

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
July 26, 2009  
Pentecost 8  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Kings 2:1-15  
Psalm 114  
Ephesians 4:1-16  
Mark 6:45-52

Our epistle lesson from Ephesians this morning finds Paul making a transition from doctrinal instruction to practical exhortation. In chapters 1-3 Paul has given us a grand vision of God's desire to unite all things in Christ through the calling of the Church, and through the gifting of the Church with the Holy Spirit.

Last week we saw how Christ's death on the cross broke down the wall between Jews and Gentiles by creating a new entity, a new type of humanity. Every source of hatred, division, and enmity between Jew and Gentile was put to death with Christ on the cross. The result, says Paul, was *peace*.

In my message last week, I noted that Christ's power to break down walls between Jew and Gentile had implications not only for Jews and Gentiles, but for all people, and for the Church. The peace and unity Paul speaks of in the first three chapters of Ephesians is not merely something toward which the church is to aspire -- *it is an accomplished fact which we are to embody and into which we are to live*.

To put it in its simplest terms, in the first half of this epistle Paul says, "Church, this is who you are and this is who God has made you." Now, as Paul

shifts his focus to the second portion of the letter, his message is: “Church, BE WHO YOU ARE.”

Lead a life worthy of your calling, church, precisely *because* you have been called.

And to what exactly has the church been called? Well, among other things, the church has been called to unity and peace. It is hard to read this passage and not notice the frequent appearance of the word “one.” We are *one* body, and we’ve been gifted with the *same* Spirit. We have been called to the *same* future. There is *one* faith, *one* Lord, *one* baptism. There is *one* God and Father living in us and through us and over us.

To make this unity possible, God has granted believers spiritual gifts, and in addition God has gifted some to be apostles, evangelists, and pastor-teachers, whose role is to equip and build up believers so that the Church of Jesus may become more and more *like* Jesus, so that the Church of Jesus may actually become an extension of Jesus’ presence in the world, so that the Church of Jesus might demolish and break down walls that separate people from God and from one another.

One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One calling, one future. One God and Father who is over all. This is the Church. And Paul says, “Church, BE WHO YOU ARE.” Do not merely *aspire* to this unity; *embody* it, and live into it.

Now, I've said in the past, and I'll repeat again, that we should not read Paul's words here about unity such that we equate *unity* with *uniformity*. That would be a mistake.

Nor am I naive enough to believe that some of the walls that divide nation from nation and Christian from Christian would easily come down if we would all just "read the Bible and do what it says."

But reading this text again this week, I noticed two things that stopped me right in my tracks, and caused me to wonder whether, when it comes to the unity of the body of Christ, I am contributing more to the problem than I am to the solution.

The first insight came to me in vv. 12-13, where Paul says that leaders have been given to the Church for the purpose of equipping God's people and building them up. There's nothing really novel about that, and we've heard it before. But then verse 13 begins by revealing the outcome of that equipping by saying, "until we come to such *unity* in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord."

Did you catch that? It was like a slap in the face to me. God has given apostles, evangelists, and pastor-teachers the task of building up God's people to the extent that the end result is a *unity* in the faith that leads to Christian maturity, and is quite possibly the *sign* of that maturity.

I thought about that for a moment. I asked myself, how often have I conceived of my role as a Christian pastor and leader in terms equipping God's people for service and building them up? And the answer was, quite often.

But then I asked myself, "how often have I thought about my task in terms of equipping God's people such that the central affirmation of their hearts and lips is, "*one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism -- *one* God and Father over all and through all and in all?" And the answer was: not often enough.

And there was a second encounter with this text that stopped me cold. It comes in vv. 15-16 where Paul describes what Christian maturity looks like. He says, "we hold the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. Under his direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly."

I realized from Paul's words here that the church's leaders are not vested with inherent authority, nor do they possess authority in its own right. Christ is the head and authority of the Church. Church leaders are merely servants who've been tasked with equipping God's people and building them up into the *unity* of faith to which we've been called. They've been called to help God's people not merely to proclaim, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," but to *embody* that reality and to live into it.

And again, the question must be asked: “how many of the church’s leaders -  
- whether they be Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox -- truly believe that the end  
result of their building up of the body of Christ is to be *unity* in the faith?

Last week in our post service discussion we formulated a theory that peace  
won’t fully come to the world until peace comes to the Church. And peace won’t  
come to the church until the church’s leaders and laity alike realize that *unity* is a  
vital component of what it means for God’s people to grow to maturity in Christ.

Perhaps it’s time for church leaders to repent. But it would be an audacious  
and obnoxious act on my part to stand here from my little pulpit in my little  
congregation and call upon the leaders of the Church to repent. Who am I, and  
how dare I suggest that the church’s leaders around the world seek forgiveness for  
their turf wars, their power mongering, their pride, and their desire for power and  
control? Who am I to suggest to the leaders of the church around the world and in  
the Treasure Valley that until there is some tangible form of unity in the church,  
we are NOT living a life worthy of the calling God has placed upon us?

But I have no control over what goes on “out there.” What I can control is  
me. So here is what I’ve decided I need to do this morning. In front of God  
Almighty, and in front of all of you, I repent.

I repent for all the times when I've focused more on what divides Christians than what unites them, and when I have unwittingly encouraged you to do the same.

I repent for all the times when my pride, fear, and ignorance has kept me from seeking to understand Christians who differ from me, and when I have unwittingly led you to do the same.

I repent for all the times when I've been reluctant to bear the cross that comes with pursuing unity among God's people, thinking that it was a hopeless task and not worth the pain and effort. And I repent for ever encouraging that same attitude in all of you.

It's a small step, I know. But the size of the step is not as important as the direction in which the step is taken. As we come to the Lord's table this morning, let us come with grateful hearts and open hands to receive the grace he offers us. For the grace he offers us makes us *one* body in him.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.