

NO LONGER STRANGERS: Bound Together

Ephesians 4:1-16

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/no-longer-strangers-bound-together/

Recently my dad brought me some papers that he thought I should now store at my house instead of his. In this stash of miscellaneous files, I found a writing assignment from when I was in elementary school. It was a letter to myself from a future me. I had to laugh when I read, "*I'm a fourth grade teacher now...*"

As a child and a teenager, I did not deviate very often from my answer to the question of "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to be a teacher." As college graduation grew close and I experienced some meaningful mission opportunities, I began to ask God a question as I prayed. "Do you want me to teach, or are you calling me into ministry?" I agonized over this question for a long time...until I finally sensed Him saying, "yes... It is not one or the other." So often we try to compartmentalize our callings....when ultimately our calling is to follow Christ.

We have been studying the book of Ephesians the last few weeks in a series called *No Longer Strangers*. Todd Pridemore and Pastor Melissa dug into the first section, and today we begin the 2nd half of this letter from Paul to the church at Ephesus. The book of Ephesians talks about our identity in Christ, and the second half lays out how we respond or behave because of our identity.

In verse 1, it says "Therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called," I have heard many Bible teachers say that we need to pay attention when we come across the word "therefore" in scripture. We ask what is it "there" for? It indicates a connection to what has just happened or been shared and a response. That certainly is the case here. Last week, Pastor Melissa talked about the prayer Paul prayed about understanding the depth and height of His love. We were reminded that God is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. And it is because of this, Paul tells the Ephesians (and us) that a response is needed.

Paul can be described as a passionate person. He did not half-do anything. Before his conversion on the road to Damascus, he was passionate about persecuting the people of The Way....the people who followed Christ. And after his conversion he became passionate about sharing the gospel with Jews and Gentiles alike. He reminds the readers that he is a prisoner in the Lord...that the message he is sharing is worth his suffering....and that prison walls cannot

contain God's message of love, hope, and salvation. Paul is saying, I've just been praying and telling you about the depths of God's love for you....the undeserved measure of grace and forgiveness... the mercy... the power.... and therefore....because of this...

Therefore, I beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called. Paul is pointing out the magnitude and greatness of our Savior. Jesus is worth us living out our calling to follow Him through whatever gifts He has given us. Are you a bus driver? Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to follow Christ. A doctor? A government official? Do you work at a fast food restaurant? Clean bathrooms? Maybe you are an architect or financial advisor. Do you provide care for children or elderly adults? Whatever it is, our response needs to be to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to follow Christ.

As I prepare to teach in a 4th grade classroom once again, I have found myself pondering, "What do I want my students to know?" There's a quote, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." It has always been a primary goal for me as a teacher that my students know how much I care about them. I have found that when our students know how much we care, they begin caring about the things we are teaching them.

I also believe that humans rise to the occasion. If we set high standards, then we may not be perfect but we do better than if the bar is set low. The Olympics are going on right now. Each athlete is setting pretty high standards and goals for themselves.... sometimes to a fraction of a second or tenth of a point. A key part of their success has to do with their minds. Think about Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, arguably one of the greatest gymnasts of all time. Four years ago, she pulled out of some of the Olympic events due to a mental health phenomenon called "Twisties" in which she described mind and body being out of sync. No matter how talented or how hard you have trained, if your mind and body are out of sync....there's a recipe for disaster.

I think Paul is saying here that our mind and body need to be in sync in the manner of how we live out the calling to follow this Jesus who paid the ultimate sacrifice for you and me. In other words, our walk needs to match our talk.

So, how do we do that?

We pick up in verse 2: with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: (Ephesians 4:2b - 3a)

In First Kids, we memorized the fruits of the Spirit from Paul's letter to the Galatians.....love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Paul is sharing the same message here.... It was his letter to a different church but it held the same meaning. Because of that great love we receive from Christ as expressed in the first half of Ephesians, we should be bearing fruit. Our response to His love should match....and point others to the glory of God.

Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That's not always easy, is it? We live in a world that is pretty divisive. That may be an understatement. Too often, we become a community of "us" and "them". With advances in technology, we have become even more polarized. We listen or read news with the slant that matches our own thoughts. Our preferences in products are noted and the ads that come across our computer screens are tailored to them. We can easily find opinions that match ours and immerse ourselves in comments, articles, podcasts, Facebook posts, etc., that affirm "our side" whatever that may be. And too often anyone who differs or disagrees with us not only is deemed "wrong" but they also become strangers to us.

How can we change this?

I think it begins by looking for opportunities to get to know the people around you and intentionally learning from others. Our youth group spent time on our recent mission trip to Cincinnati getting to know residents at a nursing home. We interviewed the residents about their life stories, listened to words of advice, laughed about funny stories shared, and began to know residents as individual people with names. When we returned for the concert the following night, our people were waiting for us! They had decorated the room and arrived early and stayed late. I watched as the residents scanned the group for their special person singing about God's goodness. I watched as some of the residents prayed over our students, and I watched as some of our students were moved to tears by the relationship offered by these adults. Learning names of people goes a long way. And as we learn names and personalities, we begin to care more about people themselves than about whether we agree with everything they say or believe.

Unity does not necessarily mean uniformity. This week, I attended a couple of worship services at a camp meeting near Smithton. This long running annual week of camp meetings is sponsored by the Lake Creek Methodist Church, but they also invite pastors from other denominations to come and share God's Word. Thursday night, as I listened to my former pastor speak I gazed around me and noticed friends from multiple churches and denominations. I thought about how there were different styles of worship preferred among the group of people, but we all chose to stand and sing the hymns together in an act of worship. If the same people gathered for a

business meeting, would they have all been in agreement? I'm pretty sure the answer would be "definitely not." However, there was a sense of unity and common purpose. We were all there because of our love for Jesus and love for each other. There was a sweet spirit among people, and we all were challenged to grow in our faith. It was refreshing.

It seems that it has almost become the exception to move in unity in the bond of peace. I think of how times of disaster sometimes break down the walls out of necessity. When tornados, hurricanes, or floods occur, we often see the best in a community coming together. People jump in side by side to help each other. Rich or poor, educated or uneducated, men or women, Republican or Democrat....it no longer matters. People unite on a common purpose. Paul reminds us that God has given different gifts...but the same Spirit.

Just a couple weeks ago, several of us gathered in this room to host SCUBA Vacation Bible Camp. We did not all have the same gifts, but we shared the same Spirit. We had leaders gifted in telling the Bible stories, in leading crafts and experiments, in teaching games, in equipping children to find verses in the Bible. We had leaders who decorated, led music, drove vans, helped with registration, gathered supplies, cooked breakfast, and prepared snacks. I watched as multiple leaders took turns loving on some of our youngest kiddos who just needed and craved extra attention. We had people serve as crew leaders who not only traveled with the children but also learned their names and intentionally built relationships. I watched the church be the church....with different parts serving together to share ONE message of God's amazing love and friendship.

I am also reminded that we can come together by diving into God's Word together. We learn stories about the people in the Bible who were not all uniform cookie cutter kind of people. Just think about the disciples alone – Jesus did not choose people all from the same line of thinking or trade. He chose tax collectors, zealots, and fishermen to name a few. Throughout the Bible, we see how God used people of different personalities, trades, genders, ethnicities, gifts, and ages. And that gives us hope that He can use someone like us.

These stories, OUR stories, bind us together. We may disagree on some of the interpretations of the stories, but they are OUR family history. They are part of our DNA...part of our identity. As we come together around our love for Christ and stories that continue to display His great love for us, we are no longer strangers. We are brothers and sisters. We are bound together. We are one.

In the last few verses of this passage we read, We must no longer be children, tossed to and

from 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. (Ephesians 4:14-16)

Have you ever said to someone, "Just grow up!" As I prepare to spend hours and hours with fourth graders, I anticipate there will possibly be some moments when I may be frustrated when a child acts out in ways that do not match their expectations. I might be tempted to say "Just grow up." But I also realize that part of a teacher's role is indeed to help her students "grow up." We want our students to grow in maturity and knowledge. We want to set them up for success now and in the future. Paul, as our teacher, is saying to us, "Grow up." Know the stories. Know the Story - writer. We must not become content with just our beginning measure of faith but we should constantly be growing in our faith. Paul reminds us to act out that which we have been taught....to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we are called.

When I began serving as Interim Children's Weekday Coordinator three years ago, I knew only a handful of people from this church. In many ways, we were strangers. I can say with heartfelt sincerity and love, we are no longer strangers. We are family, and I am grateful. Our time together has been a great time of growth of faith for me as we have served, learned, and grown together.

Receive this blessing and benediction as we go from this place:

""The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you and
be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and
give you peace."
Amen