

Ephesians 4:1-16
25 August 13

“Body Language”

Today’s reading addresses a concern you can find in almost all the letters of the New Testament: the unity of the local church. It uses words like, “live with 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.” I don’t think it’s a stretch to say this is still a pretty big concern in many local congregations today. At Living Water we do pretty well in this regard, though we have known a time or two when this was definitely not the case. And people being the sinful human beings that we are, we will undoubtedly know times of disunity and or controversy sometime in the future. It’s sort of normal.

There are a couple of really helpful ways to look at this. Here’s one I heard in a podcast: God gives us these gifts: Word, Water, Bread, Wine—and each other. The first part we get. If you’re a savvy Lutheran, you know that the Church is brought into being through the means of grace: Word—that would be Jesus, the gospel good news, the Bible, the preached, sung, and prayed Word—and Sacrament—that would be the Water, Bread, and Wine part. Most Christians get that these are gifts of God.

It’s a bit harder sometimes to see others as equally important gifts from God, especially when we judge them to be acting selfishly, unreasonably, or obstinately. But this is a New Testament teaching. God gives us Word and Sacrament and each other. The idea that I’ve got to walk that lonesome valley all by myself or that that it’s just me and Jesus in the garden alone just aren’t found in the New Testament. As someone once explained it, when you invite Jesus into your life, he brings his friends with him. I wonder how differently we would all act in a time of tension if we saw our “opponents” as gifts from God to us.

Another way to understand why this is so important is to take seriously the body language the New Testament uses. As in Jesus is the head of the church and we are his body. We are, literally, his body’s members. Members as in hands, feet, eyes, mouth, etc. You know, body parts. Gives kind of a whole new meaning to church “membership,” doesn’t it?

What today’s reading says is that because Jesus has one body, the Church is one body, just as there is one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one hope, and one baptism. Of course, the members of the body are different. I have two arms, two hands, two eyes, one voice, one stomach, two feet—and one body. This one body that is me needs all of those parts to be acting in coordination. If we say a person is totally uncoordinated, it’s not a compliment.

But here’s the thing: for my body to work, I need all the different parts. If I’m all stomach and no mouth, well that wouldn’t work out too well. All the parts are needed. One of the things this means is that it’s unhealthy for the local congregation to be pastor centered. Many congregations are just that—pastor centered. Every pastor has a limited set of gifts. The historical reason for pastor centeredness is that in times past the pastor was often the only educated person in the

parish. So he—and it was always a he—was the person. That’s how we got the word parson. That situation changed along time ago, but old habits die hard. Also many of us pastors like to be the center of attention, needed, indispensable.

To me, that’s not very healthy. Instead what pastors ought to be is coaches, encouragers, trainers in discipleship and ministry, “equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13until all of us come to the unity of the faith.” Former bishop Jerry Knoche described his duties in his parish as being the chief gooser.

Another thing this means is that all the gifts we need are here. This body, Living Water Lutheran Church, is a complete body. Sometimes I think we sell ourselves too short. The gifts are here. We have singers and prayers and a good cadre of caring people who take the time to express care. We have workers and encouragers and people who are serious about discipleship for themselves and for the whole parish. We have Sunday school teacher and youth who are already serving as leaders. I could go on.

Ephesians does more than ask us to think about how important is the unity of this one body that is Living Water Lutheran Church. Tasks us to do something about it. It asks us to grow into this unity, “leading a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, 2with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

We grow into this unity by concentrating on the story of Jesus’s astonishing freedom and willingness to descend to earth with the gifts of heaven. We know this plot line from Philippians 2. He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He emptied himself. Heaven and earth, divine and human are not so tidily divided any more. Christ has bridged the distance, giving gifts so that we might all grow up into him.

We grow into unity by growing to maturity “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” that together as Christ’s body we may, “grow up in every way to him who is the head.” So I guess the sermon challenge this week is to grow up. That sounds like chiding, but I sure don’t mean it that way. What I mean to say is that growing into maturity, growing into the fullness of Christ—and this is a *really* high standard—is a life-long process.

I’d like to end with a prayer about that life-long work. “Help me, Lord God, to remember Jesus’s eagerness not to be ministered to but to minister, his empathy with suffering of every kind, his simplicity, his self-discipline, his serenity of spirit, his complete reliance upon and trust in you. And in each of these ways give me grace to follow him.”