

Becoming Who We Are: *Together*

Ephesians 4:1-16

Before I came to Pasadena, interim pastor Denny Bellesi used to say, “Lake Avenue Church, you are a piece of work!” And, over my 11 years with you, I’ve learned this -- Denny was right. That’s what we are – a piece of work.

But, God loves us. In fact, God loves the world he made in spite of how messed up it currently is. Out of his love, God sent Jesus into this world not to condemn the world but to rescue it (cf, Jn 3:16-17). When God completes his rescue mission, he will make sure that things and people in his creation are no longer messed up. When God is done, there will be no more injustices, no more poverty, trafficking, pain, death, tears... Do you believe this? This is the good news that brings us hope.

This fall we have been seeing how a church like the one in Ephesus that Paul was writing to -- and the church here in Pasadena that I am preaching to -- are central to God fulfilling his mission. God’s eternal plan is to place local churches made up of people from every “tribe, language and nation” into neighborhoods in this messed up world to enter in to the brokenness of the world, to give witness to and to make his glory known.

In Eph 2:10, we saw that God’s Word describes a church as his “work of art”. That’s what we are. We are God’s piece of work, all of us being rescued by his God’s grace through faith in Jesus and located here in this time and place now to do God’s good works in this broken world. Today, as we come to Eph 4:1-16, in my sermon I want to return to that image back in Eph 2:10 of us being a work of art that God is creating us to be. In ch. 4, Paul uses the metaphor of a body to describe the same thing, i.e., what we will be like when God finishes his work in us. Look at how he puts it in 4:15:

We will grow together to become in every respect the mature body of Christ (4:15).

This is our destiny! We in this church will “in every respect” become the body of the One who is our head, i.e., Jesus. So, we’re all like little infants when we first come to Jesus – but God promises to make us mature and strong. When I read language like this, I pray, “Lord, this sounds great. But, there is a lot of work that you will have to do so that we will become what you promise we will be!” And, basically, God’s Word today declares, “I know. But, what I have promised to do, I will do.” That’s what we’ll think about today.

I have asked our brass players today to help me illustrate the point. When they first started playing their instruments, they did not play the way they play

now. They had a lot of learning and growing to do. I think most of us would find it hard to imagine how many hours of learning and practicing are represented in our musicians today. But, I want us to think about them bringing their years of practicing together to bless us and to bring glory to God. They could all be playing solos but what I've asked them to play together. Let's hear how it sounds as they play a few measures of the *Doxology*...

How did that happen? How did these people go from those beginners struggling to produce the most basic sounds on their instruments to playing together a song of praise to God? It starts with what I'll call a covenant.

#1: The Covenant We Must Make – to God and to one another. *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace* (4:3).

What I want our musicians to do now is to play at the same time a few measures of whatever song they want to play. Let's hear how that sounds...

Each one of them is a good soloist – but if they all play solos at the same time, they don't create a work of art – no, they create a cacophony! But, when they bring their gifts together following the same piece of music, they are able to make music that they could not have done alone. And, the point that the Bible makes is that God has never intended for us to walk a solo journey with him. We only grow when we journey together.

I want you to see how important this is. After giving us three chapters of all that Jesus has done to bring us into the one household of faith, in ch. 4 Paul begins to tell us how we respond to what God has done. The Apostle Paul is extremely passionate about where our lives as Jesus-followers must begin.

Look at **v. 1**: *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.* How? From his prison, Paul begs them to do one thing worthy of their identity with Jesus: *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace* (4:3).”

Paul is begging them – and us – to enter in to a covenant to do life together with Jesus as the center of our community. I think most of you know that I now serve on the Board of Trustees at my Alma Mater, Wheaton College. When I was a student there, we signed a pledge that included the things we would not do while we were students. That pledge felt to us like a set of rules that we had to keep on our own. A number of years later, based passages of God's Word like this one, we established a “Community Covenant.” It is a pledge to live lives worthy of the Lord in the context of a community to whom we will hold ourselves accountable. We confessed that we had a lot of learning and growing to do – and

that could only happen as we did life together, submitting to one another, loving one another, and not giving up on one another. This is a part of that covenant:

We, the Wheaton College community, desire to be a covenant community of Christians marked by integrity, responsible freedom, and dynamic, Christ-like love, a place where the name of Jesus Christ is honored in all we do. This requires that each of us keeps his or her word by taking the commitment to this covenant seriously as covenant keepers, whatever pressures we may face to do otherwise.

The basis of a covenant like that is a shared experience of God's grace, a shared recognition that each of us is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and a shared commitment to follow Jesus as Lord. But, in that, we also affirm that there are some core beliefs that we all share too.

And the kinds of core beliefs that Paul mentions holding us together are these: *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (4:4-6).*

Just seven simple but essential truths that form a part of what bonds us together. You see, Paul was well aware that there were many other lords, many other faiths, there were other baptisms in the world in which he lived. There was a whole pantheon of other gods that his Gentile readers certainly had patronized at some time in their lives. But, when people came to Jesus as Lord and Savior, those rival religions and rival belief systems and rival gods had to be surrendered to the Lord Jesus.

Based on a passage like this one, those who started LAC and led it long before any of us arrived covenanted to be the kind of church in which all who become a part of this community would hold on to the essential issues of our faith. The left a lot of room for what Paul called in Romans 14, "disputable matters". I remember being asked when I became pastor here whether I could enter into a covenant with a church that allowed much more breadth on disputable matters than most churches do. Chris and I said, "Gladly and unreservedly!"

So, here we are LAC – still a piece of work in process. We have established our Statement of Faith that you can read online – a statement that includes my commentary too. That tells you the core beliefs that we teach here. But know that, based on passages like this one, we have determined that we will have people who are both Calvinists and Arminians within our larger fellowship; that our fellowship will not be based on whether we have "red" and "blue" political leanings, that charismatic and non-charismatic will find a home here, etc.

Having said that, I do want to say this very clearly: There can be no authentic Christian unity without a commitment to essential Christian truth like we find in Eph 4:4-6. But, our focus must be on those essential things that unite us – not the disputable things.

The Apostle Paul has provided here us a good list of the kinds of things on our “sheet music” that unite us. Let us hold firmly to those truths that stand at the heart of our faith. At the same time, don’t give up your convictions on disputable issues. Many of them are important. Instead, learn to discuss them and search the Scriptures about them with your church family. And, never leave your church family over disputable matters. Learn to dispute about them – with civility and grace -- within the community to which you have made a covenant. *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (4:3).*

#2: The Personal Qualities We All Must Nurture -- *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love (4:2).*

I want our musicians to help us see what happens when some of them want to take over the piece regardless of the whether the dynamics markings indicate “forte” or “pianissimo”...

There seems to be a power struggle there, doesn’t there? Some are overpowered – even bullied. And this can happen in the community too. So, the Bible gives us three related words that describe the kind of personal qualities that need to be nurtured as we follow Jesus in a covenant community. What are they?

- Humility – groveling attitude but honest evaluation. It’s not, “I have nothing of value to contribute this church family.” No, it’s the honest self-evaluation that will never allow us to think that we’re better than others.
- Gentleness – weakness but controlled strength. It’s like a strong horse that controls its strength so that a rider can benefit from it. It’s the quality that when the emotions are running high and things seem out of control, to be able to absorb the emotions and the verbal blows and offer wisdom and a way forward.
- Patience – not indifference, agitation or apathy but faithfulness while waiting. Patience enables us to keep our covenants and to “*bear with one another in love (4:2).*” In this context, it is the quality that will make it possible for us to work through differences until the bond of peace is reestablished.

These very Jesus-like qualities will keep us from engaging in the abuse of power so rampant in our society. Instead, we will use whatever authority and power we possess not for our own benefit. We will treat people with respect and will value all people regardless of age, gender or ethnicity.

These three personal qualities lead me to reemphasize the point Pastor Jeff Mattesich made in his powerful message to us last week. He confessed what I also confess, i.e., over this past year, as we sought to lead in this past year, we could have done things much better. And, with your prayer support, we'll seek to lead as well as the gifts of God enable us and the Spirit of God empowers us. **There are two specific steps, we will take:**

1. Call ourselves and our entire church to **prayer over these next 40 da** In the Worship Folder, we have placed a copy of the marvelous prayer of Paul for his church in Ephesus 3:14-21. Let that prayer guide you. Pray it each day and let God take you from its words to specific matters of prayer.

2. **Provide a monthly update** about what's on our minds and in our hearts. It won't be anything like our worship folder – but more like a family update about where we think God is leading us.

We're praying that God might use these small steps to bring us closer to him and to one another.

#3: The Conduct We Must Engage In -- *Speaking the truth in love, we will grow together to become in every respect the mature body of Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (4:15-16).*

Vv.15-16 provides a description of how the church, the body of Christ, moves from us being infantile to being mature. So, first we must be born. Growth starts when we place our faith in Jesus and begin to follow him. "From Christ" – the new life cannot really begin until you are made alive spiritually through faith in Jesus.

But, when we are born again in that way, we are infants in the faith. **How might we be like infants?**

- We have to grow in humility – not always saying, "Mine. It's mine." We need someone in our family to teach us how good it is to share.
- We have to grow in gentleness – not always having to have our moms say, "Be gentle with your little sister. Don't hit her over the head with your truck!"
- We have to grow in patience – not always saying, "I want it now!" And then screaming until we get what we want. We need someone to love us to say "No! This will be worth waiting for."

Just as an infant cannot grow but must do so in the context of a family. So too, we do not grow spiritually except in the context of our church family that loves us and wants the best for us.

I don't have the time to develop all Paul says about this in vv. 7-13 but, boiling it down: God gives grace to each person in a church family. One beautiful aspect of that grace is that God makes each one of us valuable to the whole church – through the gifts he gives us. A few in a church family are, using his language, taken captive for a specific kind of role in the church family, e.g., to be missionaries, evangelists, and pastor/teachers. The Bible says their role is to use God's gift to equip others to grow and serve. That grace, that role, is not a higher or more spiritual grace than others – though it is important. But, most of God's family is called upon to represent God in the world – all over the world. Some are sent into the legal profession, others into the entertainment industry, others to JPL/NASA, others into business, yet others into public education etc. God sends his people everywhere to represent him.

But, even as we represent God in the world, we come back into our church family and, rooted here in love, we grow. And, the Bible gives us two directives about how we will grow together in our covenant community:

1. Speaking the truth in love to one another – Remember that the biggest problem in their church was that Jewish and Gentile believers were struggling to live in unity. There were surely many deep wounds from the ways these two people groups had treated one another. I imagine that, especially, many of the Jewish believers had been mistreated by the Gentile majority in that megacity. With that in their pasts, what should they do about those wrongs they had experienced. Ignore them? No, they had to speak what was true – but with love. Sins had to be owned up to and turned from -- and forgiveness had to be extended and received. The truth had to be uncovered in a context of a community covenanted to live in unity and conducting themselves with humility, gentleness and patience. I believe the same is essential in many of the racial and gender issues of our own day. Learning how to speak the truth in love will be a key to whatever shalom God will create in our Jesus-following communities.

2. Gracing one another through the use of the gifts God has graced us with – Notice that in v. 16, it is the body itself that God uses to bring about our growth. The basic sentence in 16 is "the whole body . . . causes the growth of the body." The word "whole" is important. Growth happens, we read, "*according to the working of each individual part.*"

So, yet again, the Book of Ephesians calls each of us to find a place of serving the rest of the church family. And, it is clear about the fact that each one of us here is graced by God to make a difference in the whole church. We've experienced that today as our Shepherd's Class has led us in worship. I hope you both give and

receive each time you come to church with your family – through the welcome of an usher or greeter, through a moment of fellowship in the lobby, through the opening of the Word and the time of prayer in our services. But, what happens if a part is missing? Our brass players can help us experience that too...

Together. God has brought us together in Christ. He promises that we will “in every respect be a work of art – a body that in every respect becomes the mature body of Jesus Christ. This happens in a community of people who have covenanted to live together in love and unity and mutual service to one another. Let’s renew that covenant – and I declare to you: We will together bring praise and glory to God.

Brass players will play the measures we began with and then the organ will flow from that into the doxology.