox Tradition, the most common version of which in the US is the Greek Orthodox Church. The concept is called perichoresis. It's a big Greek word that basically means the spinning dance.

In orthodox churches, frequently they create images of a swirling group of three dancers, moving so fast, they could be three, but perhaps, just could be our eyes playing tricks on us, like one of those three pointed fidget spinners we seem to be seeing everywhere. So the unity of the Trinity is explained by seeing God as an eternal dance.

Theologian C. Baxter Kruger puts it yet another way: "The doctrine of the Trinity means that relationship, that fellowship, that togetherness and sharing, that self-giving and other-centeredness are not afterthoughts with God, but the deepest truth about the being of God."

So how do we construct unity? We do it the same way God has been making community in and among us since the beginning of time: We make room; we enter the dance; and we serve, not to save, not to convince, not to change, but to love and to care, to listen and to find those places of connection. And we too will be working together on the shared project of being sure that all of us get home to that place of rest and unity and family.

May God build a new world through us, each of us, in Kentucky and Evanston and wherever we may wonder and work. Thanks be to God.