

## **Unity, not Uniformity (Ephesians 4: 1-16)**

4<sup>th</sup> August, 2024

How good are you at gardening? I know we have some real experts in this congregation. I always wanted to garden but when I was working full-time, I just didn't have time to look after a one. Now, we just have a little courtyard with a few pots. Although few, the plants produced give great delight. But I am finding, as do all gardeners, that even my few pots demand constant attention; watering, weeding, feeding, dead-heading, trying to combat the various pests on land, soil and air that want to devour my plants. It takes constant attention and work.

Any sort of community is like a garden. It needs continual patient and loving attention to thrive. A church community likewise needs that same care. Paul was a brilliant planter of churches but soon learnt that left untended all sorts of weeds and pests, both from the inside and outside, could attack his work and threaten his fundamental message of reconciliation, peace and love that comes through Jesus Christ.

But Paul couldn't be with all his churches all the time. Most of his letters are Paul calling out to congregations to work hard amongst themselves to hold onto the precious gift they have been given: to defend it, nurture it and enjoy its fruits and gifts. But Paul always reminds his readers that they do not do this work on their own. In fact, they must try not to do it on their own. As Graham pointed out in his sermon last week, on Ephesians 3, we are all called upon to root and ground ourselves (another gardening reference) in Christ and in the power of his Holy Spirit working in us and amongst us.

At the moment, we are having to get on with caring for each other without a vicar, a leader. Not that I am likening Father James to St Paul! So, listening to this passage at this time might be particularly helpful in reminding ourselves of what we need to do to tend our community.

In today's reading, the apostle Paul is writing to the congregation in Ephesus to encourage them as they grow in relationship with each other. Paul's primary call to them is to strive for unity within their community, as unity reflects the work of God through Christ. In the first three chapters of Ephesians Paul is writing about blessing and love and everything feels good. Paul talks specifically about the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles because of the work of God through Christ. Paul says, "For Christ is our peace. Through his flesh he has made both groups into one and broken down the dividing walls; that is the hostilities between us."

When we move on to chapter 4 and our text today Paul's writing is a little less feel good and a little more challenging. It feels as though there may have been some things going on in the community at Ephesus that were still causing division among them and although Paul doesn't say exactly what those things were, we do hear him begging them to strive for peace.

Chapter 4 begins with the word "therefore", indicating that what Paul is about to say to them is built on the things he has already said in the first three chapters, specifically about the peace that Christ has brought. In verse 2 Paul calls Christians to humility, gentleness, patience and love. In verses 3, 4 and 5 Paul calls them to unity, as we have One calling, One Lord, One faith and One baptism. What Paul does not say is that they will all be alike and agree on everything and have no more conflict. Learning to live in community is learning to live with the differences among us and placing a higher priority on unity than on convincing everyone else to believe what you believe. So yes, Christ has broken down the walls that divide us but we still have to do the hard work of learning to live together. This is true of us and was true of the church in Ephesus. There were Jews and Gentiles trying to learn how to live in community with each other and it seems that doing so was proving to be a struggle. Paul is pleading with them to do it better.

Verses 8 and 9 can be confusing for us and even for scholars. What Paul is probably talking about when he talks about Jesus descending is Jesus' incarnation when he took on human flesh for us and lived here on earth and then ascended back into heaven after his Resurrection.

Finally in today's text Paul reminds the church that we are all a part of the same body. We are all working towards the same goal though we have different roles, different parts to play. For Paul unity does not mean uniformity.

Let us pause a moment to look at the gifts Paul mentions in verse 11: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Is this list of gifts intended to be exhaustive? I do not think so. After all, "there are different kinds of gifts," as Paul writes in I Corinthians 12, "but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people." The gifts Paul mentions are important in any church but what about the other gifts; the gifts of music, for example, or hospitality, or listening, or friendship, or service or organisation, or cleaning, or flower arranging. These are gifts which we all benefit hugely from. What are your gifts? What gives you life and could give life to others? This church needs you!

The point of the gifts is that they are also about creating unity. In verse 12 Paul insists that God gives us our diverse gifts in order to "build up the body of Christ." And in verse 13 he calls us to use the talents God lends us to lead people toward "unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God." By knowing and using our gifts, we more clearly demonstrate unity. Apart from anything else, it is fun to work together. It bonds us. One of the quickest ways to feel a part of any community is to participate in its ministries. As Christians both learn and use the gifts Christ has given us, as we participate with others in our various ministries, we increasingly recognize the true place God has given to not only us, but also our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Some things hinder our ability to use the gifts God has given us. Most of us are busy people. Some of us are also simply worn out from using our gifts for many years. That's why I want to encourage all of us to both know and use our spiritual gifts to share the burden and the joy of ministry.

To conclude: There were differences among the people in Ephesus significant differences about theology and how Christianity should be practiced and there are differences in our churches today. Even so Paul

calls us to bear with one another in love. It is a call for tolerance so that we may grow into mature Christians and not easily be swayed by changing doctrines. Striving for unity with one another in community is not easy. It is hard work and it requires from each one of us humility, patience, gentleness and above all love. May we all strive for these things first as we encounter others who are different from us.