

“Building each other up in Love”

a sermon by the Rev. Marsha E. Brown,

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Focus: God calls us to follow Jesus in everything we do from our relationships with each other, to caring for strangers.

Function: Let us be mature Christians, striving to really follow Jesus in everything and being humble and quick to repair relationships and care for those among us.

I have heard people say that being a member of a church means that everyone thinks alike and believes the same thing. I think this cult-like understanding of Christian faith keeps people from even walking in our doors to see what we are about. Jesus never told people how to think. He constantly pointed to God as creator, redeemer and sustainer of every person on earth. But he didn't say, “believe this and you will go to heaven or be saved or never have to think about God again or you all have to think in the same way.” Somewhere along the line, the “Way” of Jesus became contaminated with this cult-like mentality and it keeps people from paying attention to what we are called to do. The “Way” was about walking the walk not just talking a talk. The writer of Ephesians who most

Bible scholars believe was a close follower of Paul, not Paul, is emphasizing a growth in the spiritual life of being a Christ follower. Not just memorizing scripture and getting confirmed or baptized and then never thinking or growing again. (By the way, the authorship by someone other than Paul does NOT mean that these words are not authoritative!) It is with this continued spiritual growth that we come to know the holy in a much more intimate way. And along that way come questions...lots of them. They are to be welcomed, not shunned as many of us were taught to do. Questions about theology, faith, scripture, and practice all make us better, more faith filled and faithful people. And I hope that this sanctuary, as well as this congregation is a place that any question can be voiced. God wants us to be built up in love together in Christ.

Listen for God's Word as I read these words from the letter to the church in Ephesus and other early churches: (I am reading from Eugene Peterson's Message, which is his translation from the original Koine Greek language.)

Ephesians 4: 1-16 "The Message"

4¹⁻³ In light of all this, here's what I want you to do. While I'm locked up here, a prisoner for the Master, I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run!—on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And

mark that you do this with humility and discipline—not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences.

⁴⁻⁶ You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness.

⁷⁻¹³ But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift. The text for this is,

He climbed the high mountain,

He captured the enemy and seized the booty,

He handed it all out in gifts to the people.

Is it not true that the One who climbed up also climbed down, down to the valley of earth? And the One who climbed down is the One who climbed back up, up to highest heaven. He handed out gifts above and below, filled heaven with his gifts, filled earth with his gifts. He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.

[The Message](#) (MSG)

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This week I watched as Ron had some time to do some needed weeding in our garden which is our whole back yard. He is never happier than on his knees with the tough knee protectors on the wide bricks that make the beds around the vegetables and flowers. The garden got away from him a little this year. With all the rain and a lot of other work, he didn't have the usual daily or at least weekly time to pull weeds and keep vines in order and get rid of plants that were spent. The garden seems to look a lot happier now and he certainly is happier that it is on the right track toward becoming as fruitful as possible for this year.

Our spiritual lives are no different. We have work that needs to be done on a regular basis that most of us neglect to do. We are not 'graduated' when we become members or are confirmed in a church. We are beginners who need

guidance, time and space and attention to our questions and wonderings. That is what happens in our adult Sunday School class every Sunday from 9-10 in Jubilee Hall where about 4-6 of us meet. We don't sit around and talk about what we know or think we know, we listen for what God is saying to us in this scripture, this day, in our lives. We ask our questions, and sometimes we find answers. But mostly we feel comfortable asking our questions and being open to new understanding. God speaks through the scripture to us if we listen and sometimes in different ways than those around us. That is why as Presbyterians, we believe that the Holy Spirit works in groups better than through one person who tells everyone what the scripture says or how it should be interpreted...even the pastor.

This openness to God and each other can be quite humbling to us all. It can also be quite wonderful to find that we are led in a way that is fuller and richer than what we thought the scripture meant on our own. And this kind of examined faith is what sustains us as we face the end of our lives with challenges that can seem impossible, or we have tragedies happen, as they do from time to time to anyone, and we don't know how to cope. Our examined faith is what holds us close to God and to one another. Memorized scripture can only provide the words for that faith to be developed.

This letter to the early churches was about how to nurture this kind of growth in faith and practice. They go hand in hand. If we say we love our

neighbor, but we treat them as ‘other’, then we lie to ourselves and to God. Our neighbors are made up of all kinds of people, and they can pull and stretch us to uncomfortable places when we work with them and it takes more time or understanding or explanation or care. We are still called to love them and accept them and include them-all of them. The church that this letter was written to had a lot of diversity-a lot more than we do now-even in multicultural congregations. And this letter called them to unity in Christ: that means living as Jesus did, honoring each person, caring for other’s needs, humility, kindness, compassion and mercy. These are the hallmarks of a faithful person. We all hope to be that, but it takes walking the walk of faith, not just talking the talk that has not been experienced.

My prayer for us all is to seek God with our whole selves in community. And then as we grow, to continue to listen as God calls to us-which God always does-to be as Christ to this hurting hungry world. Amen.