

August 2, 2015
Rev. Michael D. Kirby
Ephesians 4:1-16
One Bread, One Body

One of the greatest things I've ever done in my life was about 15 years ago when I drove north of San Francisco into the forests of the Great Coast Redwoods. These are without doubt the most amazing natural things I have ever seen. Some of them climb over 350 feet tall and are more than 20 feet wide.

Did you know how deep the roots of those Redwoods drill down into the California soil? At the absolute deepest? 12 feet...but most are more like six feet deep. How can that work? How can they survive if that is the case? Shallow roots should mean that the coastal California winds would bring those trees crashing to the ground.

Except...except those very shallow roots can extend far more than 100 feet out horizontally from the tree...they actually interlock with the roots of the other redwoods and even with some of the other trees in the region...and by locking their roots together the trees are sturdy and safe, and they grow tall and majestic.

It's an image that the writer of Ephesians might appreciate...How by working together, growing dependent on each other, and supporting each other, the trees can grow taller and taller...Sounds like it's just dripping with metaphors that seem to fit in nicely with the diversity that is celebrated by the author at the end of today's passage? Right? I wonder.

You might wonder why I keep saying "the author" about today's passage instead of Paul...Well...many modern scholars for a number of reasons believe that the letter to the church in Ephesus was probably not written by the Apostle Paul himself, but by one of his students or followers. It was a common practice of the day—for the students of Plato to write in his voice, for the students of Apollos to write in his voice, and, apparently, for a few students of Paul to write in his voice...and the writer of Ephesians, whether Paul or not, has Paul's voice down very well...

Whoever wrote them, these 16 verses are both good news and good hope...they seek to describe the church as the writer imagines it should be...and why? His vision? That the church should be marked by humility, by patience, by acceptance...but most of all...by unity.

It's a tough nut to crack this idea of unity. Look around. We live in one of the most divided times in human history. Increase access to health insurance or not? Israel or Palestine? Bomb Iran or not? Austerity or

economic development? Let gays marry or not? Tear down that beloved old house or sell it to a hotel?

In a world that exists in shades of grey, everyone from the politicians to the TV news shows, and from the sports pages to the textbooks being fought over in Texas and California...subtlety is out...nuance is out...everything is black or white...right or wrong...with me...or against me...Everything needs a label and the labels are all about creating divisions...It's a hard way to live...this endless string of either/or with little room for honest debate, or for conversations that risk offense.

If we are to take Ephesians seriously — we live in a culture that is broken...it's messed up...and when we let ourselves live by all those divisions we are too — “Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. You are one body and one spirit just as God also called you in one hope.”

Really? One body...and not just one body but one spirit...with love...with unity...humility, gentleness and patience...Well, okay, we can do that right? After all...we're progressive, right? We welcome everyone who comes in the door anyway...We can be that diverse mighty redwood, right? Some of us can provide the stability and strength...some of us the vitality of branches that draw us upward towards the light...some of us the hospitality and welcome for the creatures of this human forest...some the seeds of growth and future hopes...and sure, if we have to, we'll let our roots get tangled up in the roots of that more conservative church...and that more liberal one...and that one with the weird music...and that one with the hour long sermons...and that one that doesn't seem to believe in much of anything...we're good? Right?

And then we read Ephesians again and there is this niggling feeling that something isn't right...and perhaps we hear that very precise teacher most of us had whose voice still speaks to us at times like this...asking, “Mr. Kirby, precisely what part of ‘unity’ don't you understand?”

Unity...Oneness. How one is it when the only thing that unites us is that we agree to let our roots get tangled up? If we say we are united in Christ, how right is this image when what unites us is underground, never seen by others?

Maybe the Redwoods are the wrong image. Maybe California isn't where we should be looking...at the giant redwoods...maybe we should be looking in Utah...It's called Pando...that's Latin for “I Spread”...but it's also called the Trembling Giant. A botanist would call it a clonal colony of a single, male, quaking aspen. What it is is debatably the largest single living organism on earth. Oh, some might look at it and see thousands of different trees, but

when they look closer...in parts of the forest there is no dirt at all covering the roots...And Pando, the Trembling Giant — a grove of Aspen trees covering acre after acre — is actually...one plant. It weighs six million kilograms — over 13 million pounds. Each thing that looks like a tree is actually a cloned branch of the root sent up into the light for nourishment for the whole. Right there, one mile south of Fish Lake in Utah. Its root system — the life blood of this single organism — is 80,000 years old.

Pando isn't just made safe by its roots...like the redwoods...it's made virtually immortal. It has survived hundreds, perhaps thousands of forest fires... drought upon drought...the worst winters of 800 centuries...and it lives on.

What would it mean if we saw ourselves and our fellow human beings as one...saw every "they" as truly part of us...not just from the same family...but all part of one being?

Just a few weeks ago at the memorial service for Rev. Clementa Pinckney, the pastor of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston who was slain along with eight others by a racist fellow child of God...About half way through the service...an odd group of folks took the dais...some were white, some were black, some were obviously biracial...some were white headed with age, some virtually shone with youth and vigor...some were gay, some were straight...some were Baptist, some Catholic, some Lutheran, some not quite sure...They were...are...the Low Country Voices...one of the official choruses of North Charleston...a community choir...and they became a symbol of unity in that service and in their community...

Just last week, James Taylor had a concert in Charleston...and he invited the Low Country Voices to sing with him...you can find in on YouTube...and they sang an anthem of hope..."Shed a Little Light"...their voices and harmonies combined in these words...

Let us turn our thoughts today
To Martin Luther King
And recognize that there are ties between us,
All men and women living on the Earth.
Ties of hope and love,
Sister and brotherhood,
That we are bound together
In our desire to see the world
Become a place in which our children
Can grow free and strong.
We are bound together by the task
That stands before us
And the road that lies ahead.
We are bound and we are bound.

Friends, we are bound...bound together by the one who came and said to saint and sinner alike...come and follow me. We are bound by a love so great that it could conquer death...We are bound by a grace that helps us let go of our pasts...and calls us to help others do the same...We are bound by a God so mysterious and incomprehensible to surrender Godness to become one of us...so that we could get it right...learn to love as one...learn to serve as one...learn to let go of the clenched fists and clinched roots that make us think we are alone...bound by a oneness that says every child who suffers is my child...every couple who commits themselves to one another in love is my family...every infuriating brother and sister in the human family is not just my family...but is part of me, part of you.

In a few minutes we will come to the table...a table set once...for all...for Orthodox and Pentecostal...for Catholic and nondenominational, for faithful and back-slider...for prince and prisoner...We are made one by the one who sets this table...who broke bread once and said this is me...given for you...who united us in one loaf...one life...

And so we are invited this day to contemplate our oneness...how we can open our hearts to the joy that others experience and claim it as our joy...how we can open our arms to those who are in the midst of mourning and share their pain as our pain too...lightening the load of it by sharing it.

We are invited too to see our service in Christ's name in a different way...when we prepare sandwiches for Friday Lunches...when we volunteer with The Night Ministry...when we open our doors again to Family Promise...when we travel to Appalachia...these are not our encounters with the OTHER...like the branches of those aspens in Utah might reach out and touch one another...we are encountering another part of our one body...our one humanity...our one bread...our one body...

It can give us the strength to go on when times seem impossible...for just like that grove in Utah...sometimes some of us stand in the sun...growing stronger, sending strength through our very one-ness to those who live in shadows away from life-giving light and rain...

And hopefully...hopefully... it gives us the ability to see past the either/or world categories to see...not just that underneath we are all alike...but underneath we are all one...one in the one who offered himself to us and said take...eat...live...and do this too...remembering me. Re-member...putting back together the many members of our one body...our one love.

Thanks be to God.