

What We're Really About

Proper 13, Year B – Ephesians 4:1-16

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 2, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Okay, I took last week off from my resolve to preach from the Epistle lesson. There were at least a couple of people that thought the choice of the story of the feeding of the five thousand and all my talk about food was a deliberate connection with the Summer Feeding Program that filled our Parish Hall with kids from all around our community this week, forgetting that our lessons are from the Lectionary that has been around for a very long time indeed, some like 500-year-old long time. It was just a happy conjunction that had all of us thinking about the abundance of God's grace, at the same time we were focusing on how to *use* that abundance to help the people around us in the name of Christ.

But now, it's back to work, paying attention to Paul talking about the Church way back at the very *beginning* of the Church. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, Paul was concerned, especially when he was writing to the Ephesians, with the divisions that seem to mark us as human beings, the walls that we build between each other, even, the Apostle lamented, among those of us that call ourselves by the name of Christ. This morning, Paul continues with what has been called his great "litany of unity," his message to the Ephesians, *and* to the Church down through the centuries, of what is really important, what is truly central to our lives as part of the Jesus Movement.

We are one body and one Spirit, he says. In two thousand years, we Christians have managed to splinter ourselves into probably ten *times* that many different pieces. Some of those splinterings have been violent and deadly, some of them have been quiet and reserved, but *none* of them have been peaceful. We continue to bicker and to And it seems just about every time some "issue" comes up on which we disagree, one "side" or the other figures it's okay, no, that it's their *duty* to walk away, to take their ball and go home. Paul points instead to our Lord's own final wish for us as he broke bread one last time, and prayed that we would be *one*, even as he and the Father are one. What that means for us is that those of us in various branches of the Church believe that what we have in common is more important than what we have separating us. What it means is that we understand that we are connected by much more than the fragile tissues that define who we are as individual extremities of the Body of Christ. What it means is that we know we are joined by the Spirit that brooded over creation, the Spirit that fell on all the disciples of Christ at Pentecost, the Spirit who yet today makes us one.

Paul continues by saying that we have one *hope*. I've told you before the joke I learned in Alabama applied to the Church of Christ, but might just as easily be some folks around here. It seems Saint Peter was giving a tour of heaven for a group of new arrivals and had invited them to chime in whenever they had a question. At one point, however, he turned to them and said, "Now for the next portion of the tour, I must ask you to hold your questions until I tell you otherwise." They proceeded around a rather largish bank of clouds and saw off in the distance to their right a large crowd of people smiling broadly and lustily singing old-fashioned hymns. Continuing down the way and around another wide cloud until they were out of hearing range of the singers, Peter finally turned and again invited questions. One hand shot up immediately, "Who were those people off to the right and why did we have to be quiet near them?" "Oh," smiled Peter indulgently, "those were the Church-a-Chrise, and they *think* they're the only ones here."

On the contrary, Paul says, as Christians we share the same calling and the same hope. We share the promise of resurrection when this life is through. We share the absolute assurance of eternal life with God *and* with those we love. We share one hope of life in the presence of God, and we can be sure that there will be no reserved sections.

As Christians, Paul reminds us, we have *one* Lord. When it comes right down to it, nearly all of the differences between Christians have been over who is in charge. Whether or not they want to admit it, every group ends up setting up some sort of hierarchy. Whether it is their assemblies or their presbyteries or their congregational boards or their bishops or their General Conventions, someone's in charge and gets to call the shots. But when it comes right down to it, Paul is right, we have only *one* Lord: the one who said that to *lead* we must be servants to all, the one who proved it by giving up heavenly glory for a manger and a cross, the one who insisted on washing the feet of those who called *him* master, the one who bought his lordship with his death at the hands of those who refused to understand. Every time we Christians get together in our committees and our conferences and our conventions, most of our ponderings, and *all* of our ponderings ends up being who gets to make the decisions. But when it comes down to it, our Lord is the one who hung on the cross, and rose from the grave, and sits at the right hand of God – and no one else.

There is for us one faith, the Apostle says. In our day-to-day lives and most definitely in our corporate deliberations, we in the Church spend an awful lot of our time discussing what have come to be called “the issues.” We debate and discuss “the issues,” and further refine and solidify our respective position on “the issues,” until eventually that position ends up becoming for us a matter of faith. “As the so-and-so church we believe such-and-such about this-and-that.” And so we spend most of our time fussing over how we do business, and how we're going to spend our money, and who's sleeping with whom. Make no mistake, the Church always *has* been, always will be, and definitely *should* be concerned with the fact that there *is* such a thing as ultimate truth. But in the end, it is not “the issues” that define us. As Christians, we have but one true focus of faith, and that is Jesus Christ, and him crucified, risen and coming again! That and nothing else is the one faith of the Church.

There is one baptism, Paul continues. Maybe you noticed a few weeks ago when we had a Baptism here, or maybe you'll just have to listen really carefully next time, but there is nowhere in the liturgy of Baptism where we mention St. Paul's Parish or the Episcopal Church. That's because when we baptize someone, we aren't making that person a member of St. Paul's. We aren't making them a member of the Episcopal Church. As part and parcel of our baptism, we are, each of us, born into the Body of Christ, the fellowship of *all* believers, here and throughout the world, now and through the ages. With a splash of water and the sign of the Cross, we become one with all those who have gone before, the great and the small, the powerful and the powerless, the “haves” and the “have-nots,” the liberal and the conservative, the black and the white, one of, and one *with* the great *cloud* of witnesses to Christ's mercy, and Christ's grace, and Christ's love.

Finally, Paul *concludes* his litany of unity with the proclamation that there is “one God and Father of all.” Lest we forget why we are really here this morning, lest we get caught up in our form of governance, in our particularity of liturgical style, or in our uniqueness of historical character, lest we get to thinking that we're the only ones that got it right, or “the only ones here,” Paul reminds us who we really are, and *whose* we really are. Our body, and our spirit, and our hope, he reminds us, our Lord and our faith and our baptism, are grounded not in our selves, nor in our posturings and proclamations and pronouncements of what we think about this, that and the other thing. Rather, our whole being, individually and as the body of believers, is bound up in the Holy One who is “above all and through all and in all.” And, praise his holy name, doesn't that take an awful lot of pressure off little ol' us?