

**August 8, 2021 Rev. Kathryn McGinnis**

Let us pray,

Soften us, God, so that we may approach your word without pride or rigidity. Show us, Jesus, what it means to belong to each other and to you. Stir us up, Spirit, that these words may be made incarnate in our lives.

Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from Ephesians - starting at chapter 4 verse 25 through chapter 5 verse 2. Listen now for the word of the lord.

**25** So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. **26** Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, **27** and do not make room for the devil. **28** Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. **29** Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. **30** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. **31** Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, **32** and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. **1** Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, **2** and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Our scripture for this week takes us back to Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

I preached from Ephesians chapter 2 a few weeks ago, where we got to know just how radical this new church community formed there really was.

It was a church made up of both Jews and Gentiles, (two groups who culturally hated each other).

And they were worshipping together, breaking bread together.

And in doing so, by doing this, forming this community - Christ broke down the walls that had divided them, tore down those barriers and gave them a new identity in Jesus Christ. An identity founded in unity.

The overwhelming theme in the letter to Ephesians as a whole - a letter that was likely intended to be circulated to more groups than just the Ephesians - is unity.

Unity in Christ. Unity as the body of Christ.

The scripture that leads right up to our passage today, Ephesians 4: 22-24, states that in this new unity, the Ephesians were taught to put away their former way of life - their old

selves - their life without Christ - and to clothe themselves with their new self - created according to the likeness of God - their new life with Christ.

As the Ephesians have now been stripped of their former selves to a new baptism and life with Christ, they now must live in to the unity of the Church. Unity as the body of Christ.

They are connected to each others as members of the same whole and how they live their life must reflect that. honor it. Live it.

It's a simple but also difficult concept to face: that our faith doesn't stop with Baptism. In baptism we have stripped ourselves, yes, and clothed ourselves with Christ - but faith is an ongoing action. Baptism is an ongoing action.

We too, are called to continuously live the unity of the church.

But, The question is how: how do we live into the unity intended for us: unity as the Body of Christ.

Well, we're in luck. We don't have to search or ponder for long, because - our scripture today is a bit of rarity in the Bible, we immediately get a direct answer to the question of HOW to live into the unity of the church.

We get a whole list of ways we live into that unity, ways we live in unity as the body of Christ.

That list is our scripture for today. And it's list that is rooted in our collective connectivity. As members of the body of Christ, we are connected to each other, and how we live effects those connections. And so we read this list through the lens of unity in connection to each other.

The first on the list is speaking the truth: let everyone speak the truth with their neighbor.

What a simple, exciting, and scary concept all at once. Why must we do it? Because we are connected to one another. If we lie, or maybe better stated if we hold back the truth of who we are, we distance ourselves from each other - we threaten that connection. We need to speak the truth to each other because we are all part of one another.

The other side of speaking the truth is hearing it when spoken.

WE must listen attentively to each other - and honor and love the truth spoken. Because it is a truth that strengthens the body of Christ.

The next is anger. Anger is a tricky subject -even seen here in this scripture. Do not be quick to dismiss anger. Anger itself fuels change and action.

As a community, we should have anger for the injustices we see daily, and use that anger to come together for change.

It's when our anger separates us, threatens that connection. that it separates us from God.

The list continues. and in each and every way, it causes us to be vulnerable, to be authentic, and to live our lives through the lens of not ourselves, but the unity of the church, the unity of the body of Christ.

We're so conditioned to paving our own path, carving out our own future, it's perhaps both remarkable and terrifying (just like everything on this list really)

That all Christ really wants is for to be the body of Christ. Maybe it's as simple as that.

The jews and gentiles in the church in Ephesus - I'm a little jealous of them. They came together to form a new community, and then they were given this list - this guidance on how to live this new life - life as a church - life with Christ.

A clear before and after. Their old selves, their old life, their new selves, their new life.

We're not so lucky. Our church is anything but new.

This is a Presbyterian church - so i would guess a lot of us here were baptized as infants. It's hard to understand you need to start living a new life in Christ when you're a baby.

But even for those of you who were perhaps baptized later in life - you joined a church that has been thousands of years in the making where the spirit of newness has often wore off.

So what does it mean to hear this scripture thousands of years after it was written, and in many ways fail to see it come to life - lost to ways our world, our culture - our own actions that always separate us??

The biggest, boldest charge of this passage is the final one - be imitators of God. Live in a christlike love as God's children.

It often seems impossible - for we are not God. We are not Christ. But God knows that. There is hope. And it's right there in the text.

You see "be imitators of God" - its translation from the Greek implies an ongoing process.

It could also be translated as 'keep on becoming imitators of God.' Keep on. Keep trying.

Perhaps Martin Luther describes it best: "This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed."

We, this community, this body of Christ - we're not yet what we're supposed to be, what we will be, but we're on our way. And the words from Ephesians today - they're meant to help us on the journey - but ultimately it is Christ that will get us there.

In the divided world we live in today, I find myself continuously grateful for the letter to the Ephesians. If the Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus could be united together in Christ - perhaps there is hope for this world too.

That hope is rooted in Christ - but it is an active hope.

It is a hope that requires we live out the unity of the church - and we do that by speaking truth to one another, having righteous anger, loving and forgiving one another, and ultimately - keep on becoming imitators of Christ.

We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way.

And for that - thanks be to God. Amen.