Building the Body of Christ

This morning we’re beginning a mini-series from the second half of the book of Ephesians. I’ve preached several times from the first half of Ephesians, where the writer shares with wonder the glory and mystery of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ – how “God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our sin, made us alive together through Christ”, how we have been saved by God’s grace, given as a free gift, how God in Christ has broken down all the barriers that existed between us, all the barriers that separated “us” from “them” and made that some were better than another, and by the power of the cross, God has reconciled us both to God and to one another. God in Christ has offered us all grace, making us one with God and so also one with each other. If you take the time to read it, the first half of Ephesians is both mind-blowing and spirit-lifting in terms of what God in Christ has done for us. It describes just how amazing God’s grace is.

The second half of the book, which we begin to read today and which we will be hearing from over the next three weeks, is the “so what” part of the book. “Therefore” the writer says in Ephesians 4:1. In light of all that God has done for us, what does that mean for how we are to live our lives, and especially how are we to live our lives together as the community of those who have received God’s great gift? How are we to live a life “worthy of the calling to which you have been called”?

The session and I have been listening to this morning’s passage together for the past several months. Today, I would like to invite all of you to listen with me to what the Spirit is saying to you, God’s people:

We live in a world and a nation that is split in pieces. We are split along lines of race and ethnicity. We are split along generational lines. We are split along economic lines. We are split along gender lines. We are split along political lines. And in the church, we are split along denominational lines. The fractures are so deep and so clear that it’s hard to figure out how we could possibly come together.

Some of us look for all kinds of strategies, from simply being kind to one another to only hanging out with people you know you agree with to intentional practice of reaching across lines, to figure out how that coming together and forming a community could happen. Others of just give it up as a lost cause, and walk away and look after their own interests and the heck with everyone else. You can’t blame those folks, because experience tells us that left to our own devices and in spite of our own best intention, things – relationships – communities fall apart and people get hurt. Richard Sennett even asks, given the the world we live in, “Is it humane to form soft selves in a hard world?” Shouldn’t we just teach our kids to grow that tough skin that can’t be hurt so they can make it on our own?

There is another option, the option that the writer of Ephesians lays out for us, a call that is given to us as a gift from God. Ephesians tells us to “live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” We have a new life to which we have been called by Jesus Christ, and we have the opportunity and responsibility to live in a different way. Henri Nouwen said, “In a world torn apart by rivalry, anger and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.” The sign of that love is seen in the kind of community we form in the church. It is a community based not in our selves, but in the reconciling, grace-filled love of Jesus Christ. That love supercedes all the divisions between us and makes us one body, one community of Christ.

You hear that drumbeat over and over in this passage:

“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.” The Spirit and our faith create a unity in which we are called to live.

All those differences between us don’t go away. But in Christ, we find a new way of dealing with them. That’s not easy, because the differences are real, and they mean that there are different ways we experience and understand the world around us. A white person and a black person in our society can’t interact with the world in the same way because of the way the world sees and interacts with them. The same thing is true with the differences between the way men and women experience and interact with the world. What we are called to do is not ignore those differences, but recognize them and engage in the difficult conversations that help us recognize the bond of love that exists between us in spite of the divides. Several faith communities near us in Chester, Swarthmore and Wallingford have been doing just that, giving gift cards for coffee for two people from different sides of a divide to sit down and get to know each other, moving beyond superficial conversation to recognize real differences, and moving deeper still, to recognize common bonds.

Some of the differences between us are given to us as gifts from God. Ephesians talks about the variety of gifts God has given us. If we were all alike with the same gifts, it would be like a body that’s just an eye with no arm attached. But God has given each of us a unique gift for ministry that is different from everyone else’s. Ephesians names a few: prophets and evangelists, teachers and pastors. You can name others: elders and deacons, dish washers and door openers, enthusiastic greeters, financial wizards. These gifts aren’t given to us so that one person can be better than another because of their gifts. They are given for one purpose: to give us the tools we need (equipping the saints) to build up the body of Christ.

Now, you don’t have to look at me to know I don’t go in for body building as such. I rarely have darkened the doors of a gym. I get my exercise in other ways. But there are a few things I know about body building. It takes intention. It’s something you undertake on purpose. It takes practice. It’s something that can’t be done in one day. It is the continual repetitions of physical motions not the big one-time fancy exhibition that builds the muscles, one little bit at a time. And it takes attention. It’s not just the time you spend in the gym that makes a difference. You have to pay attention to what you eat and what you do in the rest of your life as well.

Body building in the body of Christ works the same way. If we practice, we build the muscles of faith the same way we build the muscles of our body. It is the continual repetitions of prayer and action that make us stronger. We have to stay focused and intentional about what we are doing, both in our own lives and in our church. We have to pay attention to what God is saying and doing through us both when we’re here for one hour on Sunday morning and through the rest of the week as well.

Body building is not an individual act. We do it together, building one another up, listening to each others’ stories, encouraging one another, sharing what we have learned along the way. Because of our differences, that can be very challenging. Living in community means that inevitably we rub someone the wrong way or that someone else gets on our nerves. Part of the struggle we have in the church is we don’t always deal with conflict very well. Our M.O. tends to be to ignore the differences and be nice to one another until someone can’t take it any more and there’s a big explosion and someone goes away. How can we build the body of Christ in such a way that we can recognize and work through our differences, held together across those divides by the bond we have in Christ?

. We won’t get it right the first time. Sometimes, as was painfully clear in this week’s report on clergy abuse in the Catholic church in Pennsylvania, we get it terribly wrong. That happens when we lose our focus and let what we do become about our own needs and our own power rather than loving others as Christ loved us. But as we practice, like a child just learning to walk, we will learn. Martin Luther wrote,  
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.

By the grace of God, we will reach the time when we are grown up into the image of the one who is our head, Jesus Christ. And even as we stumble along now, we have the opportunity to show the world a different way of living together, a way not marked by divisions, but by a community built on love.