

The Calling to which We are Called
A Sermon by the Rev. Philip Major on Ephesians 4:1-16
St. Paul's, Syracuse ~ August 5, 2018

This is one of those bad news, good news stories. The good news is that most of the problems we face can all be traced back to one source. The bad news is that most of the problems we face can all be traced back to one source, one terrible mistake.

The terrible mistake we make is that we divide ourselves from others. Our divisions are the basis for all the problems we face.

In America we have divided ourselves in many ways. Men and women divide themselves from each other. The rich have divided themselves from the poor, sometimes to the point of living in communities surrounded by fences where they will never have to interact with those who are poor. In America we divide ourselves into red states and blue states. We divide ourselves into city people and country people, into Republicans and Democrats.

We divide ourselves from each other in many ways, but racism is the most pervasive, tragic division in our nation. The Rev. Jim Wallis has described racism as America's 'original sin'. Throughout our history people have held the assumption that people of European heritage are superior to people whose ancestors came from other places. If division is the disease, racism is the primary symptom of our divisions.

The idea that racism is the root of many of our problems might seem outrageous to some Americans. After all the opening sentences of the Declaration of Independence include these words: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.* This gives the impression that the founders of our nation believed that all people, or at least all men, black and red and tan and white, are created equal.

But the written words covered over an angry argument about racial equality. At the time the words were written and at least until the middle of the 20th century, in the courthouse and in the legislatures and in the public square and in homes all across America, there was vigorous debate.

And the vigorous public debate covered over something that was harder to express. The public debate covered over a deep spiritual insecurity. The public debate covered over a deep fear of people we do not know, of people who are different. This deep fear, this spiritual insecurity seen in a lack of trust, was often in the hearts of people on both sides of the public debate.

This is the bad news. There is a deep mistrust within the hearts of many of us, and this deep spiritual insecurity, this lack of trust, is based in our fear and tragic mistreatment of people of different races. This fear and mistrust have profound effects on our nation.

This is the bad news. We are not spiritually strong, so we have allowed ourselves to become divided from each other. We have divided ourselves by race, by wealth or poverty, by political views and by gender.

This is the good news. If we act in the pattern of Christ, strengthened by the grace of God, we can be united with all those who live in the love of Christ. This is the main idea of the letter to the Ephesians.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians was probably not St. Paul. We can assume it was not written by St. Paul because the format of the letter and the style of the writing is different from Paul's other letters. There is a verse in chapter five where the author gives directions that contradict Paul's statements regarding the equality of women and men. On the other hand the author of the letter seems very familiar with one of Paul's main ideas about the way of Christ, the idea of unity.

So the author may have been one of Paul's close companions, writing in the years following Paul's death. The author has taken Paul's ideas about the essential unity of the church of Christ and expanded on those ideas in a most powerful way. The author is almost certainly addressing one of the greatest challenges in the early church: the tendency of gentile and Jewish followers of Christ to divide themselves into two, separate groups. The author has taken Paul's words and ideas about Christian unity and arranged them to create the most powerful message for the people in Ephesus. So let's take the words of the letter and try to hear them to bring us closer to the unity of God.

First we must acknowledge that this is a good news, bad news story. There are people who actively seek to divide us from each other. *We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.* We are easily deceived by those who use fears and insecurity to divide us from each other.

Being divided is directly contradictory to the work of Christ. The author of Ephesians says, *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.* The church is defined as a community that embraces unity. The church arises out of the unity of God and is active in the love of God and work of God only when it is a place of unity.

Unity is not about ignoring the truth about differences or injuries or needs. The author urges us to *speak the truth in love.* Unity requires us to speak the truth in the spirit of love. We unite ourselves with others by using our words to seek reconciliation instead of using words to attack others.

The author of Ephesians borrows Paul's understanding of the church as a single, indivisible body, the body of Christ. He writes *we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.* Unity is not an afterthought; unity is essential. God intends for us to be a single body, indivisible, just as the physical body of Christ could not be divided.

The author of the letter continues: *we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.* When we are united we build up the body of Christ, which includes ourselves and others, in love. Love brings individual growth and collective growth. There is no individual growth without collective growth.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, We are called to follow the example of Christ. This calling is an individual calling, but it cannot be fully executed unless it is taken on by the entire community, since the calling is the work of unity.

Our work of unity will not be easy. The author says it will require *all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

This is the good news. There is only one challenge we face today. There is just one thing for us to keep in the front of our minds. There is only one work for us to do to follow the way of Christ. We must be united as the Body of Christ, bringing the good news of God's unity to the world.

