

Ephesians 4:1-16
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
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The Community of God

Activist and author Patricia Ireland once wrote that a lifetime of activism is a great life because “I’ll leave a legacy and not just be a blob of protoplasm.” I’ll never forget first reading that sentence. “I’ll leave a legacy that won’t just be a blob of protoplasm.”

Now where do we get that urge to want to matter in this lifetime? To live a life that actually leaves a legacy?

Here’s what Christian faith says to this urge: You are made in God’s image, and nothing can erase that. No matter what’s happened, God is committed to restoring and healing this world — people, systems, and creation itself. As God’s image-bearer, you share that impulse. It may be sleepy, but it’s there. Being a Christian means joining a global effort to heal the world in every way. To call yourself a Christian and not engage in this mission is missing the point entirely.

That’s how big the picture is. Jesus promises, “I will give you myself and you will be my presence, and you will go through every nook and cranny of the world being my presence and my continued ministry in the renewal of all things.”

And here’s the big idea: All of this is now to be curated in community. Never alone. There are many things you can do alone but being a Christian is not one of them.

All of his instruction is plural in nature, and assumes a communal life. “Bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The end game for Paul is that “all of us come to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” There is no taking up of the Jesus project in an individual manner. It is a plural project, and part of its greatest power to the watching world is that communal life!

Paul urges us to “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit” using humility, gentleness, and patience — tools that require community to fully express. He’s not asking the early Christians to simply feel affection for one another but to live out their calling by serving each other. The church is to be a new community, not defined by the divisions of the social order, but by the new humanity in Christ, where all members are essential and interconnected.

Paul then gives theological heft to his call to unity. He reminds them of who they are in Christ. And he uses the word “one” seven times.

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.

And beyond that he tells them they have all been gifted by God for the purpose of equipping one another for ministry and building up one another so that we might grow into everything God has in store for us in Christ.

In May of 1990, the cargo ship *Hansa Carrier* was hit by a severe storm during its voyage from South Korea to the United States. In the middle of the tempest, a large wave swept 21 shipping crates into the sea, five of which contained Nike shoes.

About six months later, a dedicated beach scavenger named Steve McLeod spotted a clump of Nikes while walking along the Oregon coast. Then another. Then several piles of the gleaming, plastic footwear. Soon, McLeod's Cannon Beach apartment was packed with several styles and sizes of Nikes, each of which he carefully cleaned, dried, and de-barnacled. There was only one problem: The vast majority of the shoes were left-footed.

This phenomenon attracted the attention of local scientists working to decipher the Pacific's ocean currents. With the help of Nike and the *Hansa* crew, they determined that the shoes had not been connected during their ocean voyage. Furthermore, the slight toe curvature of the right-footed shoes caused them to tack northeastward into the Alaska Current, while the left-footed Nikes slid neatly into the southeast-bound California Current. Thus, for months, a small physical difference forced each shoe farther and farther away from its mate.

Once Steve McLeod had put these pieces together, he began contacting other known scavengers for news of another Nike windfall. Sure enough, he heard about a large number of shoes that had beached to the north along the Queen Charlotte Sound. A meeting was arranged and, in one day, 1,200 pairs of Nike tennis shoes were reunited using serial numbers. Once the pair became whole again, it went home with whomever it fit.

Notice two things:

1. Small differences, the curvature of the shoe, had them over time drifting apart. Small differences can cause major impact if we don't use the tools of community as verse 2 points us: humility, gentleness, and patience
2. Shoes are naturally opposed to each other unless you are trying to get somewhere.

Look, it is much easier for me to love humanity than it is to love humans who smell, who are inconsistent, who are irritating, who are disappointing, who are slanderous, who are not self-aware, who are nosey, who talk too much, who constantly complain, who won't get the help they need, who don't see things the way I do, who are self-absorbed, who constantly brag about their perfect life when I know it's a wreck, who bring me down, who didn't return my text, who leech off of other people, who are not grateful for what they have, who don't acknowledge what I've done for them, and on and on and on it goes. Did I leave anything out? Oh yes, because then there are the humans who butt in line, who don't come to complete stops, who play their music too loud, who jump up to the front of the line when a plane is disembarking (they are THE WORST). All these humans!

I am reminded of when Lucy told Linus he couldn't be a doctor because "You don't love humankind!" Linus responds, "I love humankind — it's people I can't stand."

Yes, the church can be a hot mess, and harm people, because, well, we are there. Humans being humans.

And ... commingled with this is the ongoing quiet work of Jesus followers around the world who without fanfare live their lives in community with others and seek to serve their communities with radical hospitality, sharing of resources, and seeking the good and flourishing of all.

Archbishop William Temple, serving during World War II, insisted that no Christian nation could refuse refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. When faced with arguments that welcoming them wasn't "realistic" or "reasonable," Temple posed a key question: "What does the love of Jesus bid us to do now?" When asked what this had to do with the church, his answer was clear: "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

Two big ideas that may be exactly what we should be asking and thinking about:

- "What does the love of Jesus call us to do now?"
- "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

However we embody and respond to those two statements, we do it together because you can't be "the body of Christ" alone. You can't help heal the world by just consuming without participating. I'm glad you're here, whether it's for the choir, the coffee, the community, or the tasty treats waiting for us in the social hall. But we can't become what we're meant to be in San Jose unless we're all in!

Because you're not just a blob of protoplasm — you're the bearer of God's image and Christ's presence in this city. Amen.