

# Sermon for Proper 13B

The text: Ephesians 4:1-16

Today, as we reflect on our New Testament reading from Ephesians 4, there are two key themes in this passage. The first is the theme of Christian maturity. The second is born out of the first, that being, the theme of unity.

As Christians we are to become mature, says Paul v13. At our birth we are born as human beings, an identity we have since conception, an identity we never lose. We never cease being human beings at any point in our life. But in normal circumstances, we do not remain an infant. We mature into adulthood. So it is in our lives as Christians. In our spiritual rebirth through water and the Spirit we become Christian: forgiven, washed, made holy, and brought into God's Kingdom as his saints through faith in Christ and his saving death and resurrection. But while our identity as God's forgiven children never changes, our Christian lives do. From the time of our spiritual rebirth we have been brought to a journey during which, as Paul says today, we are to become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Sometimes when we think of maturing we think of becoming greater, growing bigger, or perhaps reaching a particular point. We might think of skills we have or areas of talent that we are good at. But today's text puts an altogether different emphasis on maturity in Christian faith and life. Paul indicates that we mature when we become less of ourselves and more like Jesus.

Paul says in v7: But to each one of us *grace* has been given as Christ apportioned it. Christ has given us his grace. Grace is something undeserved. What that means in the fullest sense is that we would never have any claim to the Kingdom of Heaven or the Christian life without Jesus. We are complete beggars with nothing in our hands to bring to Jesus, and so near the beginning of the Divine Service, that is, God's service to us, we join with those mentioned in the Gospels: the blind men, the mother of a demon possessed daughter, the father of a boy with seizures, and call out: Lord, have mercy. Help me. In other words, we are saying, "I can't do this by myself. I need you Jesus; I am nothing without you."

We need Jesus. Without Jesus and his word we would have no idea of who Jesus is, and no idea of our need for His saving grace.

Therefore, because we are completely at the mercy of God and dependent on others, we need to have a right understanding of ourselves. We need to be humble. Humility is not being a martyr; it is not a low estimation of who we are. But it is a right estimation of who we are. It's the kind of estimation that recognizes that while we are completely forgiven in Christ, completely righteous in Christ, completely holy in Christ, we are, at the same time, still sinners. We are broken people. We are dependent on others. We are dependent especially on God, for every single breath. The opposite of humility is pride. Pride gives us a distorted picture of ourselves and of life, and of our need for others and of God. A prideful person can never be satisfied because they think themselves to be superior to others and are consumed with justifying themselves and being recognized for being better than others.

In today's reading Paul says: "Be *completely* humble." Being humble on the other hand, means becoming less of ourselves and more like Christ. It means that "I do not have the right to have my own way, but I have the privilege of serving others." Humility asks: "Who needs my help today?" Maturing in Christian faith and life means that rather than being defensive in the face of criticism (even the harshest criticism that may be unwarranted) using such as an opportunity for inner reflection and self-examination and therefore growth. When we are completely convinced that we are right, it is a mature thing to still seek out and listen, and consider the wisdom of others, through whom God speaks to us. Humility asks: "Who do I need to ask help *from* today?"

Then Paul says: "be gentle and patient." These are among the fruits of the Spirit named in Galatians 5:22-23. Gentleness and patience means becoming less of ourselves and more like Christ. It means forsaking our perceived right to speak harshly to someone when they offend us. It means seeing other people, not with our own eyes, but with the eyes of Jesus. It means asking for God's strength before we open our mouths. It means praying for God's will, not ours, to be done. The call to patience in our text reminds me of Philip Yancey's words in his book, *Disappointment with God*: "Why are not all prayers answered magically and instantly? Why must every convert travel the same tedious path of spiritual discipline? Because persistent prayer, and fasting, and study, and meditation are designed primarily for our sakes, not for God's."

When we are humble, gentle and patient, we bear with one another in love. We forsake our perceived right to get even by going behind backs and undermining each other with judgmental comments. Instead we seek reconciliation in a Biblical way: by going to the person we have an issue with and gently and calmly saying: "I don't want to offend you, but I have

a concern about what you said or did. Can we talk about it? I'd like to let you know how I'm feeling." And when someone says that to us, it means we should listen and ask for their forgiveness. We are to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. To "endeavour" means to try very hard to do something. Endeavouring means to earnestly and industriously put forth the effort to attempt and achieve something. It means to do one's utmost.

With this we see the second main theme Paul presents to us today. Maturity in Christian life and faith is to lead to unity in the church. All the hallmarks of Christian maturity—humility, gentleness, patience, love—are to lead to life together in the body of believers. Paul teaches us that there's actually no such thing as a private faith "between me and God". We are part of the one body with Christ as the head and everything we do impacts on others. Paul says: "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."

It is in this body that each person in the church is Christ's gift to the church. Elsewhere, such as in 1 Corinthians, Paul gives examples of spiritual gifts as things, but here it is people. The One who ascended higher than all the heavens gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. This isn't an exhaustive list but all people with their works of serving are God's gifts to the Church. He will build his church and he calls individuals and gifts them.

When we talk about unity we often think at an ecumenical level, that is, amongst the Christian denominations, and are rightly concerned with how we can appropriately serve with one another and the community. But today let's drop that back to a very local level. So local that we think of those in the pews in front of us and behind us. How do we need to show Christian maturity to them—being less of ourselves and more like Christ to them?

Live a life then, worthy of the calling you have received, Paul exhorts us. This is the calling you have received: called to trust in your Saviour Jesus Christ, washed in the one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, so that we can come before the Father in peace and joy as his children through Christ. And it is through Christ, Paul says in v16, that the whole body joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Before the Holy Spirit called us to faith, we used to be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning

and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. But now we are called to speak the truth in love and in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, 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.

Thank God that he has not abandoned his world but in Christ came into it and walked in our shoes as truly God with us. He knows what it means to be less of self, in the sense that, as the Son of Man, 'he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!' (Philippians 2:8) Though perfectly innocent and righteous, Jesus took upon himself our sin on the Cross so that, having our sentence paid for, we could be in relationship with the God of the universe. This Jesus who descended to us at Bethlehem is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe. It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ himself. That's an amazing hope to which we have been called! Amen.