

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR B

August 12, 2012

**Unity in the Body of Christ**

**Ephesians 4:1-16**

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The excitement is building! Our 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee is hard at work planning some interesting and exciting events for this fall. They are resurrecting, and dusting off historical records. Special concerts are in the works! They are inviting people who helped shape the life and work of this congregation back to share in the celebration. Just think of it! For one hundred seventy-five years you have been doing ministry in this community. To a westerner like me, that number is astounding! Out west, a hundred years of ministry is a big milestone.

I remember one of those one hundred year celebrations when I served as a lay staff member at First Presbyterian Church in downtown Portland, Oregon. What I remember most about that event was their opening of the cornerstone that had been laid when the foundation of the church was built. Inside that cornerstone was a metal box filled with fascinating old memorabilia. After emptying the box, they invited people to fill it up again with current notes, photos, bulletins, and other items of interest to the people who would open it in 2087.

These important milestones in the life of a church evoke all kinds of memories, don't they; people who were baptized, confirmed, married, memorialized, within its walls. If the walls of this chapel and our sanctuary could speak, they would tell us all sorts of powerful and captivating stories about how God was at work in the life of this congregation throughout its history.

Our celebration this year will be a time to remember the saints of God called to do ministry here, pastors, elders, deacons, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, and others. With God's help, each in their own way helped lay the foundation for who you are today.

So here we are in the twenty-first century when the Christian church is struggling to survive. It's sad that all the world seems to see, and all the press seems to feed on, are the divisions and schisms among us. Mainline churches everywhere are being ruptured by people leaving behind their historic roots,

dividing themselves over issues like the ordination of women or gays, and believing or not believing in the literal interpretation of scripture.

Samuel John Stone, a priest in the Church of England in the mid eighteenth century, takes us back to basics. Reflecting on the state of the church in 1867, he wrote words to the hymn *The Church's One Foundation*. He opened the hymn with these words: "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord. She is his new creation by water and the word. From heaven he came and sought her, to be his holy bride, with his own blood he bought her and for her life he died."

His second verse acknowledges the schisms and heresies that were dividing the church then, even as they are in our time. The ending of the hymn affirms that, built on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ, the church will rise above all this upheaval and emerge victorious. We must hold fast to that hope.

Someone once said, "there is nothing new under the sun." From the beginning, the first century Christian churches struggled mightily to survive. They lived under the shadow of the Roman Empire, a constant threat trying to flush out those tiny communities of faith and destroy them.

To make matters worse, within the congregations there were divisions. People lined up on sides behind certain leaders; some thought of themselves as more holy and righteous than the rest. And there was the usual bickering over how to run the church and other issues which divided them.

The church at Ephesus was going through such upheavals. Written in the form of a letter, the book of Ephesians attempted to help the people in that congregation, return to their roots; to find their unity in the building up and strengthening of the body of Christ. In today's reading the writer begins by calling the church back to the basics of who they are. These words are for us as well.

**"I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called..."**

Notice the past tense in that sentence: **"...to which you have been called..."** You and I have already been chosen and called by God as God's own. What a privilege, what a gift that is! But there is more. Because we have been specially chosen by God, we have some responsibility, to live lives that are worthy of that calling. Because we are human beings, we know we can never perfectly achieve

that goal. But that is what we are to strive for together as the people of God.

The Greek translation brings this text even closer home. To lead a life, translates as: to walk the walk. We all know you can't walk and stand still at the same time. Walking implies an action forward. Leading a life of faith means walking step by step with God and with one another into an unknown future.

We live in a world which values individualism and self sufficiency. We often hear the word "me" more than the word "we." I cringe every time my MBA son says "me and (someone else) Me and Megan (his daughter) went to the mall yesterday." People are becoming more isolated and insulated from each other. Take a walk on the streets of New York, or even Montclair and notice the number of people who are lost in cell phone land; in iPod land; in texting land; who never look up for a second to acknowledge you passing by.

My friends, the Christian church is one of the last strongholds of community we have left. Think what we have here. In a culture that fractures people's lives by the demands of work, family, and community life, there is one place that draws us together in unity. That is the church. When you entered the chapel this morning, hopefully you checked all of your worries and concerns, all of your doubts and fears at the door. Because you entered a safe place, a sacred space. You entered into a community where you are accepted just as you are, with people who understand you, care about you, love you, even pray for you. Do you know how rare that is in today's world?

Within these walls, we are reminded that we share a life of faith together. Each time we partake of communion, we are reminded of that connection with Christ and in Christ with one another. Part of our task in any congregation is to strengthen those connections in any way we can, through corporate worship , through Christian education, through our fellowship times, and other church events and activities.

What this all gets down to is what the writer of Ephesians was getting at. We are **one Body in Christ**. We are all incorporated into that body and share a common existence. Despite the diversity and individuality among us, we are one in Christ. We are **one in spirit**. The gifts we have received to do ministry were generated by and given to us by the same Spirit.

There is **one hope** that unifies us, a hope that is given to all believers- the hope of the resurrection. The writer of 1 Peter puts it this way:

(1 Peter 1:3 ) “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

Though our faith journeys may differ and though we may be at different stages in our faith formation, we share a belief in Jesus Christ. We are one in our **baptism**. In that powerful moment, we were grafted into the body of Christ and had an instant family. Baptism was so important to the Apostle Paul, that when the church at Corinth began to dissolve, he grounded his appeal for unity in their baptismal experience.

The opening lines of the Nicene Creed and other creedal documents we subscribe to, declare that we believe in **one God**, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” Notice that we declare these statements together in the context of worship. Those statements, read together, unify us.

My prayer for us today as we leave this place of worship, is that we will continue to reflect on the importance of our unity here at Central Presbyterian Church. In the midst of our coming celebration, may we not lose sight of the foundations of our faith. We are one in the **Body of Christ**. We are one through the sacraments of communion and baptism. We are one through God’s **Spirit** which gives us gifts for ministry. We are one through our **hope in the resurrection**; and through our **belief in one God**, the creator and sustainer of all things.

**May those firm foundations continue to support and shape us as we do ministry in Christ’s name in the years ahead. Amen.**