8/4-5/18 Rev. Amy Haines

Ephesians 4:1-16 Build Up…in Love

When our kids were younger we had several versions of stacking blocks. When I was younger my home church had those cardboard bricks that we stacked over and again in the nursery.

Pillows, boxes, even snow are common items for kids to build up into walls or forts. Nowadays in my house the kids build with Legos, so the stacks are smaller and more intricate than they used to be. Yet just this past week Timothy built up a 4-foot person out of square blocks from a marble race kit.

You know, though, the challenge of kids—once something is built up, part of the fun is knocking the stack down. Babies squeal when stacking blocks come tumbling down. Siblings cry when brothers or sisters ruin their tall masterpieces.

When we grow older, we realize that there is a time to tear down, and a time to build up, as Ecclesiastes 3 proclaims. Yet we must be careful with what we tear down.

I can still remember waking up early to watch the broadcast of the implosion of old Riverfront Stadium, tearing down the old to make way for the new.

And I can still hear in my head the tapes of former classmates and professors who spent more time offering criticism than constructive feedback, negativity than affirmation. Maybe for you those tapes are from coaches or employers. How hard is it to believe in yourself and your abilities when you are constantly torn down?

We live in a world that loves to tear one another down instead of building up one another.

We live in a fractured society. Read through any nightly news headlines or tweets. They often tell the ways we tear one another down through words and through distrust, in anger and in violence, in apathy and in fear. Headlines rarely tell about the ways we build one another up, the ways we live in love.

Even the headline on our own denomination’s website are varied. Many headlines do share the positive impact local congregations are having in their local communities. Yet other headlines are predicting the demise of our denomination come February 2019. Personally I am troubled by the divisive rhetoric coming out of both extremes of the theological spectrum that seem to forget Paul’s call to unity in a spirit of humility and maturity, oneness and peace.

We are created to be in relationship with one another. Yet healthy relationships are not built on negativity. They are not built on criticism. They are not built on tearing one another down. Rather, healthy relationships are built on mutual respect, built on encouragement, built on speaking the truth in love, built on being there for one another. This is true in our families, at school or work, and especially true within the body of Christ, the church.

Unfortunately, study after study, including those by the Barna Group, remind us that in the midst of our divisive society today Christians are known more for what they are against rather than who they are for. We are known more as people of judgment rather than people of grace.

I have known churches who were examples of love and grace, and I have known churches who were examples of judgment and negativity. I have known Christians who humbly and sacrificially follow the ways of Jesus, and I have known Christians who insist on controlling others and having their own way on everything that goes on within a local congregation.

What has been your experience with the church? Does the word “church” bring up a positive or negative feeling inside of you?

If a neighbor or coworker asked you to define church for him, how would you respond? Would you talk about a building or people, a denomination or specific programs? Would you share stories of God working in wonderful ways or stories of hurt, hypocrisy and betrayal?

When I am asked to define the word “church” although my mind pictures various buildings in which I have worshipped I always resort back to describing “church” as the people of God being the body of Christ in the world.

This comes from my experience. My grandfather was a Presbyterian Preacher. My Uncle is a retired Anglican Priest. My mother is United Methodist; my father was Lutheran. I have had best friends through the years who were Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Southern Baptist, and Presbyterian. I have a former classmate who is now a missionary in Japan and another classmate who is now a United Methodist Bishop in Africa.

I was in an ecumenical musical missionary group.

When I think of the church, I think of the greater body of Christ that includes all ages, all times, all nationalities, all denominations. The church is not just one group of people in one little corner of the world. We are connected with other Christians of different faith traditions and different nationalities, with different theological understandings and different expressions of worship and praise.

Those differences, however, challenge our unity in the church. So today the Apostle Paul speaks to us to use our diverse gifts in order to stand firm in our common faith while building up the greater body of Christ.

Throughout this month of August, we will ponder Paul’s words of encouragement and challenge to live in community with one another built on a foundation of love. How are we called to build up one another in love? To live in love? To give thanks in love? To move forward in love?

Although these final three chapters of Ephesians deal with the practical matters of living by love in community, we are not to forget that the source of our call, the source of our strength, the source of our unity is none other than Christ Jesus.

In the first three chapters of Ephesians Paul has been describing how Jew and Gentile are connected now in Christ, united by the grace of God despite very stark differences.

In the early church, inviting Jews and Gentiles to work together, to live together, to accept one another as one people was a radical concept.

Imagine rival gangs joining together. Imagine the Hatfields and McCoys becoming one family.

Imagine Democrats and Republicans intentionally thinking of others before their own self-interests.

Jews and Gentiles were radically different in thought, belief, experience, and social standing,

yet Paul constantly reminded them that in Christ they are now one body, one community of faith, one church.

So Paul begins chapter 4 with the word, “therefore.” Therefore, remembering all that God has done and continues to do through the work of the Holy Spirit, remembering that God has offered salvation to all people, Jew and Gentile, remembering the grace of God that is pure gift, this is now how you live together in loving response to our forgiving and gracious God.

Regardless of our differences, we share a common faith foundation upon which to live and love and build up the body of Christ. Our foundation is this:

“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.”

(v4-6 NRSV)

In a few minutes we will tangibly celebrate our common faith in a common Savior through the bread and cup of Holy Communion, recognizing in this faith tradition that all are welcome to Christ’s table, no matter what denominational or theological labels we may call ourselves, for we share this one faith and this one Lord.

While my biological family members and I may differ over ways to worship or serve or understand certain passages of Scripture, we lay those differences aside when we are asked to proclaim a common faith in a common Lord and Savior.

Yet not all families, not all congregations, and not all Christians, are willing to lay aside their differences in order to focus on their common foundation upon which to build up the body of Christ.

.. Baseball coach, Casey Stengel, once commented:

"It's easy to get good players. Getting 'em to play together, that's the hard part."

And what's true in baseball is also true in the life and ministry of the Christian church.

-- Peter J. Blackburn, Buderim Uniting Church, 8-3-97

Imagine if we all had the same gifts or passions…how would ministry be accomplished?

We need each other in the body of Christ, for we each bring different gifts and skills, personalities and backgrounds to the ministry we do together for the sake of sharing the good news of Jesus.

Yet we must recognize that the gifts given to us are not for our own self-promotion, but for the purpose of building up the body of Christ, the church. We can do so much more together than we can ever do on our own, to share the love of God and the hope of Jesus.

We share a common purpose, to build up the body of Christ.

Yet the unity we strive for within the body is not uniformity.

“The church embraces the fact that church members have different gifts, roles and functions given to bless the church. No army could be victorious without a diversity of gifts. No sports team could win without diversity of gifts. No business could survive without diversity of gifts.

[No church could thrive without diversity of gifts. –ALH] Each gift is given by Christ, and each gift enriches the church.”

-J Michael Shannon “The Rocky Road to Unity” 8-2-15 preaching.com

Paul says it this way:

“Christ handed out gifts… to train Christians in skilled servant work, working within Christ’s body, the church, until we’re all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God’s Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.”

(11-13MSG)

Our gifts were given

“…to equip God’s people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God’s Son.” (v12 CEB)

A W Tozer once said:

.. Has it ever occurred to you that 100 pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So 100 worshipers [meeting] together,

each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become “unity” conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.   
 --A. W. Tozer, The Pursuit of God. Sermonillustrations.com

Christianity is not a solitary religion, but a communal faith. We may not always get along with one another in the body of Christ, but like it or not, we are connected together within the body of Christ. So if we are connected, we need to work together. And if we are to work together, we must build up one another in love.

Paul calls us to

“grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part if working properly,

promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” (v15-16 NRSV)

“God’s goal is for us to become mature adults—

to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ.” (v12 CEB)

How are you, as part of the body of Christ, growing into Christ?

How is your faith maturing over the months and years of your life?

Just like encouraging a baby to crawl or take first steps; just like encouraging a child to try new things, and cheering for them even if they aren’t the best player on the team; just like encouraging a teenage to be their unique selves that are beloved and precious; we are called to encourage and build up one another in love, to support one another as we mature in our faith.

Christ may be fully mature, but the rest of us are not. We still have a lot of learning and growing and maturing to do.

Pastor Billy Strayhorn once said

..We seem to forget in our age of instant convenience foods, products, & services that mature Christians are not produced by taking a couple of rounded teaspoons of freeze-dried Gospel, adding a cup of warm acceptance, adding a quarter cup of grace and a quart of forgiveness.

We don't add a sprinkle of the water of baptism, a pinch of hope and then fill it all with the Holy Spirit and voila, an instant, full-bodied Christian!

--Billy Strayhorn epulpit.net 8-3-03 “Remember: Live Worthy of the Calling”

Maturity takes time, so we need to have patience with ourselves and with one another. We need to support one another in humility and gentleness. We are called to speak the truth in love but also bear with one another on the road we call faith, that we walk together. My prayer is that I am more mature now than I was five years ago, and in five years will be more mature in the faith than I am now.

Yet anything worthy or valuable takes time. A toned body is a result of hours spent in a gym.

A skilled athlete has honed his or her skills in endless practices and scrimmages. A biblical scholar has spent hours and years reading and re-reading and studying the Word of God.

Growing into maturity as followers of Jesus, as members together of the body of Christ, will take time and effort and practice.

But we will have the right tools if we look to the Bible, if we turn to God in prayer, if we trust in Jesus to lead the way.

We will have the right attitude if we look to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow members of the body of Christ and not adversaries or enemies to be ignored, hated or even removed.

We will have the right guidance if we look to Christ as the head of the church, the Lord of our lives, the love of our hearts.

Imagine how the body of Christ, the church, would be transformed if we only lived what we say we believe about maturing in faith, living as the people of God, uniting in God’s grace, as we have heard proclaimed this morning in Ephesians! Imagine how we can rewrite the headlines to offer hope to the world around us!

Listen again to Paul’s call and support for us today:

“You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly.”

“We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.”

May the words of Ephesians come true in our lives, this day and always.

Let us pray.