

*Unity Through Diversity*  
August 2, 2015  
Ephesians 4:1-16  
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

I didn't plan to have a series on Ephesians when I started my 6-week preaching cycle this summer. There are four readings designated each week by the Revised Common Lectionary -- an Old Testament Passage, a Psalm, a Gospel reading and an Epistle that run in 3 year cycles. The lectionary is utilized by many denominations, so that on any given Sunday, there may be churches of all faiths studying the same Scripture passages. Some churches follow the lectionary readings; some do not. As preachers, we are able to choose from the lectionary if we wish, or choose our own Scripture passages as we see fit. As a new preacher, I like to select passages from the lectionary, which narrows down my choices greatly! I usually preach once a month; in Cornel's absence, I will be preaching six consecutive weeks. I started with Ephesians two weeks ago, and the remaining lectionary passages of Ephesians are divided into just the right amount to make this a six-week study. So here it is: the third week of our summer Ephesians series!

As a recap: the letter to the Ephesians was likely written in the latter 1<sup>st</sup> c. by Paul, or a follower of Paul, to encourage the churches in Asia Minor, which is modern-day southwest Turkey. Church then was not signified by a building, but meant the community of believers in Christ. The letter to the Ephesians describes the nature and purpose of this community. Two weeks ago, we heard the writer of Ephesians proclaim that the gospel was for all people-- both Jews and Gentiles. Last week, we heard the beautiful prayer for the early churches -- that they would be strengthened with power from the Holy Spirit, rooted and grounded in Christ's love, and filled with God's fullness. This week, in chapter 4, we hear about what the church, the community of believers, is meant to represent and accomplish. It is the answer to, "What's the point?" It may even be the answer to "Why should I go to church?"

The central theme in the passage is that the church, the community of believers, is Christ's body. There is one body. The repetition of "One" in the passage, seven times -- one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God -- emphasizes the message of unity. Each of us contributes to the body's healthy functioning. Just as in an individual body, the goal is to optimize the health of the whole, so it is with Christ's body, the church. If we, as an individual, have a sore back or a sore elbow, it impacts not just that area, but also our whole individual being. So it is with the church. When one of us suffers, it affects the whole body.

There is mutuality between the individual and the corporate body of Christ. Just as we are to align ourselves with God's purposes individually, we are to seek God's will for us as a group. As we become more like Christ as individuals, so the body of Christ grows and develops. We can even read the "you" in this passage as both an individual interpretation and a communal interpretation. The passage begins, "I beg of you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." How do we

know what this calling is? This is part of the maturity that is mentioned in the passage. As we grow in faith, we mature more into the likeness of Christ. What is the likeness of Christ? The passage mentions humility and gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love. This is being Christ-like. It is not self-serving or self-seeking. Leading a life worthy of the call is leading a life of service to others. It does not mean self-neglect, however. We must take care of our individual bodies so that they may be of service to our own selves and others. Jesus took time for self-care. He went on solo retreats to restore himself before and after attending to those in need. Taking care of his own body and his own physical, emotional, and spiritual requirements allowed him the privilege of being of service to God and to others. Taking time for himself alone, in prayer with God, opened him to God's call for his life. This is what we, too, are meant to do as members of Christ's body.

I mentioned last week a book released just over two weeks ago that immediately has become #1 on the NY Times bestseller list, called *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. I bring it up again this week for three reasons. First, like Ephesians, the book is a letter. It is a letter to Coates' teenaged son. Second, like Ephesians 4, which focuses on the body, Coates writes to his son to illuminate his experience of being in the world in a black body. Coates eloquently describes the challenges that are put upon his son because he, too, is born into a black body. When his son is born, Coates sees him as an endangered species, eventual prey to the capture of drugs, gangs, prison, police brutality and untimely death as he has seen so much in his black community. He realizes for the first time why he himself was beaten as a child. He now resonates with the parental instinct to do anything in his power to keep his son from being taken from him by one of these predatory forces.

Though Coates realizes early on in his parenting that physical violence towards his son is not the proper or appropriate means to teach his son to steer away from the array of dangers that could lure his son away from him forever, he is able to now understand that his parents' primal impulses were intended for protection over his body. What Coates experiences in this reflective moment is what Ephesians describes as the humility, gentleness, and patience that is necessary to live a life worthy of the calling; the bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. In this moment of awareness, Coates experiences compassion towards his parents as he understands the challenges ahead for him in raising his son, which he intends to do with the highest consciousness and reverence for the body.

The third reason I find to compare Ephesians with Coates' book is about Hope. Coates is suspicious of hope. He thinks hope is a hoax, part of the elusive Dream that is never attainable for his demographic. Coates' proclaims early on that his family of origin rejected religion. He references Christianity from a stark and clearly defined detachment in the beginning of the book, and yet he seems to glimpse its value with a sort of longing as the story progresses. As part of his job as journalist for *The Atlantic*, Coates visits the mother of Jordan Davis. Jordan Davis, you may remember from the media coverage a few years back, was a passenger in a car parked at gas

station who was shot and killed after a dispute for playing rap music too loud. Visiting Davis' mom a week after the verdict of her son's case, Coates is surprised by her remarkable composure. She tells him not to mistake her calmness for the absence of anger, but that God has focused her anger away from revenge and toward redemption. God had spoken to her, she tells him, and committed her to activism. God called her to use her experience and her gifts to benefit others. Coates reflects that he has no God to hold him up, no sense that a just God is on his side.

At the end of the book, he tells of his visit with Mabel Jones (yet another mother of a murdered son), the mother of his friend from college who was shot and killed by a police officer. There was a power he felt in Mabel's presence. "As she talked of the church," he writes to his son, I thought of my own distance from an institution that has, so often, been the only support for our people. I often wonder if in that distance I've missed something, some notions of cosmic hope, some wisdom beyond my mean physical perception of the world, something beyond the body, that I might have transmitted to you." In Coates' admission of his lack of hope there is hopefulness, because he catches a glimpse of what is possible, the hope that is attainable in the body of Christ.

This hope that Coates sees in these church-going mothers is indeed what we have in being members of Christ's body. Mabel Jones had a community of love and support and a faith that could help shoulder and absorb her grief at the loss of her son. While Coates believes that when the body is shattered everything is lost, the Christian faith is based on resurrection, where hope and life is restored, where we are granted peace and awe amidst the most unlikely of circumstances, where we believe in new life for those we have lost, new life for ourselves each morning, new life for our community of faith in the midst of struggles. Christ's body is a place of belonging, a place of working toward something greater than ourselves in ministry to others, where diversity of each member is valued and cherished. As we become part of Christ's body through membership in the church, we become more aware of God's calling on our lives, and it is as we become more aware of God's calling on our lives that we appreciate the connectedness and community of those on the journey to healing and fulfillment with us. It is through being in relationship to others through love that we fully become our true selves.

The Ephesians passage tells us that God equips us with gifts for the mission to which we are called. Our last two weeks of Bible study here at Redwoods this past June were devoted to the identification of our spiritual gifts. We had completed the study of *Romans*, which, like Ephesians, speaks about these spiritual gifts. There were twenty categories we used to determine our gifts. Here they are; see with which you identify. They are all gifts to be used for service: administration, apostleship, discerning of spirit, encouragement, evangelism, faith, giving, healing, serving, hospitality, leadership, mercy, message and communication of knowledge, pastor, prophecy, teaching, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, miraculous powers: and we had all but one category represented by the members in our group. There was a freedom in this process, realizing that not only are we all not graced with

every gift, but we are not meant to be. Some of us didn't think of these categories of gifts, especially if they came naturally to us. For example, one person didn't think of hospitality as a gift. I assured her it was. The way that she set out the refreshments, putting the tea bags nicely arranged in a sweet basket lined with a pretty doily, would not occur to some of us. We are fortunate to have many with the hospitality gift in this congregation.

The church is not based on the divisions among us, our differences, but on the diversity of gifts where all are essential and all are connected. It is a body, a community based on love and peace. God gives each of us different gifts for building up the Body of Christ. We all contribute something to the community. Our life's work is to find out what our calling is, what our own gifts are, and they can change over time. "Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." Christ's gift is infinite. Discover what it is to be yourself, to live out the gifts God gives you. As Oscar Wilde said, "Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken." The gift of God's grace is beautiful, and a joy to behold. Whatever it is to be you, know that it gives God great pleasure to see you accepting and offering to others the gifts that have been given to you by God.

As we take communion later in the service, know that you are welcomed into the family of God through Christ and are accepted just as you are. Your body is an active part of Christ's body, which is working through love to restore the world. Thanks be to God.