TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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*“Body Parts”* Ephesians 4:1-16

**The passage we just heard begins the second half of Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus. Paul was very concerned about this church because they were having trouble getting along. Apparently, the diversity of the congregation was taking it’s toll on their life together.**

**Specifically, the church had been living through a time of growth. Normally, this is a good thing, even in ancient churches. Unfortunately, in the Ephesians’ case, many of the** newly converted Jews were finding it difficult to share the same space as the even newer Gentile members. What Paul seems to have heard, and what he addresses in this letter, are the reports that had been made to him that the Jews in the Ephesian church were often separating themselves from their non-Jewish brethren.

Therefore, earlier in this letter, Paul takes the opportunity to describe, in some detail, how life has changed for the Gentiles, *and* the Jews, and how the new life they now have is a life that is to be lived within a whole new understanding of fellowship and wholeness.

Once, Paul says, the Gentiles were alone in a dark and lonely world where they were trapped in their own sin. Now that they have come to know Christ, they have been joined to his body. They have received his life. Indeed, both Jew and Gentile are no longer separate from one another—like unrelated body parts that have no life. Through Christ, they are both to consider themselves members of *one body*. Together, they are to live a new life founded on Christ.

This means that there are several attitudes that are indispensable if those who belong to this one body are to personify the peace and reconciliation God created through Christ’s flesh. They are to act *“with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another.”* [v. 2]. Since they are *“no longer strangers and aliens, but ... citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God”* [Ephesians 2:19]. Moreover, they honor God’s transformational call when they *“mak(e) every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* [v. 3].

Unity. Unity is actually the motto of the United Church of Christ: It is from the Gospel of John; our motto is “that they may all be one.” [John 17:21].

One of the difficult things about unity is that many people insist that unity means we all have to be the same. Same language. Same education, etc., etc. We are supposed to be the same even when it comes to superficial things like how to dress—ever been a teenager who did not dress the way the other kids did? We can be so brutal to people who “stick-out” in some way. What is the old Japanese saying?—the nail that stands out will be…pounded down.

Paul insists on unity, not uniformity…. Yet there *are* a couple of things that all of us have to have in order to *worthily* live the life to which we have been called.

First, Paul wants us to accept that our faith is more than a private affair that we keep to ourselves. He says this very plainly in this passage when he describes our life in Christ as a “calling.” We have been called by Christ into this relationship with him. Christ called each of us by name, and for a purpose. It is that *purpose* to which we were called that is our vocation. It is something to be lived out in the presence of the whole community. A calling is the unique service we have been given to fulfill; and a calling can only be fulfilled by one who is willing to *offer* that service to others. Whether it is small (in the eyes of the world), or grand, it is the way in which we give of ourselves because of Christ.

Second, we need to remember and acknowledge Christ’s grace which both Jew and Gentile have been given. It is this grace that has saved both. It is Christ’s grace that has brought both into reconciliation with one another. This new life is entirely through the grace that Christ ushered into the world through his life, his death, and his resurrection. We are one body through him.

Jews and Gentiles living together in unity with one another becomes a crucial part of the sacred calling of the early church, and of all disciples for ever after. So, it is also our calling, too. As members of his body, we are to also to find unity with God’s beloved community.

That sounds good, doesn’t it? If this sounds so good, how come most of the time our world looks so fragmented—even the parts of it where there are people who say they believe in Christ’s grace?

I do not believe it is because we have not tried. I believe many of us have tried very hard to live in unity with our brothers and sisters. There have even been times when we have had amazing leadership in our midst who showed us the way to unity—Martin Luther King, Jr. leaps immediately to my mind, but there have been others, too, that are probably occurring to you right now.

Perhaps part of the problem is that unity requires much more than proximity. It requires us to recognize and courageously accept the way in which we can be interconnected—that is: the way in which we may serve one another.

We know this, of course. Yet here we are—at a time in history when our country and the whole world seems to be so fractured and at odds with one another. Our good news is that God has not given up on us, even if we are tempted to give-up on ourselves and each other.

Our good news is also that serving one another, even in the presence of so much enmity and strife is one of the ways in which the church of Jesus Christ is uniquely gifted to serve. Indeed, it is our calling. Whenever we overcome our own reluctance and go forward to love and serve the world, we are fulfilling our calling and glorifying Christ.

In response to those of you who are now wondering how this is going to work: the bad news is that it is not going to be without tremendous effort. The good news is that we have many examples from human history *and* from nature for us to reflect on and be inspired by.

For example: fire ants—there was an article about this a few years ago in *Science* magazine. Apparently, fire ants are these painful little pests have developed a stunning way to survive huge rains that flood their colonies—something that is common in the American South or their native Brazil. When the floods come, the ants link themselves together and assemble themselves into flat waterproof rafts that float atop the flood waters.

The disc-shaped rafts are actually water-repellent due to the interlocking pattern between the ants. Some ants in the raft even remain submerged below the water’s surface, but the structure of their interconnection traps air bubbles between them which these ants use to breath. On top of the raft, other ants surf along until the colony washes up onto dry ground. Linked together, they are so water repellant that an ant raft can float for up to two months.

The key to these rafts is the strength of the interconnection between each ant. And by the way, the ants do not do the ant equivalent of joining hands and sweetly singing a couple of choruses of *Kum Bah Ya.* The whole raft is held together as the ants clutch to one another with jaws and claws. By measuring the force required to break these links, scientists have determined that the ants’ grip-force is as strong as if a human being were able to suspend six elephants off the ground.

However, the key finding surrounds the necessary interdependence of the fire ant colony. In other words: Drop one ant in the water, and it’s dead. Drop a tablespoon of ants, and they live through interconnection.

My point is that unity is not without effort. As most of us have discovered: it takes almost daily commitment, and re-commitment. And I know it is tiring.

Our good news is that we do not have to do this by ourselves. We have the Word of God to remind and to guide us. We have the light of Scripture to encourage us. We have Paul—who wrote of these hopeful and loving things even while he was a prisoner—his faith and the light Christ gave to his life had not dimmed at all.

Neither does the light of Christ have to dim in our lives—we have all of these things and we have one other. Or as one write put it: we are no longer separate body parts, with Christ as the head of the ChurchBody, we become an interlinked bodysurfing raft that by equipping, serving, sacrificing and hanging on survives for the glory of God.

May this be so for us too. Amen.