

Pentecost 10B, Proper 13. Ephesians 4:1-16. August 1, 2021.

If we aren't careful, the whole book of Ephesians is going to slide by under our attention this summer. We've been reading this letter by Paul or Pseudo-Paul for three weeks already, and there are three more weeks to go after today. But our laudable attention to the gospel readings and something about the prose in Ephesians makes it easy just to lean back during that epistle reading and let it not so much wash over us, as flow past us without remark. But that would be a shame, because there is beauty and wisdom here that we might find especially relevant to us.

The basic logic of the letter to the Ephesians goes that we, the church, have received an incomparable gift—and the receipt of this gift determines how we should together live. The book splits neatly in half. The first three chapters describe the gift God has given us. The last three chapters describe how we should live in response to this gift. Today's reading is the hinge, the "therefore," the turn from indicative to imperative, from gift to mandate.

This is not the only possible order for moral logic, even in the Bible. But there's something appealing about it. What we have been given shows us how we should be and what we should do. This is a morality based on gratitude, instead of say guilt or reward or honor and shame. This logic makes moral effort something rooted in joy and assurance. It invites us, now, to ask what we have been given—sure, as individuals, but even more as a people—and then to consider how those gifts might guide our lives. However we might answer that question for ourselves, Ephesians has its own answer.

In the telling of Paul or one of his followers (but we might as well just say Paul), the world has been estranged and alienated both from itself and from God. This wasn't too hard to verify at the time, with people at war and at enmity with each other, class divisions and ethnic strife and wildly contradictory versions of patriotism competing with each other. (Not sure if that sounds familiar in today's world.) Paul's big example is that even in the worship of the God of all, division runs right through the heart of our practices. (Not sure if that sounds familiar in today's world.) Using especially the example of Jews and Gentiles living in Israel, he points out that some are invited to the deepest mysteries while others are kept at a distance.

But the great gift we have received is that this world of division and strife has been reconciled to itself and God by the work of Jesus Christ. And the church, then, is the sacrament of God's reconciliation of the world to itself and to God. We, Lord help us, are the sign of the work that God intends for the entire world. We, Lord help the world, are the people God can point to and say, "See, I am making all things new." For Paul, this is demonstrated by the joining of Jews and Gentiles into one people in the early church. That's a harder claim for us to make today, but we can think of other current enmities and divisions, even if these examples leave us feeling like we have much more work to do.

In Ephesians, God's great gift to the church is that we are a people who are reconciled, living in an alienated world. And this great gift carries with it a therefore. Since we have been called from a world at war with itself and made one with Christ and one another, therefore, here's how we should live. That "therefore" goes on for three chapters and even though I'm apparently preaching a whole book this morning, we'll focus on just what was assigned for today.

A people of unity in a divided world, a peaceful people in a world at war, a reconciled people in a culture rebelling against its truest nature . . . these gifts are also a task. Today's reading focuses really just on how to remain this people in this world. Paul teaches a unity that is in no way uniformity. He emphasizes unity, sketches out the diversity within the unity, and then gives some advice on how to maintain a diverse unity even while under threat by a world that

does not yet know itself, and so does not recognize us. The church's unity comes from God: 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 take that as very good news, because our empirically questionable unity is to be found as much as it is to be forged. It is accomplished by God's grace sometimes even in spite of ourselves. And Paul gives us a list that I think of as the virtues of unity, the traits that maintain what he calls the bond of peace: humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another.

But this unity that is both gift and task includes and maybe even needs diversity. Paul here gives us a list of kinds of ministry that don't exactly line up with current job descriptions in the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and the saints, all for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. The way to maintain this diverse unity is to speak the truth in love while continuing to see ourselves as growing more deeply into the life of Christ. Neither gentle lies nor weaponized facts do much good for the church. Christian community is maintained by having the courage to speak and hear the truth that is shaped by love.

Okay, so, if anyone is still with me: that's the book of Ephesians. It's a book that still has a lot to say to us today, in our world that is alienated from itself and typified by hostility and war. We might think that it flatters us to make us, ordinary raggedy doubting Christians, the sign of God's reconciling work in the world. But it's adamant that this reconciliation is the work of God, not an accomplishment of ours. It makes no room for celebrating ourselves. Because God's work of reconciling the world to itself and God is not done. The gifts we have received or are receiving are also a task. The church is both a sign and a training ground. We learn to love each other so that we can love the world. We find the unity that God has given us so that we may assist in building that unity that is justice and peace in the world. My friends, we have been given so much. And what we have been given is the first thing we have to give away. Amen.