



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Acting Like What We Are

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JULY 9, 2017

EPHESIANS | PART 4

My summer series of messages from the Book of Ephesians brings us this morning to chapter 4. And this is the fulcrum or turning point for this six-chapter book that serves as a basic textbook or “Christianity 101” for the new believers living in Ephesus and other cities scattered across the first century world. Paul has devoted the first half of the book to telling us what we need to **understand** and **believe** about our faith. And now, in the second half, he will flesh out for us how we are to **live** our faith. Let’s read from the opening verses of Chapter 4:

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. ²Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love. ³Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. ⁴For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future.

⁵There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism,⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all...

¹¹Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹²Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. ¹³This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

¹⁴Then we will no longer be immature like children. We

won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. ¹⁵Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. ¹⁶He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16 (NLT)

A Pep Talk

It was one of the many standard World War II patriotic films churned out by Hollywood in the years immediately after the war (a time when Hollywood was distinctly more pro-America and less cynical than it is today). This particular film followed a company of Marines, from their enlistment and basic training through to their deployment in the Pacific Theater. We meet the usual mix of characters: "Brooklyn" and "Tex"; Vinnie, the tough kid from the streets; Charlie, the naïve farm boy. We watch them as they are molded and shaped into a cohesive fighting unit. And then comes the climax: they are on a troop transport being carried towards the landing zone for an invasion of a Japanese-held island. Their captain gathers them together on deck to give them a final pep talk before they clamber down the netting into the landing craft and hit the beach. The captain was a grizzled and decorated World War I combat veteran who was greatly loved and respected by his men. He said to them: "You have received the finest training in the world. Your bodies are fit; your weapons are ready; you have the U.S. Navy behind you and the prayers of your nation supporting you. You are United States Marines. So now, act like it."

As Paul transitions to the practical chapters of this book, he is reminding his readers of his own credibility: He is a "prisoner for serving the Lord" (Ephesians 4:1). The phrase has a double meaning. He is literally a prisoner, in jail in Rome and awaiting trial for the crime of being a Christian. He thus is worthy of their respect and

their careful listening ears because of what he has done. But he is also calling himself a “prisoner” of Christ, because Paul has willingly surrendered his life to Christ his Lord—and thus, whether he is in jail or set free, the rest of his life will be lived in devoted obedience to His master.

And based on the credibility he has earned through his commitment and integrity, Paul issues to the new believers receiving his words a challenge comparable to the one given by the Marine captain to his troops: You belong to Jesus Christ. So now, act like it!

The rest of Ephesians will consist of practical exhortations to live our faith in every arena of life. Paul will tell us how to be a Christian of integrity in our inner personal life and behavior, and about how our faith should make a difference in all our relationships: our marriages and our family lives and our work lives. But he begins this chapter by talking about our corporate life in the Church, which he calls repeatedly “the Body of Christ.” If the Christian faith is going to make a difference in reaching a lost world, and in providing a living role model of an alternative to a corrupt and conflicted society, it will happen through believers uniting with one another to demonstrate a different way of life.

We are the Church

The word “Church” brings many things to modern people’s minds that were not at all what the Apostle Paul envisioned. Some think of the Church as a building, a physical combination of walls and windows and roofs and furniture. Some think of the Church as a big bureaucracy: a denomination like the Presbyterian Church with a national headquarters building and staff, or (on a far grander scale) the Roman Catholic Church with its massive headquarters and billions of dollars of assets in Vatican City. Some, regrettably, think of the Church in light of the terrible scandals and misdeeds of the few: the Catholic priests who abused innocent children, and the Protestant televangelists caught up in various money and sex

scandals. There are those who have abandoned their faith and walked away from the Church completely because of disillusionment at the misbehavior of Christians who have not, in the words of Ephesians 4, led “a life worthy of their calling” but instead have been hypocrites and phonies. We grieve for those we have lost due to those heartbreaking mistakes, and make no excuses for those awful sins. But those caricatures of the Church are not at all what the New Testament envisions.

Years ago, during a time when IBM, the dominant American technology company, hit a rough patch, its management hired a consultant to figure out what was going wrong. Customers around the world were interviewed about what they thought of IBM. The dominant mental images were of big machines (the room-sized mainframes or “big iron” that had been the company’s chief profit source for years), and of a large faceless bureaucracy, unresponsive to individual customer’s needs. The new CEO recognized that this public perception of his company was a core problem for them.

His intuition told him that if IBM could shift its focus from cranking out cookie-cutter identical machines, to providing individualized service and problem-solving through its professional staff directly designed to help its customers, the corporate image could change. He authorized the lead advertising agency to start a new campaign to alter perceptions. Commercials and print ads began to feature individual men and women who worked with their customers, and told their success stories about problems solved. The tag line at the end of each commercial or ad: “I am IBM.” And it worked. Customers began to superimpose the human face of their own representatives onto what had once been a faceless monolith of a big and unresponsive corporation.

We need to help people today to make the same mental shift. The New Testament makes it clear that the Church is not a big bureaucracy or a static building; rather, it is people, individual followers of Jesus Christ who love Him—and because He lives inside each of

them, they also love each other and love the world their Savior came to die for. To adapt the IBM slogan: “We are the Church.”

Unity and Maturity

It is because people judge Jesus Christ on the basis of how we His followers act that Paul makes the direct appeal to us to “lead a life worthy of your calling.” And as I have studied carefully the thought structure of Ephesians 4, I have become convinced that there are two characteristics of the church that are of highest priority in the mind of the apostle: unity and maturity.

Look again at verse 3: “Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.” And a bit later, after identifying the various roles of the leaders of the Church, whose task is to “build up the church, the body of Christ” (4:12), Paul explains: “This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son” (4:13).

The second or complementary characteristic of a Church that is doing it right is also found in verse 13: “... that we will be mature in the Lord.” He goes on to say: “Then we will no longer be immature like children” (4:14).

God longs for us as His people to be united and mature. The unity comes from several sources. It comes from the Spirit of Jesus living inside of each of us, and it comes from how we treat one another (which is why, in verse 2, Paul reminds us of the importance of being “humble and gentle,” of being “patient with each other” and “making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love”). And unity comes from continually reminding ourselves that the things which really matter are the things we have in common, our shared beliefs and values.

The things that would drive us apart are less important than the things that bind us together. That is why it is foolish for Christians of different denominations and traditions to allow themselves to be

pulled apart over comparatively insignificant things. That is a luxury we may have thought we had in previous centuries. But in a world of increasing secularism and hostility to Christ and His teachings and values, those who believe—Catholic and Protestant, Baptist and Methodist, traditional and contemporary—must stand together whenever and wherever we can. In critical times, the Church must be united.

And the Church must always be focused on growing to maturity. Each one of us individually—no matter how long we’ve been believers, no matter how many years we’ve attended worship services, no matter how much Bible and theology we’ve read or church offices we’ve held—needs to keep on growing spiritually all our lives. None of us have reached perfection, and we never will. But we are to keep on growing towards maturity. And we also are to keep on encouraging one another to grow closer to the Lord, to serve Him more faithfully, and to learn more of Him.

Charting our Course

My fellow pastors and I have a specific role to fulfill. But we are certainly not the whole church. And the words of Paul make it very clear that being part of the Body of Christ is not a spectator sport—it’s a participation sport! In fact, remarkably, Paul says in verses 11 and 12 that the pastors (and the other religious “professionals” he lists with specialized roles) are not actually the ministers of the church. **All of us** are the ministers; my role (and Brad’s and Steven’s) is to equip you to find and fulfill your individual ministry or service.

I recently watched again on DVD the 1990 film *The Hunt for Red October*, starring Sean Connery as a Soviet submarine captain (and based on the thrilling Tom Clancy novel set during the Cold War). In the film—which got rave reviews for its accuracy in portraying real naval procedures—we find this process repeated inside the control room of a submarine: the captain decides where the sub will go, then the navigator charts the course to take it there, and then the people

operating the rudder and the engines and the other systems of the ship take that cue for their actions.

Perhaps my role in this “submarine” is to be the navigator. I am certainly not the captain, for that role in every church is held by Jesus Himself. But based on the direction He has given us in His Word, my specific assignment is to help chart our course. And here are a few important aspects of the course we “pastor/navigators” have set for First Church:

We seek to handle any differences that arise among us with mutual respect and love, keeping in mind that what binds us together is more important than anything that would separate us. We don’t have to think identically about things. Unity, as our Captain Jesus has called us to in Ephesians 4, is not the same as uniformity or groupthink. We’re not all the same, and we don’t think the same way, but we will try to be vigilant at preserving our core unity and direction in spite of differences.

We will always be open to new people and fresh ideas. This is true not only for seating in our pews and space in our parking lot (we want to always have room for new people God might lead here) but also for our leadership: we desire to bring new people into positions of importance and service.

Every member of this church and everyone who comes to worship here is equally precious and valuable, to the Lord and to us. There are no “insiders” and “outsiders,” no “important” and “unimportant.”

We intend our ministries, programs and facilities to grow as God provides resources to us, but we will do so as careful and faithful stewards of what He has entrusted to us. We will be cautious about debt and risk. We will change and expand in ways that will not compromise our core ministries or endanger our future.

We will pursue excellence in all we do, pushing ourselves and one another to the highest possible standards within our abilities: in our music and worship, our preaching and teaching, our facilities and management, our mission support, and our outreach to the community. We know that nothing we do is ever perfect, but we will not be content to settle for “good enough” or less than our best efforts.

With these principles guiding our course, we believe we will, as Paul says, “build up the church, the body of Christ” (4:12).

Infants and Boats

Paul closes this section of Ephesians 4 (his vision for the Church) with an interesting mixture of metaphors. We’ve already noted his desire for maturity, his longing that individual believers grow up in their faith and understanding so that “they will no longer be infants.”

We know that young children are unable to protect themselves physically (and thus dependent on parents and teachers to guard their safety and provide for their needs). They are also gullible and easily misled and influenced. It is the latter vulnerability about which Paul is concerned. Becoming adults in our thinking means that we can discern right from wrong, wisdom from folly and truth from error. We can think for ourselves, and can apply the principles of scripture to life.

Paul then switches metaphors, when he says he wants us to no longer be like little boats, easily pushed around by tides and winds and wakes. How does a boat remain solid and unmovable on a constantly-changing body of water? It is only by its connection to an anchor lowered to the seabed or its tether to a solid dock. The tether or rope that holds us close to the Lord and unmovable in our faith is what the Church is meant to provide.

Can you be a Christian apart from any involvement or participation or relationship with a congregation? Yes, you can. Robinson Crusoe, the shipwrecked man of Daniel Defoe’s novel, was actually a man of faith who, all alone on his south seas island, prayed daily. But it’s not recommended, and should not be willingly chosen. To be strong and mature, we need one another. To be united in faith and love with other believers is God’s desire for us. ■