

Sermon: Church Unity in Community

July 7, 2019

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13; 5:19

Our reading today follows this prayer at the end of chapter 3:

Let us pray:

... I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (*Ephesians 3:14b-21*)

So, what reminds **you** of **your** church community - this one or another?

I have a collection of church plates in my study:

- One is from the 75th anniversary of the Hyatts, Ohio, Methodist church - the small church where my mother grew up.
- One plate is from the First Methodist Church of Taylorville, IL, the church my father was involved in growing up – and it's dated the year I was baptized in that church as an infant.
- I have two from the First Methodist Church in Normal, Illinois, where I grew up:
 - one of the old, original building I attended as a preschooler,
 - and one of the new building built across the street, from the church's 100th Anniversary.
- And, I have this plate given to me when I left the first church I served as a pastor – commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Manhattan United Methodist Church.

Just like the crafts kids take home from VBS, and the photos from ASP or other mission trips, these plates are tangible reminders of our connection to a church community, its people, and all that goes on there. Our connection to a place where we learn and grow closer

to God, where we love and work with others, a place where we belong. We are also connected to other churches in town, and to many other United Methodist congregations around the world.

The Letter to the Ephesians was written to remind church communities about their identity as a church. It was written at the end of the first century, C.E., after the disciples died, when the surrounding culture influenced many to misinterpret Paul's ideas, the mix of Jews and Gentiles was still an issue, and the church had lost its way.¹ Ephesians is the author's attempt to correct that situation.

Although some still argue it was written by Paul, many scholars now believe the author was an associate of Paul's, following his style. The letter is missing Paul's normal greeting and names of colleagues, and doesn't address a specific issue at a specific church like Paul's other letters.

In addition, the words "in Ephesus" were not found on any papyrus or scroll of Ephesians until the second century CE, so it's quite possible this was a circular letter – one passed to many churches, not just one.² This epistle also seems more like an expanded sermon – containing snippets we usually find in worship – prayers, creed, pieces of hymns, and a doxology!

Ephesians is also **the New Testament book** considered most relevant for the modern church.³ These verses are known as the *hinge* – where the author turns from describing all God has done through creation and for the church, to describing how to live a worthy life in response – one that begins with God's grace and matures while nurturing the unity of the church.⁴

Seven reasons urging unity are listed, almost in the form of a creed:

“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.” (*Ephesians*)

¹ Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,

² Margaret Y. MacDonald, Ephesians. In Beverly Roberts Gaventa and David Petersen, eds., *The New Interpreter's Bible One Volume Commentary*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010, p. 833.

³ Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992, loc 194.

⁴ Brian Peterson, Commentary on Ephesians 4:1-16, August 5, 2018, workingpreacher.com.

We are all one.

An inclusive church is part of God's plan...

This doesn't mean we are all alike.

"Unity is NOT uniformity."⁵

God wants us all to be one – unified even though we are different in so many ways – to learn to love each other and work with each other and encourage each other toward maturity, which is by the way, something we vow at every baptism. We promise to accept, nurture and help members grow into Christian maturity through worship, Bible study, developing a personal relationship with God, and responding to God's blessing by serving others.

We are called to "lead a life worthy of our calling 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." (*Ephesians*) One commentary said patience here might best be translated as having a "long temper!"⁶

We all have different gifts, but when we use them all together, we can do God's work. This is the special role of the church community - to welcome everyone and help us use all our different gifts together, as we praise God and serve others.

This church community is blessed to share a rich worship that includes beautiful and meaningful music. Our first summer sermon series, Songs of Community, focuses on our music.

Our opening hymn, *O Church of God, United*, (#547) was written by Frederick B. Morley, a Canadian-born, ordained Methodist minister who served churches in New Jersey and New York. During the time of optimism following the Second World War, the World Council of Churches was established, symbolizing hope for Christian unity. *O Church of God, United* was composed for a hymn search for their second assembly, meeting at Northwestern University in 1954. Five hundred hymns were submitted, and while this one didn't win, it was recognized.⁷

One Bread, One Body, (#620), was composed by John B. Foley who was born in Peoria. A Jesuit priest, Father Foley was the first director of the Center for liturgy at St. Louis University, and has written more than 165 musical compositions. This song, often performed as folk guitar music, is one of the most popular Eucharistic hymns written since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, and reflects the theme of unity as we gather together as one body.

⁵ Susan Hylen, Commentary on Ephesians 4:1-16, August 2, 2009, workingpreacher.com.

⁶ Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990, page 235.

⁷ Dr. C. Michael Hawn, History of Hymns: "O Church of God, United," UMC Discipleship Ministries resources: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-church-of-god-united>.

Our closing hymn is *Build up the Saints in Love*. This is a new hymn, written by United Methodist pastor F. Richard Garland in 2010, and is from his series of hymns based on Ephesians. Pastor Garland was born and raised in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and graduated from Garret Theological Seminary. He interned in Chicago and served in Indiana, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut; was involved in the *Walk To Emmaus* movement, and is now retired. Garland is a lifelong hiker and Methodist. He wrote 91 other hymns, and also writes for the Upper Room devotional.

These are just three of the many, many songs of our worship as a church community – songs that speak to us, commiserate with us, lift us up, tell about Jesus Christ and praise our God. If you're like me, there is often one of our worship songs that just keeps playing in my mind, and I find myself singing or humming it all week.

The last line of our text from Ephesians says that worship should come from our hearts, “making melody to the Lord in our hearts.” (Ephesians)

I pray that a song to the Lord will be in your heart,
and you will sing it all week - and beyond.

Amen.