

Dec. 31, 2017

Lesson 5: Faith to Unite

Scripture: Ephesians 4: 1-16

Context:

The lesson today comes from a letter that is known for focusing on unity in the body of Christ and is a book that looks at ecclesiology. How is the church the body of Christ is the question the book seems to address. When it comes to authorship and to whom the book was written, there are several different theories. The one that holds the most sway among scholars is the Book of Ephesians was not written necessarily to the local Christian community at Ephesus in the senatorial province of Roman Asia as it reads as more of a homily to be read to multiple Christian communities.¹ That is not to say that it was not read at the church in Ephesus; but was instead probably sent there and then encouraged to be spread to churches around the area.

As one reads the book today, one could see how this was a sermon sent in written form to help those figuring out who they were in the faith. The spread of the early church included large amounts of Gentiles who were figuring out how the church was different than the multiple religions in the Roman Empire. The reason for the epistle was to show the nature of the church and the Christian life to those from a pagan background and to remind the Gentile Christians that Paul's salvation history never disowned the Jewish background from which it derived its origins.² A summary of the doctrine of the letter would be that Christians, who share the risen life of Christ, are raised above the pitiless control of cosmic forces that say humans are playthings of "fate" and "luck."³ Instead, Christians are those who reconciled in God through Christ and are to be united as part of God's plan for a broken humanity.

Most of those themes actually become apparent in the fourth chapter that we read from today. Beginning in the first six verses, the writer unites the audience by reminding them that they are all one in God who unites them in baptism and ties them together. There is one body of believers, one Lord, and one hope. They are to be united with one another not by their own will, but because they have confessed it in their creeds and in their call to be with one another.

To set that example off, the writer reminds them of Christ and his own ministry of how he came to earth to empower his disciples and teach them about their own calling. Following the death and resurrection, Christ ascended leaving the church in the hands of his disciples. As they were left behind, they were the ones who became the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastor/teachers. Their job was for them to equip all of God's people in all the places they were sent.

As they work together, with Christ as the head of the church, they grow in their faith and build up one another. As a result, they grow united and don't fall into deceitful scheming and attempts to mislead one another or those outside the church. If there is ever

¹ Ralph P. Martin, "Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1991), 3.

² Ibid., 4.

³ Ibid., 9

trouble, they are to “speak the truth with love” to help one another grow into Christ, the head of the church. All the different gifted people are important as they stay connected to Christ and build up all those who possess different gifts. When love is part of the equation, then God’s work is done.

Application:

If there’s one word that stands out in this passage, it is unity. Even though it is only mentioned twice, all the allusions and phrases point to the body of Christ being connected together because of unity. We are to be united in Christ.

As we look at the number of churches here in the Bible belt and the several *thousand* denominations in the Christian faith, we can see that in some regards we have failed. A college professor of mine once brought up the conversation about denominations and said: “Isn’t it a little sinful?” as we all squirmed in our seats. Anytime there is a disagreement or a different interpretation, we seem to think that the best thing to do is simply part company and go another way. We forget that the one Lord, one faith, one baptism who is over all, through all, and in all transcends even our worlds that we’ve constructed. A prayer for us in coming decades and centuries might be that we come to understand that Christ is the head of the church and that the churches are the different parts of the body. Hopefully they are to be only separated by being in different geographical locations.

Another thing about unity in this passage is the focus on “speaking the truth in love,” and “accept each other with love.” While as great and mushy gushy as these passages sound, we also realize that they hold challenges. “Speaking the truth in love” means that sometimes we step on peoples’ toes and sometimes we name the elephants in the room that no one wants to name. In leadership, one must constantly note the changes that need to be made and how getting there may mean ruffling feathers or even shattering the sacred cows that have always been in their special place. There’s still a certain amount of diplomacy and thoughtfulness that must go into changing those things are restructuring them.

The same goes for “accept each other with love,” as we think about things in our neighbors and our brothers and sisters we might not like or agree on exactly. It means that it will be hard and that we might have to understand love as not something to be earned or conditional, but as something that we have to work on daily with another person or group. Some days it might be easier to listen; other days it might be to pray for them. And sometimes it might simply seeing things from that person’s point of view and going to support them in whatever capacity they lead or seeing what truly makes them come alive.

What I have recently seen in my church that gives me hope is when I see people go to different events that represent different ministries in our church whenever it is a special occasion. This comes out especially during the Advent/ Christmas season. It gives me great joy when I realize that our usual contemporary worshippers have gone to a special service in the sanctuary, or that our usual sanctuary worshippers are supporting a program associated with the contemporary service. That is the body of Christ at work supporting and encouraging one another; that shows a sign of maturity to not divide into teams and who you “root for” in the church world.

Above all, I think this passage reminds us that as Christians we are to function differently than the rest of the world. We are to love one another, encourage one another, name the gifts for ministry we see in one another, and remember that the head of the church is Christ. It is his church, it is his body of believers, and it is he who rules the world we live in.

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Associate Pastor
First United Methodist Church
1380 W. Main St.
Dothan, AL 36301
Office (334) 793-3555 ext. 240
E-mail: hunter@fumcdathan.org

