

Joined and Knit Together Ephesians 4:1-6

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 1st August 2021

Up to this point, the author of Ephesians, likely Paul—for convenience, let's say Paul—is making the claim that through Christ, God is birthing a new humanity, a new people, forming disparate peoples, disparate religious sensibilities, and knitting them together into something new. This people, this community, this church, will be known for its diversity and inclusiveness. Why? Because both Jews and Gentiles are now worshipping Christ together under one roof as a new people. The enmity between Jew and Gentile is being healed in Christ. We hear in chapter 2, “For Christ is our peace; and he has broken down the wall of hostility between us...declaring peace to those who are far off and those who are near (Eph. 2:14, 17). This community, this people will be known for their welcome and reconciling love—not, mind you, because they're especially nice, not because they're especially kind or good, not because it's the politically correct thing to do (which it wasn't in the Roman world), but because these people find themselves dwelling in the nature and power and presence of the Risen Christ and know to the core of their being that reconciliation, welcome, and acceptance together lie at the core of God's being.

If we've experienced God's grace and love through Christ, then how can we withhold that same grace and love and acceptance from our neighbors? It's not ours to withhold. It's because God's love and grace holds us and cares for us, that we find ourselves becoming *more* loving and caring for one another, for neighbor, for the alien and the stranger who walks into our community. Their welfare and well-being have become our concern.

What we find here is a profound rationale for the life of the church. Because of Christ the walls that formerly separated humanity from God are now gone. This same power, known as love, can break down any walls that divide and alienate us one from another. Because of reconciliation in the “vertical” relationship (between humanity and God) there can now be reconciliation at the horizontal level, between person and person. And the individuals who have experienced this kind of love and grace are now pulled together into a new community, into a new family, a new race, a new humanity, a new people, into a church—choose your image—built into a temple, into the dwelling place of God. Ephesians is awash with such metaphors or images. Paul is straining to make a point, begging us to see that God is at work in us and among us. We are like a beautiful piece of art, a poem (Eph. 2:10), created in Christ, crafted by Christ, formed and reformed into something beautiful and new, into a unity. And the text claims that we are *already* united by the Holy Spirit, and therefore calls us to work hard to maintain this unity.

In this sublime text we are given a vista into a new world, given a glimpse into a different way of being, a still more excellent way. It's a way marked by mutual forbearance, of “bearing one another in love” (Eph. 4:2) The meaning of this Greek phrase suggests “to bear *up*,” that is, “to hold oneself up,” responding with patience with someone until a sense of provocation is past. That's what love does, it bears all things, it endures (1 Corinthians 13). To love is to bear; to bear is to love. They are tied together; they interpret each other mutually. “If to love includes bearing one's neighbor, then love is not just an emotion, [or feeling,] or ideal of the individual

soul.”¹ It’s an act. It isn’t love except in relation to neighbors. A Christian doesn’t love in general; we love in particular. For the Christian it’s always specific, and it’s often costly and often, as a result, it’s miraculous.

Paul says, make every effort “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). “The unity of the Spirit is maintained, [not attained] as the members of the body function together harmoniously for the well-being of the whole.”² “Make every effort,” means “take pains, with haste,” with passion, work to fulfill this responsibility. The Greek here means to use your will, your senses, your reason, your physical strength, your total attitude, to give it your all. There’s nothing passive about this, there’s nothing quiet about this, there’s no space to take a “let’s wait and see” attitude. Take the initiative. Take responsibility. You. You do it.³

And what do we have to do? “*Maintain...the bond of peace.*” The Spirit is forming a bond. This doesn’t mean the Spirit is like super-glue. The metaphor is more dynamic than that. The Greek word Paul uses comes from the world of construction and carpentry; it refers to that which holds a house together—the wooden beams, the fastenings, the ligaments. With these bonds in place we have a structure, a structure that houses the people of God. We are being built into the household of God, Paul says, built upon the foundations of apostles and prophets, with Christ as the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). “In him,” we heard several weeks ago, “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple..., a dwelling for God” (Eph. 2:21-22).

This temple, then, is a place where God’s people live and breathe and move and grow. It’s the space, the sacred space where God’s children are invited to live in freedom. This is Paul’s beautiful image of the church. The church is a people, yes, a community, but more than merely an association of people, we have *become* a people, we have come to know what it means to be children of God living in a particular space. The church carves out a space in the world for us to embody the gospel, a sacred space for this new way of living and loving and bearing one another’s burdens.

Given the hostility and divisions in society, as well as within the church these days, this text sounds like sheer fantasy. Doesn’t it? Straight out from the land of make believe. There is no place for division in the church and yet the church can be a divisive place. Today—unbelievably!—we have Christians fighting over whether or not face masks should be required in worship. In light of what we are facing, this text is a judgment of the church, in its light we see just how far we have rejected Christ and prefer to serve other lords. Christ came to tear down the walls that divide us to establish in their place a new space in which to live. The church should be, and can be that safe space where God’s children are allowed to live in freedom. The Spirit desires that *this* space be different, set apart, unlike every other space.

What makes a space safe? What makes space sacred? Perhaps these questions share a common answer. Theologian Pamela Cooper-White suggests that sacred spaces, whether it’s a sanctuary or a religious community, have a maternal quality to them. We sometimes refer to the church as mother, “Mother Church.” The church like a mother gives birth to us, born in the womb of baptism. The church, then, is the place where we are held and loved, where we feel the embrace of God, and feel the embrace of God in the way we are held by others in the community. It’s the space where we know we are being held by someone larger than

ourselves. A sacred space is a kind of “maternal holding environment.”⁴ In this matrix we know ourselves reconciled to God and to our neighbor, we know ourselves loved unconditionally, we find ourselves welcomed and accepted. A sacred space is a holding space, a space that “contains” us, a space where we know ourselves to be safe.

Now, of course, we know, sadly, this is not always the case. Far too many have experienced the church as anything but safe. Assuming it to be so, this sacred trust has been violated by religious leaders who have abused their power and violated the rights of all God’s children. Once this trust is lost, it’s very difficult—not impossible, but difficult—for it to be regained.

But if we go back to this text and claim the truth of this text, we need to know that despite all the limitations of God’s people and church itself, God is still at work through us. And because God is still at work through us and in us, when we experience the power and presence of God within and among us, we discover that God desires to create something of us, with us, for us. This text shows that we are being joined, knit together, joint by joint, knot by knot, ligament by ligament, soul by soul, person by person, fit together, hinged together, into a new body, a people, a temple, a church—choose your image—we are being formed into something, built for love, built for the “body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Eph. 2:16).

In some this is what’s it’s all about. This is all we have to do. This is all we are called to be. This is the true purpose of religion, what it means to be religious, and perhaps why we need to reclaim the meaning of this word. Unfortunately, it’s gone out of favor these days. Many like to say, and I’m sure you’ve heard this, “I’m spiritual but not religious,” or this phrase, “I don’t believe in organized religion.” I’m not sure I want to be in a disorganized religion. That sounds pretty chaotic for a Presbyterian who values order. But you get my point. Religion, ultimately, doesn’t mean being holy or following religious practices, and it has little to do with belief or a creed. Religion, from the Latin *religare* means, “to bind,” “to bind back,” “to connect.” Our English words *ligament* and *ligature* come from that same root. *Religare*. It’s all about connection—God connecting with humanity, humanity connecting with the divine, human beings to human beings, person to person, connecting with the depths of the soul, connecting with creation, with the cosmos itself. As Albert Einstein (1879-1955) showed us, this entire universe—at every level, from micro to macro, including the properties of light, particle and wave—is all about relationships, it’s all about connections. Relationships between, across, throughout multiple levels of being and creation, making these links, always making links, making connections, binding together, binding back to, and discovering and realizing that everything and everyone is connected.

Connected. Joined and knitted together. Every ligament with which it is equipped, working together for a purpose (Eph 4:16). There’s something essential here in these simple words. Perhaps it’s easy to miss but seeing this makes all the difference. For a house doesn’t build itself. And no one is self-made. We don’t knit ourselves together. Someone else is doing the knitting. We are the object of someone else’s handiwork. Something is being done to us, with us, for us, and for the world through us. Formed and reformed by *another*. Created, a poem, or a work of art, by an artist making something beautiful with our lives. Something we cannot do on our own.

Passive. Sure, yes. But not entirely passive. Actively passive. We yield, we submit, and we open ourselves to what God is creating and making in us, through us, individually and together as a new people. This means that the church and every church needs to set aside its personal dreams or agendas of what we want the church to be or what we think a church should be about and should be doing. The more important question is: what is God's dream for this church? What is God creating through us, with us? To answer these questions, we need to open ourselves, open our hearts, open our minds, open our arms, our lives, allow the Spirit to speak. To yield. Submit. May we allow ourselves to be ministered by the Spirit who longs to join us together, knit us together, into a people—a church. Not what we want or think we want but truly becoming, authentically a holy people, set apart for God's good work in the world. That's an image to live into. *May it be so.*



¹ Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 4-6* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1986), 427-428.

² Barth, 428.

³ Barth, 428-429.

⁴ Pamela Cooper-White, "Sacred Space and the Psyche: Reflections on Potential Space and the Sacred Built Environment," in Kathleen J. Greider, Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, and Felicity Brock Kelcourse, eds., *Healing Wisdom: Depth Psychology and the Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 78-80.