

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

August 5, 2018, The 11th Sunday After Pentecost/The 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time

II Samuel 11:26-12:13a, Ephesians 4:1-16

“THE CALLING TO WHICH YOU HAVE BEEN CALLED”

In the last couple weeks you may have heard references to the study that says that we Americans are more divided from each other than we have ever been since the Civil War. Now I'm not enough of a historian, nor have I read very deeply into this, to have an opinion as to whether this study is true or not. But as someone living in America, I can agree that we are living in a very divided time.

And it's not just that we are divided from each other by our political, religious, economic and societal beliefs, but we are very vocal, in cyber space and face to face, with those who don't believe like we believe.

Culturally we seem less and less able to agree to disagree with each other, no matter what the issue is,

and more and more prone to shout louder, and attack the humanity of the person that disagrees with us.

In the last few weeks I've had several conversations, heard NPR reports and read magazine articles that have joined together as I've been thinking about all the division in our lives. Thankfully I've also been reading the Bible.

I've had several people talk to me about their needing to take a break from Facebook and social media because of the fights that erupt all the time with their friends and families. I've also listened as people have listed the extended family members they continue to communicate with online, and those they've had to block, because their beliefs are just too dissimilar from their own, and their disagreements have gotten too verbally violent. The stress this causes has become too much for them.

In another conversation, I spent time with a friend this week who is getting ready to publish a book she has written for couples who are entering into retirement together. It is a book for people inside the church and outside the church. It is a book for straight couples and gay couples. There isn't much written in this field and she is excited to be offering couples help for negotiating one of the major milestones of life.

I was sad to hear that part of her process of getting ready to publish, is deciding how she is going to handle trolling, the cyber-attacks that are bound to come her way in social media. She is a therapist, not a pastor, and has written a therapeutic book of practices for couples that suddenly have a lot more time together, every single day, because of retirement.

In this exciting time of a five year project coming to completion, she is also anxious about the cyber-attacks that are part of being a public person. She is bracing for those who think she is too Christian, and those who think she isn't Christian enough. She is bracing for those who think she should not have written about both gay and straight couples, and those who think her approach isn't inclusive enough. And she is bracing for attacks against her as a person, because that's the way cyber bullies work.

She has someone coaching her on how to handle this expected public abuse. He is recommending that she hire a reader who will preview what is written about her book on Amazon, other online sites and her own website. This coach, who has a lot of experience in living a more

public life told her: “once you read something hateful, you can’t unread it.” I am sad that this joyful time is also filled with anxiety for her.

Another part of my thoughts on our divisions, came from my college alma mater, Whitworth. Last month there was an article in their quarterly magazine entitled: “Everyone Wants to Talk, No One Wants to Listen.” A recent graduate, who is 18 year old wrote: “The (asynchronous) nature of online communication allows us more time to carefully word a response, but it also becomes easier to distance oneself from whomever one is conversing with. That distance seems to make it more acceptable to insult someone simply for holding a different opinion. Because social media offers a more indirect route to communication, we feel less pressure to be considerate. Reducing people to their beliefs makes it more difficult to extend empathy, because the person behind the beliefs disappears from the conversation—instead of communicating to understand, we are now communicating to be right.”

Whitworth Today Whitworth.edu/whitworthtoday, Spring 2018, Vol 87.,
No. 1, p. 11. English Major, 2018, Rylee Walter,

What a powerful sentence: “Reducing people to their beliefs makes it more difficult to extend empathy, because the person behind the beliefs disappears from the conversation—instead of communicating to understand, we are now communicating to be right.” And I think it’s fair to say this happens not only in cyberspace, but in face to face conversations: “instead of communicating to understand, we are now communicating to be right.”

And as my friend was told, “once you read something hateful, you can’t unread it.” To which I would add: “once you say something hateful, you can’t unsay it,”

“once you write and send something hateful, you can’t unwrite it and unsend it,”
and “once you hear something hateful, you can’t unhear it.”

We live in a world where our divisions have the power to shape the way we live our lives. Whether we are people who are online or not, we have people in our lives we agree with and those we disagree with.

And we each face choices about how we are going to live with the people we disagree with:
people in our families, our spouses and partners,
people at school, at work, in our neighborhoods,
our friends, enemies and frenemies,
and those here inside this church family who don’t think or act the way we do.

Of course we all have people we disagree with.

While we are among the first generations to add the cyber world to our disagreements, we are not the first generation to have major disagreements.

We aren’t the first ones to reduce people to their beliefs and lose sight of the person behind the beliefs.

We aren’t the first ones to communicate to be right instead of communicating to understand.

This morning we read part of the letter to the Ephesians, which was sent by snail mail to a church that wasn’t getting along. They were followers of Jesus who couldn’t agree on what the Christian life should look like. Their disagreements were causing damage to the church.

The letter to the Ephesians called the church to come to unity, instead of focusing on their divisions. It is a letter that continues to call believers, like us, to come to unity in Christ.

Unity that doesn't mean we all believe the exact same way,
or live out our lives the exact same way,
but unity does mean we value all the people in our lives, seen and unseen, because they too are God's children.

You can hear how divided things had become in the first verses of chapter 4 that we read this morning. Can you hear the longing in the heart of the author as he writes:

"I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,
with all humility and gentleness,
with patience,
bearing with one another in love,
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit in the bond of peace."

These words may be nearly 2000 years old, but they would make a great Facebook post or tweet today wouldn't they?

God's people still get tangled up in divisions and fights, and not seeing the humanity of the people we disagree with.

The words of Ephesians call us
to not say the thing that can't be unsaid,
or write & send the things that can't be unwritten and unsent.
Instead we are called to practice, humility, gentleness, and patience.
We are to bear with one another in love
and maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit in the bond of peace.
We're to do this, not to be nice, but because we are followers of Jesus.
This isn't about manners, it's about living the life of faith.

Then, in case the people getting this letter missed the point about unity, the author uses the word "one" seven times in two sentences:

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."

And then he writes: "But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." We can't conjure up this one-ness, this unity, by our own strength and wisdom and creativity. It is a gift from God.

The life of faith calls us to choose to live inside this unity.
We are called to use the gift of unity we have been so graciously given.

This is counter-cultural living. It is faithful living.

It means letting people disagree with us, and not shouting or shaping or shaming them to our way of thinking.

It means choosing the challenging paths of humility, patience and gentleness when we post on Facebook, Tweet, answer the phone, and sit across the table from that person whose beliefs and decisions are so very different from our own.

The only way to bear with someone in love,
and to maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit in the bond of peace
is to see people with God's eyes first.

It changes the world if not only are we God's children, but so is everyone else too!

This is the calling to which we are called. The difficult, life-changing, life-giving path of love. It asks everything of us,
and has the power to change hearts and lives,
beginning with our heart, and our life.

One author I read this week asks two hard questions to challenge us on the path of unity and love. He writes that as we pay attention to the unity that God has created we must live with these questions:

First: Which of your own preferences do you value more highly than the experience of this God-given unity?

And Second: To what degree do you desire less unity than God intends?

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p. 304.2.7, Paul V. Marshall

We answer these questions with the way we live, speak, tweet, post, and act today, and tomorrow and the rest of this week and beyond.

Hatred can't be unheard, unspoken, unwritten, unspoken.

Love has a ripple effect as it is given away again and again,
re-spoken, re-written, re-posted, re-sent.

This short passage in Ephesians calls us to rigorous path of faith in a world that will not reward that choice.

May we choose to live inside the gift of unity we have been given by our God:
Because 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.” Amen.

USE NEXT TIME?

Movie 'Eighth Grade' Dares You To Relive Those Teenage Years

July 14, 2018 5:54 PM ET

Heard on All Things Considered

NPR's Michel Martin speaks with comedian Bo Burnham about his new film, *Eighth Grade*.
MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

OK, if I say eighth grade, what comes to mind - Drama? awkwardness? Please let me think about anything but that? A new film out this week dares you to walk those halls once again, but this time in the age of Instagram. The film is called "Eighth Grade," and it tells the story of Kayla, a shy 13-year-old girl in the last weeks of eighth grade navigating the turbulent waters of pool parties, school dances, awkward romantic advances and underappreciated video blog. And, unlike previous generations, she has to do all of this in a sea of social media.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "EIGHTH GRADE")

ELSIE FISHER: (As Kayla) Hey, guys. It's Kayla, back with another video. So the topic of today's video is being yourself. Being yourself can be hard, and it's, like, aren't I always being myself? And, yeah, for sure. But being yourself is, like, not changing yourself to impress someone else.

MARTIN: The film was written and directed by comedian Bo Burnham. And, like the film's protagonist, Burnham spent some of his teen years posting to YouTube.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BO BURNHAM: (Singing) 'Cause I'm Bo, yo. I'm the greatest rapper ever, and whether you - whether - whether you think you're better or not - you're better, you're not - don't need a sweater - I'm hot. If I can't think of another rhyme, then I ought to think of one.

MARTIN: But, unlike Kayla, Burnham's comedy videos went viral and launched his career as a stand-up comedian. Now, 10 years and many millions of views later, Burnham has made his directorial debut with "Eighth Grade." The film is already generating a lot of buzz and some excellent reviews. And so we're really glad that Bo Burnham is with us now from our studios at NPR West in Culver City, Calif., to tell us more.

Bo Burnham, congratulations. Thanks so much for talking with us.

BURNHAM: Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

MARTIN: So let me just get this out of the way for people who are wondering. You are a grown man now. You're...

BURNHAM: I am, yes. I am growing - but, yes, 27.

MARTIN: Growing, 27, got your driver's license and...

BURNHAM: Yes.

MARTIN: ...All of that good stuff. So what made you decide to tell a story through the eyes of a 13-year-old girl for your first feature?

BURNHAM: You know, I was just really setting out to try to tell a story about what I was feeling at the time, which is I was feeling anxious, and I feel like it was linked to the Internet somehow. And, you know, I wanted to talk about what it felt like to be alive right now. And, to me, that felt confusing and weird and strange and anxious and unsure. And so I realized that I was describing "Eighth Grade" at a certain point.

So I went online to watch a bunch of videos of young people talking about themselves. And the boys tended to talk about videogames, and the girls tended to talk about their souls. So it was, like, OK. I think it's probably (laughter) going to be about a girl. And I also wanted to make a movie about this age that didn't feel nostalgic and wasn't a memory. I like

nostalgic movies, but I wanted this to be visceral and present. And it being a girl sort of forced me to not be able to project my own experience on this. This isn't a story about my younger self.

MARTIN: Well, I confess that I have an in-house focus group. I have two people in my house who just finished eighth grade...

(LAUGHTER)

MARTIN: And one of them is a girl. And I...

BURNHAM: In-house focus group - I like that.

MARTIN: And I took her to see the film - the screening. And I asked her if it rang true. Like, there was a particular moment when the principal was dabbing, you know, trying to be cool. And I said, gee, that seems kind of corny. And she said, but so very accurate (laughter).

BURNHAM: Yeah. Yeah. The corny is intentional. There's - the cringe is meant to - yeah. We're trying to honestly portray kids and then honestly portray how adults have no idea what kids are going through (laughter).

MARTIN: Let me just play this scene from the film where Kayla is shadowing a group of older high school kids at the mall. She's hanging with them, both studying them and wanting very much to be a part of them, which is also something that very - rings very true at that age. And I just want to play a clip from where the older kids are talking about the differences even in their age group from what they saw when they were in eighth grade. Let me just play that. Here it is.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "EIGHTH GRADE")

DANIEL ZOLGHADRI: (As Riley) She's a different generation than us. She's...

EMILY ROBINSON: (As Olivia) She's not a different generation.

ZOLGHADRI: (As Riley) Yeah, she is.

ROBINSON: (As Olivia) She's four years younger than us. I mean...

ZOLGHADRI: (As Riley) OK. But people who were, like, four years older than us felt like [expletive] 50 years old.

ROBINSON: (As Olivia) That's, like, blatantly not true.

ZOLGHADRI: (As Riley) Your sister?

ROBINSON: (As Olivia) My sister just sucks.

ZOLGHADRI: (As Riley) OK. But, like, on top of that, she didn't have Twitter in middle school, and we did. That made us different.

ROBINSON: (As Olivia) Kayla, you're not different than us.

ZOLGHADRI: (As Riley) Well, yeah - when did you get Snapchat, what grade?

FISHER: (As Kayla) Fifth grade.

ZOLGHADRI: (As Riley) Fifth grade?

IMANI LEWIS: (As Aniyah) Jesus.

ZOLGHADRI: (As Riley) What?

MARTIN: OK, tell me about that scene.

BURNHAM: I had felt a disconnect from people - you know, I had felt as close to people 10 years older than me as I did to people three years younger than me because I realized that, like, these once-in-a-generation sort of social innovations were happening every six to eight months. So it was, like, you know, if generations were defined by, I don't know, a Walkman, and then, like, vinyl, now these new, radical changes were happening every, you know, eight, 12 months. And so my thought was, maybe they still are happening once a generation, and the generations (laughter) are - gaps are just shrinking.

When I was on social media, it was, like, MySpace, which was, like, OK, post a profile picture of yourself, and list some of your interests, and list your friends. And now it's Instagram, Twitter. What do you look like? What are you thinking? What do you look like? What are you thinking? Those are really baser, deeper, stranger questions. And the way kids interface with it, I think, changes the way they feel about the world and themselves. So I'm just interested in that. I don't think these things are decorative and trends. I think that - I think they'll reach much deeper than that.

MARTIN: What is motivating your interest in this? I mean, because, on the one hand - I'll just be honest. Looking at this as a parent, I'm thinking, OK. What do I do? What do I do about this? Like, what do I do about this? And I don't think that's your motivation. But I don't feel like your motivation is simply let me just record and document this. I feel like, as an artist, you're pointing us in a certain direction of concern. Does that fair to - is that...

BURNHAM: Yeah, well...

MARTIN: Is that fair? So what would that be?

BURNHAM: I think - so - well, I think I want to subjectively document it, which is different than, like, objectively documenting it like a, you know, anthropologist or anything. I think I'm trying to describe honestly what it feels like for me. And that's the truth. I'm doing this on behalf of really myself.

I mean, I felt like the Internet wasn't being represented correctly. **There's so much commentary on the Internet. There's so much commentary about the Internet. And, for me, we're just not at a place where we've even gathered the information to have those conversations, so I just kind of wanted to do some emotional inventory and say, this is what it feels like personally, on a personal level. So we can maybe have a conversation about the Internet that's a little more subtle than Russia, you know, or cyberbullying.**

You know, because that's, like, how we talk about the Internet, and there's a much, much subtler conversation about, you know, how it makes us feel in our tummy, you know, and the weird choice we have at the end of the night between every piece of information in the history of the world on our phones and the back of our eyelids. That's a really intense, weird sort of thing to be swinging between.

MARTIN: And it's interesting, too, because your experience with the Internet is that it - you get the best of it and the worst of it in some ways. I mean, you got this marvelous exposure for something that just started out as kind of a fun personal project, and yet, it did kind of change your life, right?

BURNHAM: Yes. I mean, I wouldn't be here without it. And that's the thing about the Internet. It'd be so much easier to address if it was just bad. If it was just bad, we'd just tell the kids and everybody to get off their phones. But the truth is, it is - it just deepens every possible thing, the good and the bad. It's giving exposure to voices that would not be heard. It's giving visibility to people that wouldn't be heard. And it's setting the country on fire. We're connected more than ever, and we're lonelier, and we're numb, and we're stimulated. You know, we're self-expressing and we're self-objectifying. So it's all of the things, which is confusing to me and why I felt like I just wanted to explore it subjectively from emotional standpoint.

MARTIN: That's Bo Burnham. He's a comedian, screenwriter and director. His new film, "Eighth Grade," is in theaters now. He was kind enough to join us from our studios at NPR West in Culver City, Calif.

Bo Burnham, thanks so much for talking with us.

BURNHAM: Thank you, Michel. Appreciate it.

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