

Pastor's Message – 8/1/2021

In Love Worship Series -

Build Up *in Love*

Ephesians 4:1-16

It doesn't really make any difference, whether you're cooking or cleaning, baking or building, gardening or repairing – any complicated task requires any number of tools and, not having the right tool, makes the job difficult or even impossible. Every tool is important. In baking, the thermometer is as important as the measuring cup. In building something, the hammer is as important as the nail. The sponge is as important as the bucket. Doesn't make any difference; every tool is important.

We're starting a worship series today, a 4-Sunday series called *In Love*, based on the latter chapters of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. We'll start it today, then take a break next week when I'm gone, and resume on the 15th. We're going to be focusing on “**building up in love, living in love, giving thanks in love, and, finally, moving in love**”. Today, on this first Sunday, Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, is focusing on the need for unity—not that all will be the same, but that all people have different gifts that complement each other and can be used in building up the entire church in love.

In the sixteen verses we are focusing on today, Paul tells the Ephesians and us that God has called us to unity, which is a divine gift. Unity, however, does not mean uniformity, but rather diversity and dynamism in a body of people who have been variously gifted, so that they may grow into maturity by developing their gifts, and building up in love. Building up is a major theme of this “practical” portion of the epistle. But as much as the author tells us where we're going, questions immediately rise in our mind:

Who does the building up?

What is being built up?

How do we accomplish this building up?

What is growing, building up, in love all about?

In many a home where children live, perhaps in your homes when you had children, there was one particular door frame with little penciled marks on it or maybe a wall chart. These marks record the growing height of each child. Over the years, the children can gaze at that rough ladder of pencil marks, with the birthdays scrawled beside them. It is the measure of their progress toward full stature in life. That doesn't work so well with the building up of a church or growth of individual members of a congregation. It's hard to make pencil marks to chart spiritual growth.

I suspect that most everyone here would agree that we are all children of God, but people of different ages will respond differently to the language that Paul

uses in our Bible reading today. He writes toward the end of the passage, “Then we will no longer be like children . . .” His images of “gifts,” “growing,” and “mature” will mean one thing to children and quite another to older adults. It might be more helpful to speak of “babies” rather than “children.”

There is a difference in being a baby and growing up or maturing. There are some truths about babies that we can identify: (1) Babies pay attention only to what is directly in front of them. Therefore, they are easily persuaded. If you want a baby to stop playing with a toy, you may be able to simply replace it with a different toy. (2) Babies think only of themselves. They see themselves as the center of the world, with everyone and everything arranged around it to meet its need.

The goal for churches and for followers of Jesus is transformation! We are called to reach maturity (v. 13). We are called to maturity, not only individually, but rather all of us together as one corporate mature person (cf. 2:15–16). Individualism is a sign of childishness; unity is a sign of maturity. The maturity of being “fully formed in the likeness” of Christ requires us to stay together. Our transformation is realized only in relation to one another; it is social rather than individual.

So, what does it look like for a person to become mature in Christ (until we stand mature in His teachings and fully formed in the likeness of the Anointed, i.e., Jesus” v.13)? What would it look like for a church to be built up in love (v. 16)?

How can this church, how can your church, help you be built up in love?

What are some ways that you can build others up in love (at church, at home, at work)?

One of the ways our founder, John Wesley, spoke of this work of building up is in the metaphor of the “new life.” This metaphor emphasizes that God not only forgives us, but God also desires we **grow** in abundant living or holiness, i.e., being built up in love.

We can call it spiritual maturity — it is one of our foundational beliefs — that “by grace you have been saved through faith,” as Paul writes earlier in this letter (2:8). As Methodists, we wholeheartedly affirm this belief and also insist that the good news does not end there. God is constantly working within us to fit us for abundant living or Christian maturity. One image for this is that God’s love is expanding our capacity to love God and love others through acts of compassion. So, while Methodists might not use terms like “saved” or “being saved” as often as other denominations, it is not that we disagree with those terms. Rather, those are starting points for living the new life God has for us, as we mature into more fully seasoned disciples of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 4:1-16 stresses the theological theme of unity, grounded in the centrality of Christ. When an individual or community sets its focus on Christ, the individual remains unique in their gifts and talents (v. 11) as well as their needs.

Each individual uses their diverse gifts for the good of the whole, “so that God’s people would be thoroughly equipped to minister and build up the body of Christ” (v. 12).

And what is this equipping? It further underlines the focus on unity: “The equipping is not about accumulating skills or knowledge. Rather, the word ‘equip’ comes from the Greek noun *katartismos*, meaning ‘the setting of a bone.’ Its root meaning is from a verb meaning ‘to reconcile,’ ‘to restore,’ ‘to create,’ ‘to prepare.’ To grow in one’s ministry, therefore, is to align oneself with God’s intentions, both individually and as a church.”

An important aspect of growing and maintaining the gift of unity is the proper use and encouragement of individual gifts. No matter the size, every person’s gift and offering is important and essential. Our passage today identifies a number of the individual gifts that may be received: emissaries, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers; not as a way to focus on individuals, but as a way to emphasize the role of these gifts in the life of the whole community. Each person is to share their individual gifts with the community. Thus, all within the community gain strength from each other. This is how the community as a whole grows and matures and is built up.

Paul’s writing asserts that Christians are created to live in community with one another. This requires a certain level of spiritual maturity that we can reach only when we act toward one another in the spirit of Christian love. As part of this 4-Sunday series, it will be just as important to focus upon “community” as “unity.” It will be a good time to reflect on what the church is doing to:

Build one another up *in love*?

Live *in love*?

Give thanks *in love*?

Move *in love*?

A few years ago, Google released a searchable database of 5.2 million books published since 1500. Researchers soon discovered that, between 1960 and 2008, individualistic words increasingly overshadowed communal ones. The usage of ‘kindness’ and ‘helpfulness’ dropped by 56%, even as ‘modesty’ and ‘humbleness’ dropped by 52%. Our language reflects our lives. Phrases like ‘community’ and ‘common good’ lost in popularity to ‘I can do it myself’ and ‘I come first.’”

Humility reminds us of the “power of the many,” all the people who have helped us, or who continue to influence us: “We have a greater impact on each other than we think.... Everything we do ripples out and affects each strand in the web of our connections.” Humility also calls us to “the power of one,” the opportunity to use our own gifts -- not for gain, but for service.

“God has given to each of us grace in full measure,” Paul writes. It is not always easy to see ourselves as a person that God has gifted. We don’t always acknowledge or give thanks for the gifts we have been given or the gift of who we

are and who we can become as disciples of Jesus and children of God. We sometimes fail to see that God has a purpose for giving gifts. Consider again the partial listing of gifts in our Bible reading today. Those gifts and the other gifts that God gives to everyone help to build the body of Christ, i.e., the church. Each individual and the church as a whole is called to build up and be built up as the body of Christ.

For us to be built up and for the church to grow into maturity requires a common sense of purpose. Jesus must be the center of the church. The church of believers must be connected with Christ as well as with each other. This unity is not uniformity, however. There can be diversity within unity. There will be differences – different gifts and different priorities – but with a shared focus on Christ, members can work together for the growth of the whole.

To live together well, the church must aspire to certain characteristics which Paul writes about today. The church is called to be humble, gentle, patient and tolerant in an atmosphere thick with love, with peace binding you together.

When we live out of our basic identity and purpose, other people are encouraged, blessed, challenged, and built up in love. As we learn to love God more deeply and love our neighbors more compassionately, our lives will naturally be attractive to others and be a sign of God's work in us and in the world. What will your next interaction with others in your church and beyond look like? How will humility, gentleness, patience and tolerance mark your contribution to peace in the church of Jesus Christ?

It may seem strange to think about snow and snowflakes in the midst of the very warm weather we have been having, but have you ever wondered what a snowflake weighs. It reminds me of a story.

“Tell me the weight of a snowflake”, said the robin to the dove.

“Why, it weighs nothing at all,” replied the dove.

“In that case,” the robin went on, “I must tell you a marvelous story. I was sitting on a branch of a fir tree, close to its trunk,” the robin began, “when snow began to fall...not heavily, not in a raging blizzard, no just like a dream without any violence. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the needles and twigs of my branch. I reached the number 3,741,952.

Then when the 3,741,953 snowflake dropped onto the branch weighing nothing as you say, the branch suddenly broke off.”

With that the robin flew away.

The dove thought about the story and said to herself, “I sometimes think that all my efforts and the little I can do make no difference. We might think they are nothing at all, but if we put all our efforts together, great things are possible.”

Snowflakes are frail, but if enough of them get together they can stop traffic. The exercise of just one gift can be enough to grow and build up a church *in love*.