

Sermon on Ephesians 4:1-16

This morning we're going to be talking about unity. And I think it would be a powerful gesture if before we get started, we make an honest attempt to recognize and lift up a small group among us who probably have felt slighted and marginalized for a long time. I think it's time we set aside some differences, and call out this group to say, we accept you and we're all better off having your unique perspective and that our community is healthier for this diversity.

I, of course, am talking about those who put pineapple on their pizza. The amount of ridicule and scorn that you've received for wanting to add wet fruit to an otherwise savory, Italian/American dinnertime staple is unfounded and goes against one of the most lauded values of this great country: freedom of choice. I apologize on behalf of pizza purists everywhere. And I, personally, will no longer disparage you for your arguably dubious culinary tastes. May we go forth from this place unified in the idea that pizza is delicious, no matter how you slice it. Amen.

Unity is one of the major themes of Ephesians and that's where we've parked the family van over the past two weeks. So open your Bibles to page 1081 and we're picking up where we left off. The book of Ephesians is actually a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus, a coastal city in Ancient Greece, modern day Turkey.

What's unique about Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus is that there doesn't seem to be any underlying problem. There's no rival factions, false teachings or extreme moral failures or anything in particular that Paul wants to correct when he writes to them. If all the churches of Paul's missionary journey as described in his letters to them were a classroom of kids, Ephesus would be the star pupil.

And in the 4th chapter, we can read as Paul urges them toward maturity in faith. In other words, they're off to a great start - here's how they can continue to grow:

4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. **2** Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. **3** Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. **4** There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. **8** This is why it^[a] says:

“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”^[b]

9 (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions^[c]? **10** He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) **11** So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12** to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. **15** Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. **16** From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

There’s a lot going on here and I want to break it down more simply for us to understand. But first let’s consider how Paul launches into this section:

“Live a life worthy of the calling you have received”

And it must be said that if there is a life worthy of our calling, then there is also a life NOT worthy of the calling. Paul will go into that a bit more further down in the chapter and we won’t get to it today, but it’s worth noting that we’re looking at what Paul considers a life worthy of our calling to follow Jesus.

So let’s look at that first section again:

2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. **3** Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

In studying this text, I just kept reading this over and over. And I'd ask these things of myself and of our church:

1. Am I (are we) self-sacrificing, humble? Do I put the needs of others over the needs of myself? Are we patient and gentle with each other? Are we bearing with one another in love?
2. Do all of those things add up to us making every effort toward unity?

Unity will require great acts of love, humility, and patience. To form this holy bond of peace, it means we must actively participate in its formation.

Ideas or beliefs bring us together and lay the foundation of our unity. (as Paul points out: we have one lord, one baptism, one faith) but in order to maintain unity, it's going to take an extraordinary community effort.

A few years ago, a funny thing popped up on the internet, shown through hilarious photos, called the Get-Along-Shirt. I can't show it to you, but what some genius parent did is when siblings were fighting with one another, they'd have them stand together and put an oversized adult shirt over them both to wear like conjoined twins until they could start to get along again. I'd consider that to be bearing with one another in misery, but the love is there. The beauty of the get-along shirt is the kids have to work together to bring peace...and when the peace returns, then they're free and a happy household may commence.

Now you could sit the kids down, and go on about family values and how we should love one another and getting along is good and important, but the get-along shirt is tangible, physical, a little uncomfortable and probably gets dirty and stretched and torn, but it brings action into the concept of love and unity.

Bearing with one another in love, humility, patience....these things are the get-along shirt. Without any tangible effort toward unity, it's only an idea, and division is just too easy.

Nicky Gumbel, creator of the Alpha course and pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Brompton said it this way:

"It's easy to argue. It's easy to split. It's easy to start our own group with people who agree with us. Unity requires great effort. We need to spare no effort to make the invisible unity of the one church visible at every level."

To make every effort for unity, however, doesn't mean uniformity. Unity actually flourishes under diversity. And that's what the next section is about. Paul writes:

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. **8**
This is why it^[a] says:

“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”^[b]

9 (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions^[c]? **10** He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

What in the world does that even mean?!

Paul is quoting Psalm 68. Except (and this is fascinating) he actually misquotes it. Let me explain:

Psalm 68:18 is talking about God ascending to the mountain (now remember this is poetry) where he chooses to reign. And he takes many captives and **receives** gifts from people to establish his dwelling.

Paul, intentionally misquotes this Psalm to show a prophetic parallel with the work of the Spirit through Jesus.

He says Jesus ascended (which is to say he descended when he came to earth, born of a virgin, healed the sick, preached the kingdom of heaven, was crucified, died, and raised again to be ascended) and **gave** gifts - that’s the part that Paul misquotes - gave gifts...

“to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13** until we all reach unity in the faith”

Is this starting to make sense? We are to make every effort for unity. Christ gave of himself grace and gifts of service to equip us to do just that. It’s a calling for both the individual and for the church. In this effort, we must share the work of keeping the unity using the unique gifts given to us. Paul compares it to a body when he writes:

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

There’s one problem: It’s hard! It’s really hard! If division is easy, unity is hard. Following Jesus is once again counter-culture. The trajectory of our nation right now is toward tribalism. That is: finding people just like yourself, disregarding or even condemning others, and closing off any outside idea or way of life.

I sense its growing influence in my relationships: Sometimes I feel like I'm having the same drawn out conversations, with the same group of people, who already think the same thing I do, to the effect that I'm losing a beautiful thing that maybe I took for granted. We've been caught up in political games, disinformation, and polarizing talking points that don't reflect the melting pot that this great nation is supposed to be. What's worse, is that the church isn't really better off.

This is not the life worthy of the calling we've received. We are to be humble, gentile, and bound in love. Making every effort toward unity through peace. Jesus has uniquely gifted the church to work toward that unity. We will be ripped apart by ideas if we don't put in the hard work of unity.

And if we do that...

we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. **15** Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

We feel so strongly about this that in September, Pastor Lisa is going to spend a few weeks teaching in a series called Holy Conversations - and it's really about how to talk to one another again, and how to hold one another in high regard, and how to get back to loving each other so that we can go on bringing the healing of the world in Jesus' name, together.

But I want to leave you with a snapshot of what it looks like for our church. I want to remind you about how great this place is, how proud I am of you all, and why our ongoing unity really matters.

Back in June of this year, Karen Klaus gets a call from one of our Buddy Break moms, Margaret Kolze. Margaret and her husband Jim had paid \$6000 to a handyman to come install a ramp at the back of their house so their 12 year-old son, Dillon could better access the backyard and pool where he's able to splash and play and really receive some good therapy.

The handyman came, demolished the existing deck, poured new concrete and then just never showed up to finish the job. Despite numerous attempts to contact him the project was left undone and the Kolze family was left with a concrete slab, no ramp, and part of their house exposed to the elements. And to pile on the bad news, the work that had been done hadn't been properly permitted by the city. So they don't just have a useless half-project in their yard, but an illegal half-project.

So Margaret calls Karen because they are out of money and don't really know what to do. What she does know is that Karen runs our Buddy Break program that exists to help families with

special needs. This isn't quite what we mean by special needs but the sentiment is the same: "can you do anything to help?"

Karen comes up with this idea: The Kolze family can be the mission of this year's VBS (which just so happens to start the following week). At VBS they have something called a "coin war". Monday, the kids learn about Dillon and the Kolze family and their need for a new ramp. Tuesday, the kids bring pennies. Wednesday, they bring nickles. Thursday, dimes. Friday, quarters. At the end of the week, they've collected a very heavy \$1200. Amazing!

So then Karen is able - via the generosity of our VBS families - to offer that gift to the Kolzes. And when Karen is delivering the news another great thing happens. They are discussing the need to now find someone to do the work, and it has to be permitted correctly, and who can do it when Karen makes some off-hand remark about Habitat for humanity. It turns out that the Kolzes live on a street adjacent to the Habitat homes being built here in Crystal Lake. And maybe the proximity doesn't matter too much, but it gets the wheels turning and Karen puts in a call to Habitat who not only has the ability to put the ramp up, but can do so getting all the proper permits required by the city.

So Karen gets in touch with Habitat for Humanity and they have a segment of their organization called Homes in Crisis and while there's normally a long waiting list they're able to fast track this request, in part, because of the money that had been raised by the VBS kids.

And so, a week ago, James from Habitat, Jim Kolze, Elizabeth from Buddy Break, and Karen installed a new ramp onto the back of the Kolze's home. And now Dillon is able to be a kid in his own backyard again.

It is out of ordinary acts of love that we're able to bear witness to this great show of unity. Perhaps the perfect picture of unity is the unlikely group that installed the ramp. A father down to his last hope, a contractor, a respite program volunteer, and a Karen Klaus backed by the generosity of a hundred kids' pocket change.

The Spirit of God can be found where people are putting in the hard work of unity. So be proud of your church. Lift up the people of faith around you. Encourage each other to continue these good works. And may God bless you as we, together, form a bond of peace...

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Amen.