

15th Sunday after Pentecost - September 1, 2024

Ephesians 4:1-7

“One Baptism”

1. Our congregation has a mission statement and a strategic plan.
 - a. A year or two before I started my ministry with you, Rev. Scott Hill and a team of church leaders worked with a consultant to listen to the congregation, its hopes, dreams, and strengths, and created these important documents
 - b. We try to include the mission statement in the bulletin every Sunday, and the newsletter (space permitting) but it's also on the website.
 - i. In part it says that we want to be an active, growing, inclusive, caring, inviting church family, with
 1. Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 2. People of all ages, sexual orientations, gender identities, races and cultures, socioeconomic situations, all mental and physical abilities.
 3. Those who bring hope to the world and those who seek hope
 - ii. In the strategic plan, we set out to
 1. Have an everyday spirituality
 2. Engage young families
 3. Assess and address poverty in our community
 4. Gain clarity for our LGBTQ ministry
 - c. I like that we have those statements which challenge and give us guidance
 - d. In the coming months we will be engaging with a consultant to help us see ourselves anew, to consider updating our mission statement and creating a new strategic plan, and then look forward as we start our third century
2. Today's passage gives a kind of strategic plan to the original audience, and to us yet today
 - a. If you'll allow me a little bit of background, I want to give context to the letter of Ephesians
 - i. It is presented in the Bible as a letter by the Apostle Paul, but modern scholars cast doubt that it was actually Paul who wrote it (Anchor Bible Commentary)
 1. When compared to other letters by Paul, they find some important differences in vocabulary, style and theology.
 2. So it's possible that it was written by a follower of Paul, who was writing in Paul's name, which wasn't an unusual back then for students to write in the voice of their teacher
 - ii. I bring that up because one of the key differences of this letter is that it doesn't feel like a letter to a specific congregation (as Paul's other letters are)
 1. This one feels like it was meant for a broader audience, the Church with a Capital C
 2. And while it does have some very problematic teachings about hierarchy, specifically seeing women in secondary status which is in contrast with other Pauline passages, the reading for today offers us some good stuff to ponder.

- iii. As such, today's passage could be seen from a more general light – and it means that in a way we're not reading someone else's mail, but rather a letter sent to us!
 - b. The writer is encouraging the Church to be a humble church built on unity and peace
 - i. And their argument is really simple: God is ONE. We are ONE.
 - ii. There is one body (meaning one Church), one Spirit, one hope, one Redeemer, one faith, one baptism, one God.
 - iii. And because of it, we are to bear with one another in peace(which implies that it will take some work to do that!)
 - iv. There is a beautiful simplicity to it, and it challenges us to cling to that simplicity
- 3. The sacraments of Baptism and Communion are a preset reminder for us of that message of unity in God
 - a. Think of them like the embodiment of our identity as a people of God, and as a symbolic mission statement and strategic plan
 - b. There is One Baptism [pour the water]
 - i. Water unites all living things on earth, for we can't live without it
 - ii. Water unites all God's people, from ancient stories of creation and journey to freedom
 - iii. Baptism represents our union with God's love and forgiveness and with one another
 - c. There is One Table [lift the elements]
 - i. The sustenance our one earth provides is represented in these elements
 - ii. The single table is the symbol of the banquet to which all are welcome in God's realm
 - iii. Communion represents the daring love of Jesus, and serves as our example to risk for one another in the name of God.
 - d. One Body, one Spirit, one Redeemer, one faith, one baptism, one God
 - i. Such one-ness is diminished, of course, by
 - 1. humanity's eternal temptation to be gods instead of follow God
 - 2. our eternal temptation to proclaim we're right and others are wrong
 - ii. Which is why it's crucial to lean into the one-ness of this passage, which reads like an ancient creed or hymn
 - iii. You can almost imagine people in ancient churches saying this or singing this by memory, to praise God (and maybe to repent for the ways in which they failed to live up to it)
- 4. No matter what our new mission statement and strategic plan eventually says, we as a congregation live into the flow of this one baptism and one table. We seek to live up to that grounding belief, with humility, gentleness, patience and love, in our interactions with one another and with the community where God has planted us: There is one Body, one Spirit, one Redeemer, one faith, one baptism, one God