

## “Building Up in Love”

Based on Ephesians 4:1-16

First delivered August 5, 2018

Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

Today we begin a series of messages that are based on the letter to the Ephesians. These messages will focus on our life together as Christian community, especially how love is at the core of our identity as the body of Christ.

We begin with the first sixteen verses of chapter four. This passage is loaded! Paul covers a lot of material with an economy of words. He mentions the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He talks about vocation, about how our community is like a body, about spiritual gifts, the virtues of humility, gentleness, and patience...there's a lot here.

As I read this passage, I find Paul focusing on two topics: unity and building up each other in love. I want to talk about that this morning.

In verse 3, Paul says we are to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. What does he mean by unity? He doesn't mean uniformity. It is impressive to see a military regiment lined up in rows and marching in lock step. It is mesmerizing to watch how each soldier moves in perfect unity with the rest. But that's not the kind of unity Paul is talking about. Paul uses the image of the body. He doesn't talk about how we are like eyes or ears, hands or feet. Instead he talks about the body of Christ, about how Jesus is the head, and how the whole body is joined together by ligaments. So we, as a community of believers, are united as a whole body is united as one, organic, growing, living, breathing body. By the way, what I mean by community of believers is not just our gathering here. I'm talking about the global community, the over one billion Christians spread all across the world. We are a big body! And that's not even taking into consideration the billions of saints who have transitioned from this life to the next.

What is the source of this unity that we enjoy as the body of Christ? Well, consider your own body. Did any of your body parts

volunteer to be a part of your body? Of course not. Your body is one package, uniquely designed by our Creator. You didn't assemble your body. The body you live in is given to you "as is." In the same way, the unity that unites us as brothers and sisters in Christ is given to us by God. It is not something we assemble. Nor is it something we volunteer to be a part of. Paul is teaching us that the unity we have in Christ is a gift, given to us by God. Our unity in the body of Christ is a given.

Now, you may be wondering, if our unity is a given, why are we as a body of believers so fractured? That is a real problem. It's always been a problem, making actual the unity that is given to us by God. Paul wrote a lot about unity because the churches he was writing to often were becoming disunited, breaking up into factions. I'll talk more about this, but I want to say here that the unity we have received, or as Paul puts it, "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," is something that we have to live in to and be committed to. Paul says we have to make every effort to maintain the unity of Spirit. The unity is given to us but we each have to do our part to maintain that unity, that bond of peace that we have received by being members of the body of Christ.

Does Paul give us any guidance on how to do that? Indeed, he does. He tells us, no, he begs us to lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called. And that calling is membership in the body of Christ. If we are Christians, we must strive to live a life worthy of the identity of Christian. Paul highlights three virtues that mark a worthy Christian life: they are humility, gentleness and patience. Now here is where I could get sidetracked. Each of those virtues is a sermon in itself. Do you see how valuable these virtues are, especially when it comes to maintaining unity?

Humility is awareness of your value, not thinking too highly or too little of yourself. Humility is acknowledging that you are worthy. You are not all that and a bag of chips. Nor are you just a fill in the blank. Humility is all about acknowledging how worthy you are among others who also are worthy. It's this understanding of humility that helps maintain unity.

Gentleness: how important when it comes to maintaining unity. To be gentle is to be sensitive to others, to try not to cause any kind of

offense. It's a key ingredient in getting along with others. And patience, oh how that is necessary to maintain unity. And for many of us so difficult! Misunderstandings, an ill-spoken word, a failure to follow through on a promise, are just some of the ways that we strain the bond of peace that holds us together. We all make mistakes. Patience, or bearing with each other, is critical to sticking together when tensions rise, threatening to pull us apart.

I saw these virtues in action last Tuesday. Jadon had band camp last week. I chaperoned their trip to Newark to see an open rehearsal of the Bluecoats. They are a show band based out of Canton who travel all across the country. They are amazingly talented and pull off an incredible show. Watching them rehearse was fascinating. The director stopped them frequently. He would call out certain sections, and sometimes people by name, giving corrections, but also sometimes a nice dose of praise. He was gentle with his corrections, completely professional. The band members, confident in their value and ability, were able to humbly receive that correction. And the band demonstrated great patience as they stopped and started, reset, ran the section over again. No complaining. No dragging their feet. All business, but with a playful spirit. It was really cool to see. This is a band that is unified.

What the Bluecoats do is impressive. In fact, it's pretty awesome. But it's also temporary and completely human created. The show directors come up with the music, the props, the choreography. The band members and flag corps learn the program and bring it to life with the best of their ability. But when the season is over by next weekend when they have the world championship in Indianapolis, they will all hug each other, say good bye, and then scatter to the winds, returning to college, their jobs, or whatever they do. Some won't be back next season. That rendition of the Bluecoats will be over. They build up something special. But it isn't lasting. There is an end point.

This is not true for us. What we are building up is not of human origin. The body of Christ was not anyone's idea. It is God's idea. The director of this band is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And we will always be members of this band. We will never age out. We are not a part of the body of Christ for a season. Paul talks about how we are joined together

by ligaments. As Christians we are connected to each other. We don't scatter to the winds after a season. To be in the body of Christ, this is our mutual calling. And we will never be alumni but always active participants, even, dare I say, after we pass from this life to the next.

What we are building up is also not a finished product. Next weekend, Bluecoats will perform one final time their program they have been working on and refining all summer. They will be judged against their peers and see where they place. Then, they're done. But as Christians, building up the body of Christ, we are never done. It is a process that continues for as long as you and I have breath. Part of our calling is to never stop doing what we can to build each other up in love. That's our never ending task. And it is a process. Our life together is always one challenge after another. Humility, gentleness and patience are always on hand as we strive to build each other up and not tear each other down. Paul talks about helping each other mature into the full stature of Christ. Can we agree that is aspirational? Certainly on this side of heaven to reach the level of maturity in which we all are like Christ is a work in progress. Every now and then we get it right. John Wesley talks about being made perfect in love, meaning that every thought and action is guided by love. We can become perfect in that sense. But the goal is to help us all get there. And stay there. And that takes effort.

So this is our way of life, as Paul sees it. This is our calling, to maintain our unity in the bond of peace by building one another up in love, helping each other toward maturing, the full stature of Christ who is our head. And this ought to be our way of life, not just because it's the right thing to do or because the Bible tells us so. This ought to be our way of life because this is life at its best, its most excellent, its most beautiful.

At the open rehearsal, for an hour and a half, we watched the Bluecoats practice different segments of their program. But at the end, they ran through the whole show for us. It was fabulous. Every group was doing their own parts, the pit, the brass, the drum line, the flag corps. But they were all moving to the beat, in unison. It was art in motion. It was a glorious performance.

But immensely greater is the “performance” of Christian community. When we all play our part, moving in unison to the beat of God’s heart, it is glorious. Of course, it’s not easy. Remember patience? Remember how we must forbear with one another? For this to work we have to each do our part and support and encourage each other, building up instead of tearing down. And it’s a process. Our performance isn’t always perfect. But those moments, when the diversity of the body of Christ is manifested in the world, it is a sight to behold. When we, as a community of faith, are our best selves, building up one another in love, it is nothing less than a taste of what heaven will be like. It is, indeed, heaven on earth, a sign of God’s reign.

So for these reasons, let us strive, make every effort, to live lives worthy of our call, with humility, gentleness, and patience, maintaining the spirit of unity in the bond of peace, until we all reach maturity, the full stature of Christ, the one who is our head, our band leader, the one who keeps the beat of the heart of God.