

Life As The Body, Part 1  
Psalm 51, Eph 4:1-7, 11-16

It happens every summer. At the end of May, the two weeks before Memorial Day Weekend, we look over the calendar into Summer and think about that vast, pristine blank canvas stretched out the horizon before us. We will do this and that and go here and there and still have so much time for quiet walks with our significant other and leisurely mornings and soft slow summer evenings. And then boom! Here we are in the first week of August. Schools start soon and vacations come to a screeching halt, and our Summer Sabbath winds down. I'm looking at the worship schedule, realizing we only have 4 Sundays together after today and there is so much more to share and do and enjoy together. And, I bet Pastor Laura is looking at the calendar about now too and thinking Wow, time flies when you're having a Sabbatical.

But you know what, I was in a worship service recently wherein the preacher made this statement, "There is enough time to do what God calls us to do." This preacher said that God loves us and wouldn't give us more to do than what time allows. So, today I'm going to listen to that preacher and trust that the time we have

available is sufficient to do what needs doing. Faith and trust...that's what we do as God's people.

Given all this, we are fortunate this morning that the lectionary has chosen this beautiful word picture from Ephesians to describe our aspirations as church. Listen to the picture of us, of God's church painted by our brother Apostle Paul: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" And then this description:

A community of people and a way of life wherein humility is valued, gentleness is encouraged, patience is cultivated, grace is practiced, reconciliation is pursued, generosity is applauded, integrity is celebrated, and weakness becomes strength....

This is the picture of who we are and who we are to become. And when we get there, there is unity, sweet unity. No not uniformity where everyone must think alike, but unity in Jesus Christ. This is a community so committed to Jesus, so loyal to Jesus that all the other issues and disputes in this world that divide people fade away into insignificance. When we are there, fully immersed in Christ, then we are one. Then, we are all in (see how I've learned the Clemson language?).

Then, Paul says, we grow into “maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” Then we aren’t easily disoriented or fickle or easily manipulated, because we know whose we are and therefore who we are. We are children of God, committed to Jesus Christ and to one another. This allows us to speak the truth in love because we know we are committed to each other. With commitment comes depth. Without commitment, well, everything stays on the surface. Commitment gives the structure for deep connections with God and each other.

This is the uprising Jesus started. It's a life-giving alternative way to be. Call it the commonwealth of God, kingdom of God, Way of Jesus, or whatever. When we experience it, we come alive. When we are in the presence of those living this way, we become like moths circling the back porch light on a summer night. The Way of Jesus, uprising, aliveness. Moths to the light.

That’s the beautiful part of this passage – it holds up a description of the community of faith we want to become. We are leaning toward it, yearning for it, applying ourselves to living into it. Yet, we are not there yet. We have to admit that in this community there are times when we let each other down. There are times

when we forget we are a community and we chase our own individual desires. There are times when we neglect to work for the common good of God’s Church and instead only look to ourselves.

That’s why we read the classic penitent Psalm a moment ago, Psalm 51. Yes we are straining toward being this Blessed Community, yet we aren’t there yet, so there are times when we must stop and confess our sins to God, to each other, and to ourselves. I am so grateful for God’s grace which restores us to right relationship. God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins when we confess them with penitent hearts. Grateful we are.

Sometimes, we really need unity in this body of Christ. Well, we always need it, yet sometimes we are highly sensitized to our need for community.

Tuesday this week, we did an activity in our staff meeting that highlighted this church’s need for unity this very summer. We used those large white sheets with a sticky tab on the top, placing them on solid backgrounds and locating them around the room. At the top one said, “Transitions – Personal.” Another said “Transitions – Vocational,” meaning transitions that have to do with church since all of us in that room not only worship here,

but work here too. Afterwards I collected some of the statements made:

- Lead pastor away on sabbatical and is returning soon
- Sabbatical Pastor – arriving, attaching, serving, leaving
- Said goodbye to Cindy Davis as Childrens Ministry Coordinator and said hello to Kattie Wilson in that role
- This month is Al Masters last month as Interim University Pastor and this month we welcome Michael Sanchez into this ministry role
- Judy Crawford, beloved Ministry Assistant, retires Aug 15 and we welcome a new person into that role this week
- A new approach to disciple development begins soon called LIFT, which you will hear more about soon.

And these are only the church-wide transitions. Add your personal transitions and we are aware of how life is always changing and shifting under our feet.

One of the ways God provides for us in a swiftly changing world is to give us unity. No, we are not looking for conformity. Perhaps the old saying sometimes attributed to John Wesley and other times to St Augustine, but likely originating with a Lutheran Pastor from the 1600s, **“in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity”** When we can gather around one Christ, one baptism, one church...then our lives are grounded,

centered, and far more stable. And when it happens, when we are one in Christ, it is something to behold.

Allow me to tell you a story of when it happens, of when we are mature, living into the full measure of Christ. I was doing a Session retreat for a church back in 2013. I met with the Session and some other lay leaders Friday and Saturday and then preached in their worship service on Sunday. Often times when I do these events I’m staying in a hotel but this time they arranged for me to stay with one of the disciples from that church. John, I will call him. John lived by himself in a nice house, having been divorced for 10 years or so. He was a gracious host and I really enjoyed getting to know him. Well, on Saturday afternoon we completed our retreat work and then John shared that we would be going out to dinner with Jerry and his family. I met Jerry during the retreat and was glad to do so. Jerry’s wife Sara was there and they brought their two grandchildren who were staying with them for the weekend. During the conversation we talked about all kinds of things. But this was just after the last presidential election...not the election of 2016 but the election of 2012, and you may remember that emotions were running high then too. So, I became a little uncomfortable as they went down that conversational

pathway because they were clearly on different sides of the aisle in their politics. I listened and generally tried to avoid getting involved the best I could. But for these people this emotionally charged conversation didn't seem to be a problem. We finished the meal and parted with hugs and handshakes and a promise to see each other the next morning in worship.

Later, as John and I were talking at his house, I commented on the conversation. John shared with me that he is as conservative as they come. He described himself as a Tea Party Conservative Republican. He also shared that Jerry and his family are as liberal as they come, a liberal Democrat. I responded that it appears as if this is not a problem for them, they seem to be great friends. Here's what John said, "I love Jerry, we sing in the choir together, we share meals together, I know his grandchildren really well. But I don't love Jerry because he's a liberal Democrat. I love him because he's a child of God just like me and we are church together."

Wow. Unity in Jesus Christ. Not conformity, but unity. "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity"

When we get it right, when we can step out of ourselves and live into that vision of church the Apostle Paul shares with us in Ephesians, when we are committed to God and each other, then all the other things that divide this human race fade.

This is who we are. This is who Christ makes us to be.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, our world needs churches like that. We need church like that. May we grow into Christian maturity, into the full measure of Christ day by day. Through the grace, and power, and most of all love of Jesus Christ our Lord, may it become so. Amen.