

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2015
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Building up the Church

For several weeks this summer we will have a Sunday reading from the Letter to the Ephesians. St. Paul is traditionally recognized as the author, although it's quite possible one of Paul's colleagues wrote this letter sometime after Paul's death. The writing style, vocabulary and structure are very different from the letters we know Paul wrote, such as Romans, Corinthians, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians.

And this letter does not seem to be written to just one community in Ephesus. There's very little personal information. It reads more like a sermon or a treatise. Most likely it was written to several faith communities in this area of modern-day Turkey and given the name of the first century capitol of the region, Ephesus.

The letter does express all of Paul's theology, Christology, and ecclesiology. It is written to encourage and support these early churches. Paul's intent is to help these communities grow. Ephesians' main theme is the building up of the Church. We could even say this letter gives us "high church" at its best. So I hope you will hear a couple of more sermons on Ephesians in the weeks ahead. And I hope you will spend your own time reading and reflecting upon Ephesians. What does the letter say to each one of us at this point in our spiritual journey?

At every baptism we begin the liturgy with an opening affirmation from the words in chapter 4, "*There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...*" (4:4-6). A few verses later we read the concise definition of the Church's mission, "*the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...*" (4:12). We are the "*saints.*" Each one of us needs "*equipping*" to help build up the Church. Of course, St. Paul was not writing about constructing buildings or building up budgets or creating programs.

Paul was writing about building up relationships – people with people, each person with God. These relationships are not dependent upon nor defined by nationality, race, gender, social status, age, wealth, or politics. The relationships Paul was concerned about are what connects people who know, who love, who try to follow Jesus.

In today's reading from chapter 2, Paul tells us about the Gentiles who have come to know, to love, and to follow Jesus. There was great animosity between Jew and Gentile. The first Christians came from the "*chosen people,*" the Jews. But Jews believed that Gentiles were "*unclean.*" They were considered "*aliens,*" "*strangers,*" those "*far off.*"

Peter's great vision changed all that as we read about in Acts, chapter 10. So Paul preached to Jews and Gentiles spread out across the Mediterranean world. And Jews and Gentiles lived in community together, sharing their belief in Jesus Christ. These shared relationships helped the Church to grow, to be built up. As much as the world wants to define

us by our differences, Christ wants us to be one, united in knowing God's love. And the way to unity is through reconciliation, understanding, and forgiveness.

We might ask ourselves what needs to be reconciled in our own lives? We know the reconciliation needed in our nation, in our world. What about our relationships? Our families? Our church?

Each and every day I seem to be involved in some degree of conflict, some hostility, some division, some misunderstanding. Some days Christ's call for unity, reconciliation and forgiveness seems far off, maybe impossible. Anger, competition, and the need to control block reconciliation. We all experience some "walls" of hostility. Yet in Christ we are called to help people come together to forgive, to reconcile, to be united.

Unity, reconciliation, forgiveness build up the church because we can discover and share peace. Paul mentions "*peace*" four times in the verses we read today from Ephesians. Paul writes that peace is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus brought peace to his disciples on the first Easter night. Our liturgy has the peace at the very center of our celebration. This is Christ's peace built upon reconciliation and unity.

This is the message we now hear and see in the work of Pope Francis. This is the lesson of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's work in South Africa. Recently we saw this peace and unity in the Charleston, South Carolina parish that experienced great evil with the senseless shooting of nine members during a bible study.

If St. Paul did write Ephesians, he probably wrote it while under house arrest in Rome waiting for his own execution. It's amazing that Paul could write about peace as he faced his own death. It's amazing he could write about peace to communities facing persecution from the Roman Empire. Paul reminds us that Christ's peace can be experienced even when we are challenged by suffering, evil, and death.

I hope people who come to Grace Church find unity, reconciliation, and peace. I hope we all experience the building up of our relationships in Christ. Certainly our J2A group showed new growth in relationships in Christ during their pilgrimage to Germany. Certainly our mission team to New Jersey also experienced this spiritual growth. And today we celebrate the ministry of our Altar Guild, a ministry built upon unity and peace. So, we give thanks for these gifts, for the building up of the Church, and we pray that we can continue to share Christ's unity and peace with all who come here.

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 23
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56