

After last month's sermon series, I went back to the lectionary scripture as I prayed and planned ahead for the upcoming sermons. The Ephesians lections jumped out at me. Each Sunday in August, a different passage in Ephesians gives particular instructions on how to walk the walk. Last Sunday, we talked about the importance of walking the walk. I love how the Holy Spirit works this way. For this Sunday and for all the Sundays in August, we will talk about specific areas in how to walk the walk, so a spontaneous sermon series evolved, which I will call, *A Letter to Live By*.

Ephesians is a letter written by Paul to the people of Ephesus, which is modern-day Turkey. Paul was in prison, yet he didn't let that prevent him from continuing his ministry. Even though he could no longer travel around, his letters were sent out in his place. These letters gave instructions on how to live a new life in Christ, and this was his way of building up the body of Christ.

I received a letter one time from my mother that reminded me of Paul's tone & directness used in his letters. I was five years old when she was diagnosed with stage 3, triple negative breast cancer. If you know anything about the different types of cancer, you know this is a nasty one. Triple negative is so aggressive and was often a death sentence. Treatments have gotten better since the '70's, but my mother went through so many rounds of chemo and radiation that just didn't work. She was out of options, so her last hope was coming out here to the cancer clinic in Tijuana. My brother and I stayed with my grandmother, and my mother would write me letters.

I have one here that gave me instructions, similar to Paul's letters. After conveying her feelings for me and all the niceties of their experience, she asked me very specifically to make the right choices in my behavior. I was eight years old, by the

way, when I received this letter. She wrote: "Please try to obey Gam and not fight with Chad while we're gone. I'm depending on you to do your part to help during this time in our lives. Remember what I asked you to do each night, because God answers prayers."

Wow. I must've been a real stinker, disobeying my grandmother and fighting with my brother. And, I believe it. My brother and I fought all the time. But, now, I can hear the desperation in my mother's voice in this letter. That she lacked the strength to deal with our petty fights, and she desperately needed God to help her through this. I hear that same tone in Paul's voice.

My mother needed my brother and I to unify, to stop fighting with each other and become one unified family who, together, would fight the disease that was threatening to rip us apart. And, this is Paul's message for this passage. He gives strict guidance for the people to come together, in love, to be one unified body, so that they can overcome the disease of divisiveness that is threatening to rip apart the body of Christ.

There are three parts to this long passage for Paul's message of unity. Before we unpack that, I'll give you some backstory. Paul knew the Ephesians. He lived among them for three years and developed close relationships with them. He knew about the petty fights. He knew what they were dealing with in Ephesus politically, religiously, and commercially.

Ephesus was located at the intersection of two ancient trade routes, a crossroads, if you will, just as it had become a crossroads for the people. Jews and Greeks lived in the city with their different political and religious views. They both benefitted from Ephesus being a tourist city that attracted people for three things: The Temple of Artemis, the fertility goddess, the 25,000-seat amphitheater, and the stadium

where wild animal fights were held. Their livelihood rested on this tourism, so they were often in competition with one another. It had become a divisive atmosphere.

Paul knew their struggles and wrote a letter with instructions on how to live together despite their divisiveness. He reminded them that despite their differences, they were one body of Christ, with Christ as the head of the body. All our differences are gifts of grace given by Christ so that we come together to use those gifts to serve as one body. We should focus on the purpose of the differences, to unify the body, instead of the differences themselves that could divide the body.

The first part of this passage focuses on our calling. In order to be unified, Paul begged them to lead a life worthy of their calling. You may be saying to yourself that you don't know your calling, and I am asked quite a bit, does everyone have a calling? Yes, everyone has a calling and many callings at one time or over the course of our lives. I am called to be a pastor, but I am also called to be a wife and a mother. I am called to be a friend and a sister and a daughter. I look at my actions, my choices, and ask myself, "Am I leading a life worthy of my calling as a wife? Am I making the right choices as a mother?"

In the grand scheme of things, Paul is saying in this passage, that the people are called to be the body of Christ and to build-up the body of Christ. That is our calling. We carry it out in the many roles that we're called to. We are called to be the body of Christ and build-up the body of Christ, as parents, grandparents, spouses, siblings, friends, and the specific jobs we hold. You may not be called to be an "apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, or teacher," as Paul listed here, but you are called to be the body and build-up the body in whatever job you are called to do.

Paul gives instructions on how to do this: "Be humble, gentle, patient, love and support each other, and make every effort to maintain the unity with peace?" (v. 1-3). We live a life worthy of our calling if we are these things. If we're humble and gentle and patient and support each other and maintain every effort of peace, we will be a unified body of Christ. When we're arrogant, harsh, hurtful, impatient, could care less about each other, then we are divided. And, when we're divided, we're not living a life worthy of our call as the body of Christ.

The second part of this passage seems kind of confusing, almost like it was just stuck in for theological backing. Paul was a scholar, so it is not surprising that he would use a theological promise as evidence to back up his claim. In verses 8-10 he points out that Jesus is the same person who descended to earth and ascended to heaven. He did this so he could fill all things. Not just heaven or not just earth. He fills all things. Nothing is off limits. Jesus has the power to go anywhere to pull people together.

Paul talks about Christ's descending and ascending to illustrate that he is "above all and through all and in all" (v.6) even in our divisiveness. Some readers get a little upset over verse 10 that in some translations, suggests Jesus even "descended to the lower parts of earth," which some interpret as hell. They just can't imagine that Jesus went to hell. But, Paul explains that no place is off limits for Christ, even our personal hells. We may think that we're alone in our circumstances or the pits we're stuck in that divide us. But, that's not true. Jesus loves us so much that he meets us in those hellish places. He goes wherever he needs to go to reach us. He fills those places. He is above them, he is below them, he is in them, and he will walk with us through them.

Often, the body of Christ is divided because we allow something to come between us. We are stuck and think that there's no way forward. But, Paul sticks in this very important theological promise, that, despite the differences or the conflict, we can be united because we have Christ with us -- above us, below us, in us, and through us. He is the glue that fills in all the cracks of our divisiveness. Jesus is what unifies us.

The last part of the scripture instructs us to grow up. No more baby Christians. Verses 14-16 tells us when we're immature in our faith, we hold back the entire body because we are prone to be punked. We fall for the crafty schemes and false teachers because we just don't know any better, and those things could pull us away from the body. Paul says that we must grow our faith to avoid being pulled in different directions, yet we should also grow together as one body of Christ, with each part knit together and working properly.

We all have a job to do. We all are a body part that works together. When an athlete is training for a marathon, he or she builds up every muscle in the body to work together to reach the finish line. I've never seen a runner with a beer belly. Yes, you need strong legs to run, but if you have a flabby core, it will hold back the entire body.

When each part of the body of Christ is working properly, we are working together. We are unified for one task. We are living a life worthy of our calling, by being loving to each other, by remembering that Christ is with us and unifies us, and by being mature in our faith. No more baby Christians. No more stuck Christians. No more unloving Christians. We must live a life worthy of our call to be a unified body of Christ.