



November 21, 2021
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Ephesians 4:15-16
Growing in God



Generous Hearts. Abundant Lives: Life Together

At the dawn of creation, God declared to Adam, “It is not good that the human should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” In other words, God created you and me to need one another. But very soon afterwards, Cain grew jealous of Abel and struck him down. Thus began the paradox of humanity – we were made to be in deep connection to each other but we are deeply afraid and jealous. As a result, we are incessantly judging who the insiders are – those like us, and who the outsiders are – those who are different.

This distrust was prevalent at the birth of the church. There was a rigorous, sometimes strident debate as to whether or not gentile Christians would be required to maintain the purity laws. Paul sees this debate tearing at the fabric of the church, for it distracts them from its fundamental gift. To the Galatians, he reminds them, “There is no longer slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s argument prevailed for the whole church, and as we read in our Golden Verses Acts 2:42-46, we see it created a dynamic church.

Paul knew the Ephesian community would require the fusing of two cultures, Jewish and gentile Christians, so he charges them to be joined and knit together. Furthermore, he insists that this joining and knitting will be the source of growth and strength for them to

withstand temptations and forces that seek to destroy them.

This oneness was unique in the world. The church community did not draw lines across ethnic identity, economic condition, or social status. They did not care for and connect only to those who were like minded; all were one, as God meant us to be at the dawn of creation. The church was meant to be the reversal of the Cain and Abel sin.

But this alienation remains a fundamental problem in the world today, and the church should be leading the charge to knit and join people to one another.

Thankfully, Bonhoeffer’s classic, *Life Together*, shows us how. In this book, he describes the unique fellowship found in an underground seminary during a time when hatred and suspicion were on the rise – the time of the Nazi’s. Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*:

[God] did not give [them] to me as a brother or [sister] for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above [them] the Creator. ..Now the other person, in the freedom with which [s]he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, ...God creates every[one] in the likeness of His Son, the Crucified.

Your fellowship, your connection with each other, is the chance to find God in one

another and therefore to find joy. Jesus told His disciples and us, “The world will know you are my disciples by the love you have for one another.” By knitting ourselves together in love, we position ourselves to be a part of the reconciliation world.

A community knit by love is the greatest promise for healing in our world today. This love is not shy to speak the truth to oppression and prejudice. As Paul tells us in Ephesians, we are to “speak the truth.” There is a tremendous amount of truth telling in our world that needs to be said, but sadly, too often, it only tears down and drives apart. Paul adds the critical ingredient to speaking truth: speaking it in love. It was his love for the Corinthians, the Ephesians, and more, that enabled them to hear the hard truths.

Paul speaks with deep affection for them all, yearning to see them and praying for them when he cannot. Prayer is another critical ingredient to restoring God’s intentions for the harmony of humanity.

Jesus prayed for His followers and His betrayers. Prayer is a central tool in growing a heart of love for everyone. “I can no longer condemn or hate [another] for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble [it] causes me.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.

This is what Christians have to offer the world, the power to speak the truth and to do so with relentless love for everyone. But it all begins with us growing, knitting ourselves to each other.

On this stewardship Sunday, we are reminded of Paul’s words in Ephesians, “as *each part* is working properly.” That means everyone giving financially. It means finding a place to get

involved and connected. For everyone, the calling to give and to do will be different, according to your gifts and how the Lord has prospered you. But there is a calling that is the same for all of us – to love as Christ first loved us.

On November 7th, I preached the first stewardship sermon about bearing fruit. As you give more generously, we will be able to do more Bible studies; more prayer, more mission, more children being baptized, and so much more. This week we learn that our ability to do so is contingent on knitting ourselves together. That in our common life together, on committees and projects, we do so in Jesus’ name. Otherwise, what makes our activities different from any other non-profit?

In this life, there are many things that bind people to each other. Co-workers are bound by their common work. Family is bound by blood. Southerners are bound by culture. Retirees are bound by shared lifestyle and needs. Students are bound by their common status. All of these shared traits forge bonds that are more or less strong, depending upon their intensity and the number of shared groups.

As Christians, our shared event that binds us together is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it is something much deeper. It is not only the memory of a past event, but the living Christ, whom we continue to experience and share.

We can immerse ourselves in this love for Christ and one another by imagining everything we do takes place around the table with Jesus at the center. All of us have our eyes turned toward Him, taking our direction, our hope, our passion from Him. Then, as each of us are

connected to Him, we reach our arms out to each other, bound to one another as our eyes are fixed on Christ, being nourished by His life.

When I meet with you to plan the budget, to discuss worship, Jesus is sitting right there. When you come to plan Sunday School classes, Jesus is listening. When you cook food for the homeless, He is smelling the sweet aroma of brotherly and sisterly love. And when our children play in the garden we can hear His laughter. Since wherever two or more are gathered He is in our midst, every time we are together is a sacred moment of Holy fellowship to be treasured.

Right from the beginning of the book Bonhoeffer underscored the church's inestimable value, "It is easily forgotten that the community of Christians is a gift of grace from the kingdom of God, a gift that can be taken from us any day." The state of the German church deeply pained him because of their tacit approval of the Nazi's rise to power and their treatment of the Jews. He explained, like Paul in Ephesians, that the church should function as a living, vibrant organism that he called a "community of love."

In Spartanburg, there was a young lady who was diagnosed with cancer. The family had just joined the church but that did not stop anyone from coming to a prayer service that packed the sanctuary. Eight hundred people from the congregation, her school, and the community gathered to prayer for her doctors and nurses and to ask God to perform a miracle. She was too ill to come in person but we dialed her into the service. Her friends stood to pray, her teachers, her parents, the pastors, and her new church friends. Not everyone prayed but

everyone did their part by being a part of that gathering, and as Paul wrote, "As each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." It was a community formed by love, filled with trust in God. No matter what happened, she knew people cared – from her best friends to complete strangers.

And you, to love being with each other.

It might be easy to dismiss your love of fellowship as simply your love for food and a party. But I think it is something much more profound, and at the root of it is Paul's vision of a church knit together by love.

I am here today because Christ first loved me. I am here today because Christ bound us to each other. I am here today because I love you and I love our time together.

Whether it is having lunch with Pastor Ruben at Church of the Living Hope, discussing Kierkegaard on the front steps after church, speaking with a visitor about the connection between faith and trust, wrestling with the book of James in a Bible study, or praying with someone who has lost a friend. There is a certain spiritual joy that wells from the depths of my being when I experience our *Life Together* as sacred fellowship. As we are knit to each other by Christ's love, we will indeed grow strong enough to go into the world, to help reverse the sin of Cain and Abel, remembering as God said in the beginning, it is not good for us to be alone. Amen.