

October 10, 2021
Rev. Kerry Smith

Come Together: Unity Doesn't Come Easy
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Ephesians 4:1-6

New Revised Standard Version

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

I am now a football parent so Tuesday nights are spent watching my son play as the center on the eighth grade football team. I am learning many things. One thing I am learning is that parents are very passionate about football and the calls that the referees make. Last week there was a bit of a kerfuffle among a parent a few rows up from us who was loudly wondering about the referees ability to recognize different events that were happening on the field. A parent on the opposing team did not agree with these wonderings and there was shouting back and forth. I kept shrinking lower and lower in my seat because I wanted to be anywhere else but right there. Some people revel in conflict, but I would rather run away from conflict.

Diana Butler Bass recently said, "We're not really divided. We can't be. We are all siblings together on this beautiful earth. We are, however, broken."¹ I understand what she is saying, but you look around and we certainly seem divided. Sometimes it seems like we have to walk on eggshells around everyone and make sure not to mention politics or masks or the vaccine. I took Everett for his 14 year-old check-up this week and the pediatrician asked in the past eighteen months if he had any covid symptoms. I said he had gotten tested a few times but it was always negative and he had received the vaccine as soon as he could. You could hear the pediatrician take an audible sigh of relief because she wasn't sure how we were going to respond when she asked about covid. We are broken when we are so hesitant to bring something up because we aren't sure how someone is going to respond. We are broken when we react instead of listening to one another. Our brokenness is a challenge for us today.

We talk here at Greenland Hills about building a bigger table. In our reading from Ephesians, Paul begs the reader and us to lead a life worthy of our call, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making *every* effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Paul, or one of his later followers, wrote the letter to be read aloud in the Ephesus church community when they gathered for worship. It was a time of violence and hate between Jews and Romans. Soon after Paul's letter was written, there was a Jewish rebellion that was followed by war between the Romans and the Jews. It was a time when hostility was in the air that people breathed. Sound familiar? Reminds me of family Thanksgiving dinners or turning on the television and watching people fighting.

This week we saw another school shooting, and we go through this cycle of shock, horror, thoughts and prayers, blame, finger-pointing, news fades, repeat. I think about our teachers who walk calmly to the door to check that it's locked, just in case, because that's what teachers do. What are we teaching our children? What are we modeling every day? How are we speaking to one another? How are we excusing, encouraging, or engaging hatefulness and violence every day? We have to stop throwing our hands up and we have to speak up because we are failing those who need us most.

Paul is talking to a fragile Christian community that is stressed and in need of guidance. He begs for people to lead a life worthy of their calling. First, they have to recognize what their

¹twitter.com/dianabutlerbass/status/1444700463161561094

calling is, assess the gifts they hold, and anchor those gifts in the unity of the Spirit and in the bonds of peace. They do this because they are one body, one Spirit, there is one hope that belongs to their call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God who is above all and through all and in all.

Community is com-unity which means “with unity” and it is grounded in the gift of Christ that creates this space of grace so that we will be one in the Spirit and one in the Lord. This is a big deal and it is hard work. We are called to a calling that is one of the riskiest, most challenging tasks in our lives as we use our God-given gifts to bring unity to this faith community and to the relationships that we have in our families, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods, and beyond.

You might have doubts about this “calling to which you have been called.” You have been called with all humility, gentleness, and patience. That sure does sound highfalutin. When the Holy Spirit works in you, that is going to happen, but you are still going to have times when you are yelling at the car in front of you. The core message of the passage that we read from Paul’s letter is that we are all in this Christ-following together. Each of us brings to our common life specific gifts that we can contribute to our unity. It is such a radically different way to live than the culture’s way of individual gain and everyone grabbing all they can get.

Our daughter is a senior in high school, I’m not quite sure how that happened, and everyone asks her what she wants to study. I have no idea what she will end up doing in her life for a career, but I know that as a follower of Jesus she has a calling to which she has been called “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” It is that inner voice that speaks to each one of us, I believe it is the Holy Spirit, telling us who we are.

We are individually called to this kind of a life, and we are called as a community of faith, as Greenland Hills, as we do good and bear the light of Christ to everyone that we meet. I love our acolytes because they bring the light of Christ into this place to begin our worship of God. They remind us that the light of Christ is with us and then they take that light when our worship is finished to show us that we take that light of Christ with us as we leave this place. We are never alone; God is always with us.

We practice our calling of unity by stopping to listen, by being patient with one another, and breathing deep when we want to scream. I love the Zulu and Xhosa word *ubuntu*. It means the essence of being human and it is about generosity, hospitality, care, and compassion. It means that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. I am because we are. I belong to you and you belong to me. If you are hurt or ignored or diminished, I experience the same thing. As Martin Luther King Jr said, “Whatever affects one of us directly affects all of us indirectly.”

The good news of the gospel is that there is one body and one Spirit, just as we were called to the one hope of our calling. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Our common aim is connection and love. Where are you being called right now that may lead to unity in ways you never imagined? What gifts have you discovered and what moments have you realized where the Spirit of God has inspired you? Did the pandemic make you grow closer to God? It definitely made us all realize how precious this gift of life is. How can we embody love, passionate love, all-out love, love that will not let go of the truth, kind of love? How can we amplify joy, goodness, and gratitude?

People find love at Greenland Hills, but they can also find authenticity and community. We want to extend community as widely as possible. Did you know that the Passing of the Peace

is one of the earliest liturgical practices in worship? It is a simple ritual but it reminds us that as followers of Christ we are called to be peacemakers, striving to live in peace with one another. “The peace of Christ be with you.” “And also with you.” What more significant words do we as a people of faith need to hear in a society that seems determined to pull us apart from one another?

We are declaring that the presence of Christ is given to us as individuals, and experienced in community, as we go about our sacred tasks of reconciliation, justice, and compassion. That we are a people of peace and when we pass the peace it is a symbol of who we are. It doesn't mean when we pass the peace we have worked out our quarrels or that it is magic. It serves as a reminder to us of God's will for us.

I love how writer Brene Brown says being a part of a church community should be about singing, breaking bread, and passing the peace with people you want to punch in the face.² In my mind, this community is the best thing that is going on, I want to be a part of this hospital for sinners. I want to be in this place where there are all kinds of people and the greatest thing that we have in common is our love for God and our love for our neighbors. We praise God together and we serve God together. There is one body and one Spirit, just as we were called to the one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Thanks be to God, Amen.

² <http://jenhatmaker.com/episode-02-brene-brown.htm>