

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, October 17, 2020

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

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

with 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. 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. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. 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. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

So, I was thinking about this forever piece of the pew. I couldn't help but think about the pew that I occupied at John Knox Presbyterian Church along with about 15 other high schoolers. We would sit in the far back right view of that sanctuary and we would make a ruckus every single week, and I think there's something poetic about me being a preacher now because I can't imagine the turmoil that my preacher had to deal with as we would snicker and laugh, and pass notes the entire time. But that pew over time became a holy place for me and for those young people that I got to sit beside there.

You know, I've made a practice since I started here at Idlewild to begin our time together in the pew. First, it was over in the penalty box here, and then right lately, it's been right here in the front row pew. I spend a few moments when I'm seated in that pew contemplating what I bring with me to this place. What are the things that I carry with me into worship, and then into the pulpit, but I also spend a few moments contemplating what it is that you bring with you to your pew this day. Because it turns out that worship cannot and does not happen in a vacuum.

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We bring our whole selves to this place. So we bring our joy to this place, laughter of our children, the memories perhaps of our childhood, maybe even in the same pew that you were seated in this day. We bring the joy of stories. of reach recent adventures .and perhaps of new love. We also bring our worries. We bring worries over our finances, and our marriages. We bring worry over those test results that haven't come back yet, worries over our children and their futures, worries over our planet and the brokenness that we see around us. We bring our joy, but we also bring our worry, and, indeed, each of us in a different way brings our pain to this place. Pain from brokenness and betrayal, pain of lives that haven't lived up to our expectations. We bring the pain of infidelity and addiction, the wounds that have been inflicted upon us, but also the wounds that we have picked up along the way we don't know how.

We also bring with our pain our hope. Hope for our families and relationships, hope for reconciliation in our world, hope for our communities, and our city, hope for our schools, perhaps even hope for our church.

Rosaria Butterfield says, “We may never know the treacherous journey that people have taken to land in the pew next to us,” and I would extend that to say we may never know the joy and the worry the pain and the hope that the people seated next to us and the pew bring with them.

So, Paul spoke to the early church in Ephesus. He was speaking to them about what it is that they bring with them into their worship. I had a church member just in the narthex before worship say that he has attended that place in Ephesus, seeing where it was that that young church would gather together with the acoustics perfect. They would gather in that place, not on pews like these. They're probably on stone. They would be seated, and Paul wanted them to know that they were not coming to that place in a vacuum. He wanted them to recognize and appreciate the things that they brought with them into community. So he begins in the text that we just read from Ephesians . He begins with the attitudes that they bring with them. We all bring different attitudes. Paul encourages the early church in a particular way. He encourages them to bring with them an attitude that is humble, and gentle, and patient, to bring with them an attitude that would bear with one another in love, an attitude that would make every effort to maintain the spirit of unity in the bond of peace.

He knows they're coming with some sort of attitude. So, what does it need to look like, and what does it need to be? He starts by telling them explaining to them what it should look like. Then he reminds them, that early follower group, that they, whether they know it or not, bring with them unity. When Paul said unity, he meant that all things are united. So, he says there is “one body and one spirit church. There is one hope and one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.” You might have brought with you to this place a spirit of separateness. You might think that you've only traveled here by yourself, but the reality is that any thought of separateness is a myth. You bring to this place unity, he says. And then he gets specific. He says but each of you even in your unity have

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different gifts, and you've brought them with you like superpowers. Lucy, you have a lot of superpowers. I'd say prayer is one of them, too, that you could add to the list. You bring with you different gifts Paul says.

And then he gets specific. He says the Spirit of God has equipped you, the church in Ephesus, in particular ways. Some will be apostles, which for us in the Greek means those who will be sent, some of you will be willing to travel perhaps to Cuba or to some other place where we do outreach, some of you will be willing to take the time to get on a plane and go. He says some of you will be apostles. You'll be sent to different places. Some of you are prophets, ones who speak on behalf of the divine. Others of you are evangelists, one called to bring good news, and others of you are pastors. There's not just one pastor amongst us, indeed, anyone who shepherds and cares for their neighbor cares for sheep in the fold of God, that's a pastor. Then, he says finally some of you are teachers. Perhaps you do that in your daily life as well, but you have a gift for connecting with people and you can teach and shape lives in ways that you scarcely imagine. The question, though, is there for the people in Ephesus to ask why have the people been given these particular gifts, for what purpose? Paul says is at least twofold.

The church has been given all of these gifts, apostles, and prophets, evangelists, and pastors, and teachers, to equip the saints for the works of ministry, and then, and, even in the midst of that, to build up the body of Christ. So, each of those seated in the pews that day hearing the reading of Paul's letter would have recognized themselves in in one of the dimensions of the gifts that he described, and then they will have noticed as he goes forward in the letter, that the purpose of that gift is to equip those saints for the work of ministry and to build up the body of Christ. They might ask for how long must we do this. I taught Sunday school when my kids were really young. I don't want to do that anymore. I've been doing it for a really long time, they might say. Until all of us come to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God to maturity, Paul says. And to the full measure, the stature of Christ Jesus. So, a long time Paul says.

I was thinking about these different ways in which we are equipped, but I was thinking about y'all seated in your pews this week when I read a story from one of my favorite authors, Justin McRoberts. He has a couple different prayer books that have been incredibly formative for me, one of them is *40 Days With Prayer*, and in between those prayers he tells short stories. Here's one of them. It's about a traveler and a companion and for me it spoke to the people that you are seated next to in your pew this day.

A traveler and his companion were preparing for a long journey. In preparation, the traveler packed a second coat his companion watching him asked why are you bringing a second coat. The traveler responded I will need it. The traveler then packed a second pair of shoes, and his companion asked why are you bringing a second pair of shoes. I will need them, he says. He packs extra food, two of every kind

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of food he brings along. Why are you bringing two of every kind of food? I will need it, he says. Perhaps. Like you as I read the story this week, think you know where it's going. The traveler's companion finally set his small bag down and said look how heavy your load is. Mine is light. I have but one coat, one pair of shoes, and just enough food for the days that we will be walking together. Why do you need so much? And the traveler said because your coat is old and thin, and your shoes are old and worn, and having walked with you quite a number of miles, I also know that you can grow quite hungry. Confounded, the companion said, but when I asked you about these things, you told me that you would need them, not that I would need them. The traveler said you are my companion so long as we walk together. There is no difference between your needs and my own.

I thought about it this week. I came in here and spent a little time just seated in different pews, and I thought about what it means that the people seated next to you are indeed companions on your journey. You might not even know their names, you might have just read it in the friendship pad as it was passed to you or back, or you might know them better than anyone else in the entire world knows them. But it strikes me that if the pew or the place where we are seated is the forever peace of the body of Christ, known as Idlewild Presbyterian Church. If it is, indeed that, then our needs are inextricably tied to each other. So long as we travel together there is no difference between your needs and the needs of your neighbor. Each week I spend a few moments contemplating what I bring with me, and I spend a few moments contemplating perhaps what you bring with you. And I wonder have you ever imagined how many people have been seated where you are seated this morning?

Have you ever imagined what those people brought with them to this place? What joy or worry, what pain or hope was seated right where you are this morning? Because as Jeanene rightly pointed out, "It's not about the pew it's about the people."

So what is it that the people of God do in these pews? We pray together, we contemplate God's word, we sing together with joy, we learn together, we grieve and even celebrate together, we sometimes weep, and we sometimes rejoice. We are encouraged, therefore, by the apostle Paul, to take a certain posture when we come into this place, to bring with us a certain attitude one of humility and gentleness, one of patience that might birth the spirit and the bond of peace amongst us. We are reminded that any idea that we came to this place alone is a myth. Indeed, each of us is bound up in the body of Christ and united in ways we can scarcely imagine. We are invited to reflect each of us on the unique gifts that the Spirit of God has equipped us with. Some perhaps apostles, others prophets, other teachers, others pastors. Each of us equipped in different ways to be about the ministry because what happens in these pews is that we practice. We practice here for a short time on a Sunday morning how we are supposed to live and be in the world. We practice that the people who are really close to us are our companions on the journey.

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Perhaps the people standing behind us are in front of us at line at Kroger, are parked beside us at a stoplight, perhaps the people that we will pass in the hallways at work or school, they are our companions, and we practice here what it means to love and to care so that we can go out and do it better and together. Finally, we are built in love, at least that's what Paul says. That in our gathering we are built in love so that we might help participate in God's building the world in love. So, we take our place in these pews so that we might grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. For in Christ the whole body is joined and knit together by every ligament, and it is equipped. Some apostles, others prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, some teachers, because each of us, when we are working properly, promote the body's growth in building itself up in love. So, beloved, we must return to this place each time. We must return to the pew in which we find ourselves this day, or perhaps one close to us, until we can see the full stature of Christ, until the whole body together is built up in love.

So how long might that take you might ask? My answer would be I imagine, it'll take forever. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.