

Ephesians IV
Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

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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.

One of my favorite artists is Kiki Suarez, a German born psychotherapist who lives and works in Chiapas, Mexico. Her paintings, large or small, are explosions of color. Ted and I have been lucky enough to collect several of her pieces over the years. Some of them very tiny, only 3"x3". One of my favorites is a little painting about 8"x6" that hangs in our bathroom. It depicts a rural scene. There is a man seated on one hill and a woman seated on another. They have blissful expressions on their faces and as they sit, they lean toward one another. The title of the painting is "An Inclination."

I love the message of this little piece and I have used it as a sermon illustration at weddings. The artist uses the body posture of the couple to depict their orientation in life: they are inclined toward one another. Each tends in the direction of the other, apparently thinking of the other. It is a wonderful metaphor for how married life should be: each decision I make from how I spend money to how I spend time must be made in the context of my inclination toward Ted. Or put another way, my inclination toward Ted should shape the whole of my life so that our marriage is strengthened by the choices I make. Every time I look at the painting I am reminded to tend in the direction of my marriage.

This little painting can also be an image for us in our life together as holy community. Please look with me at the very first line of our reading from Ephesians for today: "I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." It sounds like normal Christian exhortation. But we miss something in the English that would have been clear in the Greek. The "you" here, as it is through most of the letter, is plural. So it is better read something like: "I beg you all to lead "a life" worthy of the calling to which you all have been called." He doesn't say, I beg you all to lead lives....he says very clearly "a life." The author is telling us, as holy community, to lead together *one* life. Wow. Think on that for a minute.

It is our tendency, I think, to each lead our own lives and then gather here for nurture and belonging. Doing good things together. Loving each other, even. But then going back out to lead disparate lives. I think Paul has something quite different in mind here. He suggests that we understand ourselves as holy community, living “a life.” So in our workaday world we think... is this decision consistent with life in my holy community. Not the way we might ask ourselves “is this moral” or “what would Jesus do.” More like: does my decision, my action affirm the one life we share at St. Barnabas. Am I being hospitable to my co-workers? Am I making room at the table, at work, in my neighborhood, at my school for one more person, even if I don’t know them or understand them? Do I ask, and then use, people’s names? In everything I do, am I inclined toward my holy community?

If we doubt this is Paul’s intent, we need only read a little further on: “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...”

We don’t worship *gods*. We don’t customize baptisms to suit our own understanding or convenience. There are not *spirits* divided among us. We are washed in one baptism and enlivened by one Spirit. *We* are one because *God* is one and together we are called to *one* table and *one* life in Christ.

Let me caution you, this is not the same thing as thinking with one brain. This does not mean we become automatons who don’t have our own ideas or opinions. But it does mean that what we do-whatever we do-we do for the good of the holy community...whether we understand that to be St. Barnabas, the ELCA or the whole Christian church on earth. Please allow me one more example from marriage. One rule of thumb that works well in marriage is that a couple should never fight to win. That is, each person should not have their own agenda supersede the good of the marriage or of the couple. ‘Fighting to win’ means that someone has to lose. Why would you want to make the person you love lose? And if you are a better fighter, eventually you look across the table at that person and wonder why you would want to stay married to a loser. Or, for that matter, to a person who always has to win. So in marriage, when you fight, fight instead to resolution. Fight for your marriage. Fight for what gives life to the couple or the family. It changes the way you fight when instead of fighting each other, you fight together for the sake of the one life you share. There is still the opportunity to express your own ideas and see your values lived out in your life together. But it is not done at the expense of the other.

So it is in the church. Everyone brings ideas and opinions and different gifts. Everyone wants to see what they value lived out in our life together. And we fight about things once in awhile. It may not feel like a real “fight” but often we come to a discussion with opposing views and have to decide what to do next. We may proceed with the discussion based on the premise that one side, one idea has to win. Paul calls us to a different kind of life together where we set aside our desire to “win” or get our way and instead ask “what is in the best interest of the community.” What solution serves the one life we are called to live? What solution leaves room for everyone at the table?

It is a very different way to think about being church. It is a very different way to think about being community. Paul must have understood that what he was asking the churches in Ephesus to do was really new and strange, quite apart from the way they had experienced life in other communities thus far. Because the rest of Paul's letter is practical instruction about what this looks like and how to pull it off.

He first tells them that they are not left alone to discern the Spirit and the will of God in working this all out. Gifts have been given to help lead and guide the holy community in leading "a life" together. There will be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers...all given gifts for one purpose. For the purpose of equipping the saints for the work of ministry. For the purpose of building up the body of Christ. These apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are each uniquely called by the one Spirit into one body, one hope, one faith. Even now, they continue to work among God's holy communities and will do so until such time as we mature into the full stature of Christ.

That is the other bit of reassurance that Paul offers. There is no expectation that we are supposed to be getting this right right now. Clearly, we aren't there yet. Instead we live as a *growing* community. We *aspire* to "a life" worthy of the calling to which we collectively have been called; to unity in Christ...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." Inclined toward one another.

Living "a life" together in holy community we 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."

This is an exciting vision that Paul casts for community in Christ. And it is as counter-cultural a vision today as it was 2000 years ago. Christ calls us constantly away from thinking *as* the world thinks into a way of thinking *about* the world that is hopeful and mature. No longer, as Paul says, tossed to and fro but grounded firmly in one body and one Spirit, just as we were called to the one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Amen.