

Aug. 14, 2011

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

“Unity, not uniformity”

As we make our way through life, there are times we feel we don't belong. As children we are hushed and shushed and sent away from the important grownup conversations and activities. We may feel shunned by our peers: everyone gets invited to the birthday party down the block, but we don't. I was always picked last when team captains picked out teams for games and sports at school. There I stood, sticking out like a sore thumb, all alone at the end of the selection process.

In adult life we enter a new workplace where everyone knows the ropes and each other, and we feel like an alien from another planet. We move to a new community and it takes a long time to begin to feel at home. BELONGING—being part of something bigger than ourselves--- this is a universal human need and longing.

For each of us there ARE times we taste the joy of belonging. We feel a connection of harmony with others or the universe, a oneness with our fellow travelers through life, a bond that links us to God.

This happens in many ways in many places. Maybe you're sitting fishing on a riverbank, half dozing on a lazy, humid summer day. And something about the silence, the gurgling of the water, the sun's dazzling rays—they all combine bringing you a feeling of peace.

Sometimes we experience this through music. Once my brother was driving down a country road in western Nebraska with the radio on. And suddenly, for no apparent reason, the song, the sunset—everything came together in an incredible moment of feeling God's power and presence, with him, within him, connecting him to every other living being. My husband told me of such a moment on a hilltop in Wisconsin, shared with our oldest son. It was a moment of harmony, unity, belonging—connected to the earth, sky, animals, plants—with all people who share the earth with us.

I think all of us might have such a story to share- a story of feeling CONNECTED in HARMONY with all that is. We treasure those moments, but we don't carry their memory with us all the time.

Today's Scripture brings us a reminder of the truth of this CONNECTION. The Ephesians text tells us that we ARE one, we are joined together, we belong—even if we sometimes don't feel like it. We are ONE BODY, with Christ as our Head.

You know how you sometimes doze off watching T.V., and you wake up with your hand smushed under your body, and it feels numb and prickly? It feels like it doesn't belong to your body anymore. But even though it doesn't FEEL like it belongs, it does! That's how it is with the body of Christ. We may not always feel our oneness, we may not always experience harmony—but the good news is that we DO belong together--- we ARE one, no matter how we feel.

Doesn't it seem easier, though, to feel oneness out in the beauty of nature? It's hard sometimes in the confusion of our church communities, where we don't all think alike, and where we sometimes do and say things that offend each other. That is why it's so important to remind each other of the truth of our oneness.

We do this in a number of ways. We worship the same God together. We pray for each other, sharing our joys and concerns. We reach out to the hurting world together, side by side in mission outreach and response to disasters. We celebrate Holy Communion together.

The Ephesians passage spells out our oneness, which is based on our being the body of Christ. This happens through our love for Christ and for each other.

We are one body. Our unity is based on the one Spirit which provides us our abilities and gifts. Our oneness is based on our common hope: redemption and healing for all the world. Our oneness is real because we all serve the same master—Christ who showed us how to be a servant. We are one because we all share the same faith.

The apostle Paul, writer of this letter to the Christians in Ephesus, did NOT mean we all share identical BELIEFS. The Greek word for “faith” is seldom used that way in the New Testament. Faith here means “trust” and “commitment”. We all, through our faith, choose to TRUST God and commit ourselves to God's ways, revealed through the Scriptural accounts of the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

We are one body. Yet it's critical to notice verse 7 in our Scripture, which begins with the word "but". That "but" is crucial: we are one---- we share a true unity, BUT--- we are NOT the SAME. Our oneness has nothing to do with uniformity. Paul affirms our diversity, our differences in gifts—saying these differences serve and help our unity, rather than hindering it.

We all have gifts, but we all have limits. None of us has all the parts needed for us to be complete without each other. Our gifts are not given for us alone—they are meaningless unless they are shared. Singers need listeners. Writers need readers. Teeters need totters.

This is such great news. Because what I lack, someone else possesses. This is God's plan. We really do belong together. There is no way any one of us can grow into the fullness of Christ alone. We are promised we can and will grow into Christ's likeness AS WE LOVE GOD and EACH OTHER in the unity of our diverse community of the church.

None of us can do it all. None of us is asked to do it all. This is good news for the church. It is certainly good news for pastors. There is no way our gifts can meet all the needs of the church: for knowledge, pastoral care, Scripture, education, worship, art, drama, music, health, finances, architecture, plumbing, electricity, history, community concerns etc. etc.

TOGETHER we are a pool of RICH and VARIED resources. We are ONE BODY, of differing and beautiful parts.

We accomplish together what we cannot alone. We are one body. We ALL are needed. We ALL belong. Amen. Amen.