

10th Sunday of Pentecost
Sermon 8.2.15
Scripture: Ephesians 4:8-16
John 6:24-35

I have a friend whom I've known all my life, which means in an irreplaceable way she's my closest friend. She was born three days after I was born and grew up a couple miles down the street from where I grew up. We were in school together through high school, which means after elementary school and junior high, we both went away to the same prep school where we were both day students. We kept in touch through college, saw each other during summer breaks. In my 20s, I worked at her family's local business where she would come home to and then flee away from. Really, we've never been able to stay away from each other and yet there are times when we can barely stand one another.

She was always reinventing herself; that drove me crazy about her. I was always relentlessly myself; that drove her crazy about me. I mean, I would wear my *glasses* out to *bars*! But she would pretend to be European and try to pick up Middle Eastern sheiks. In Boston. She said they'd go to Boston all the time. They'd go there for their check-ups at Boston's hospitals. Or for college. They'd buy their way into Harvard or MIT. All I ever saw in those bars were frat boys in baseball caps. And I was wearing my glasses, so I know what I saw.

Both middle aged now, we've each calmed down and are more accepting of one another. But I think we'd both agree that hers was the harder path a rangy, restless one. (I'd also venture the guess that I had as much fun.) And it's striking because in many ways our lives were so much the same. Our families were the same degree of loving and conflicted, committed and cannibalistic.

The one obvious thing I had that she didn't? Church.

What I seem to be suggesting is so simplistic as to be nearly worthless. So many dynamics go into the development of personality. Two different personalities can hardly have those differences chalked up to one mere factor.

And yet...

The Letter to the Ephesians is one of the disputed letters of Paul. This is to say it's in a similar enough vein and voice to be considered Paul's, and it's early in the

timeline of what books of the New Testament were written when. (Paul was the earliest New Testament writer.) But it's disputed as one of Paul's letters because it's also different from those that are undoubtedly his.

This time reading it through, I found it strikingly different. The sentences are long, and the vocabulary is full of words that are conceptual and theological. Yes, many of the concerns are the same as Paul's typical concerns: the role of Gentiles in this still Jewish movement, and how to understand the Law in relationship to the grace poured out in the "Christ event." And, yes, there's also concern for practical matters: how people within the church, this new movement, should relate to one another and their families and their governance. But there's a confidence in the style—a gracious pouring out—that doesn't strike me as Paul's.

Paul was the first one to work through these questions and ideas (Jews and Gentiles, church and world, law and grace), and as such his writing wends and doubles-back, stutters and tries again, whereas the writer of the Ephesians seems fluent in this new world of both/and, of anticipation and fulfillment, of the provisional and the absolute, of Jews and Gentiles now that (as this letter states) "in [Jesus'] flesh God has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." In short, this which was once shocking and cause for double take, is simply a wonder.

It would have all the more a wonder in Ephesus, this already ancient city by the time this letter was written. Founded a thousand years before Christ, Ephesus was the third largest city of Asia Minor, was known for its Temple to Artemis and its libraries, and was likely filled with Gentiles, which is to say very few Jews, and sophisticated Gentiles at that. In fact, it's thought that the Gospel of John was written here, which would make sense given that John's Gospel is the most philosophical, a coming together of the highest Greek thought and the most committed Christian convictions. And perhaps this is why the letter to the Ephesians seems so high-minded—not that the writer is different from the writer of the letter to Corinthians or to Philemon, but that the audience is different, able to take in the poetic pouring forth.

Paul was, after all, someone who aimed to be all things to all people.

Egotism, it sounds like. But really, it was for the sake of unity. Unity: our writer, like Paul in general, seems principally concerned with propagating the notion of unity in the early church. What once divided the two peoples of ancient near east now need no longer divide them. No, for what this God, first known to the Jews, seems to have in mind is nothing so parochial as only choosing the Jews (lovely thought they were [and are] to God). No, what this God seems to have in mind is something far more encompassing, far more wide-reaching than any tribalism and favoritism that comes so easily for us humans to believe in. No, what God has in mind is that all might be unified, a whole body joined and knit together by every ligament.

Ligament, our writer calls it. *Ligare*. Religion. Remember?

It's a unity that has nothing to do with uniformity. (The church is a gathering of people not uniform, but *cruci*-form.) This is important to note. This unity has nothing to do with uniformity. I know some of our newest members have friends who imagine life in the church is about saying all the same things and laughing at all the same jokes. And, while we of this congregation, and indeed of the wider church, might share a laugh from time to time, joining a church has nearly nothing to do with becoming a uniform people who say all the same things and laugh at all the same jokes (unless they're funny). On the contrary, what joining a church means, according to this morning's writer and, as it happens, to me in my experience of church, is coming together in the faith that each of us is called to some specific purpose and provided some set of gifts, and then taking the time to discern for ourselves and for one another what that purpose and those gifts might be.

I'll say it again: joining a church in the spirit of unity is largely about discerning what each of our purpose and inspiration might be in this world, and doing so in the faith that each of us will have some distinct purpose to be differentiated from all others.

I'll say it again: joining a church isn't about becoming like everyone else, it's about becoming like yourself.

And so it goes that some will be apostles—that is, sent out to heal, to cheer, to liberate. (There go the doctors, the artists and story-tellers and entertainers. There go the social workers and public servants.) And some will be prophets—forth-telling of

what is and fore-telling of how what is might lead to what will be. (There go the scientists, the poets, the policy-makers.) Some will be evangelists—bearers of good news. (There go the preachers, the singers of sacred songs. There go the parents who tell their children, “I love you,” and the partners who say to their partners, “I love you,” and the friends who say, if not in word then at least in deed, to their friends, “I love you.”) Some will be pastors, guiding people in ways that give life, and some will be teachers, instructing people in wisdom and understanding. (There goes the Gould Farm staff.) But for each there is this task—that we must no longer be children, tossed about to and fro and blown about by every doctrine.

Wait. What?

That we must no longer be children: it’s strange, perhaps, this admonishment. After all, Jesus is remembered to have said that, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, you must become as a child.

Then, typically, we who mean to follow Jesus wonder at what it is about being a child that might opens them—us—up to entering such a kingdom. That they’re playful, we suppose, or that they’re wonder-full, that they’re guileless, that they’re unselfconscious: any and all of these are possibilities.

I think one not often pointed out is that “children” is a concept that implies relationship. We’ve come up with the notion of “child” as a legal status—anyone under the age of 21, under the age of 18, under the age of 16, under the age of 12. But, before it is a legal notion, it strikes me as a relational notion, a status that implies relationship: children are people who have parents, or *a* parent. They’re not free agents; they are protected by, and answer to, a higher authority, indeed a *loving* authority. So, in Jesus’ formulation that we must become as children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, I hear that we must become as people who have parents, one to whom we answer, one by whom we are protected, one who is parent to us all—protecting us all, loving us all, accounting for all.

(Jesse and I just spent a week with our two sons, my sister and her husband and their two sons, and occasionally my two step-cousins. We parents in the group spent a lot of time as arbiters of justice, making sure the play was fun and fair instead of mean and humiliating. And we could usually get the children to go along.

How wonderful it would be if we adults had such an arbiter of justice to make sure our play in this world is fun and fair. Then it'd be as if we were living amidst the kingdom of heaven.)

To be as children: to be as ones with a loving parent who advocates for us and disciplines (which is to say teaches us) us, who restrains us, binds us as in a swaddling cloth, and frees us to live in God's reign of love: yes, this *is* a blessed state.

Elsewhere, though, Jesus described critically those following him as children, which was to say fickle, changeable. The disciples were moody, often on the verge of tantrum. The crowd was unreliable, self-involved.

In other words, children aren't the panacea, and that we become as children isn't some flat, absolute command. This is the life of faith, after all, not life as dictated by an instruction manual. So to become as children, and to be no longer as children: this is the sort of paradox we should come to expect if we hope to follow Christ.

To become as children, and no longer to be as children, like in this way—that we not be blown to and fro by every doctrine that seduces and sounds plausible enough, that seems to work for that guy who's rich and successful, that seems to work for that woman who's pretty and happy.

It's easy to hear “doctrine” as having specifically religious connotations. But I don't think that's either the most helpful or the most accurate way to hear it. Really, I doubt very much our writer is concerned here with the early church of Ephesus coming under the sway of some other religion, as we understand religion. Our writer isn't worried about Christians attending yoga classes or tae kwon doe or converting to Islam, is instead worried about the people of the early church forgetting who they are, or never coming fully to know who they are—each of them rooted in some given sense of self.

I bet Ephesus could be a pretty wild place, at least as wild as Boston, so full of sheiks and all.

It's said that identity, as much as it's discovered, is also conferred. Yes, I suppose it's true that we “discover” ourselves: we craft and live into our chosen identities, I suppose. But more than that, or more fundamental to that, we have our

sense of self conferred onto us—by our parents who see us and know us, by our communities that hold us and correct us, by our first moments as living beings and by every moment to follow. We have this self conferred to us, or we don't—we don't gain such a sense of self, and then things can be a lot tougher to manage.

Marshall Poe is recently retired professor of history who taught at Harvard and Columbia among other places. He is also someone who once avowed himself an atheist. So, no one was as surprised as he was to find him publishing an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* a couple years ago entitled, “Colleges Should Teach Religion to Their Students.” In it, he's quick to clarify that he doesn't mean they should teach World Religions or Comparative Religions (which they already do). He writes, “I'm not talking about 'religious studies,' that is, the study of the phenomenon of religion. I'm talking about having imams, priests, pastors, rabbis, and other clerics teach the practice of their faiths. In college classrooms. To college students. For credit.”

He explains how he came to this unlikely conclusion. He got stuck with a task that had him getting to know a number of students better and more intimately than he ever had before.

What he discovered unnerved him.

He writes, “..many of the students I talked to were disappointed, confused, and lost.... To them, the college curriculum was a bewildering jumble of classes that led to nothing in particular...To them, campus life revolved around bread and circus... university-funded events—football games being the most important—in which drunkenness was the order of the day...

“I also learned that because they were adrift in so many ways, they suffered...There were those who drank too much and got into trouble. There were those who were full-blown alcoholics or drug addicts. There were those who were too depressed to go to classes. There were those who cut and starved themselves. There were those who thought of killing themselves and some who even tried... And, more than anything else, there were those who... just dropped out.”

He considered, then, this deep sea of confusion and distress, and among our culture's “best and brightest” no less, and he thought through what options there might be available, the most obvious being campus mental health services. Perhaps

these could be “beefed up,” he wrote. But these are expensive and time-consuming. One-on-one therapy has the potential to go deep, but for only a relative few, and likely only for those who are already so inclined.

For him, though, there was another, even more obvious option—though he was loathe to admit it. He writes of a time in his a life when things got “stormy” for him. Without going into any detail, he explains, “My spirit was broken and I did not think I could go on. Because of this crisis, my life was in shambles. I was lost. Being a well educated, middle-class type, I naturally sought the aid of psychiatrists. They were very helpful in treating the symptoms of my malady, but they could not identify, let alone fix, the core problem...

“What to do?” he asked himself, and he writes, “I had never been religious... But, in desperation, I began to attend what might generically be called a ‘spiritual program.’ Some call it a ‘religion’ and others call it a ‘practice.’ It doesn’t matter. The important point is that the people in this spiritual program embraced me, identified with me, and told me to *do* a specific set of things. There was talk of God, but they explained that *talking* was secondary to *doing*. I didn’t have to believe in God, they said, all I had to do was practice the teachings of the ‘religion.’ If I did that, they said, I would be relieved of much of my suffering.”

And so he was, and now, when people ask why it helped, he explains simply, “It gave me a ‘way of life.’ Without a way of life,” he claims, “one’s thoughts and actions tend to move at random, like water poured on a surface, spreading out and seeking the lowest places. With a way of life...one’s thoughts and actions move in a single direction, like water poured in a channel, moving in a single direction toward a final end...”

“Upon reflection,” he concludes, “it occurred to me that all religions, if seriously practiced, do precisely what this ‘religion’ had done for me: They teach you how to live. It is true, of course, that clerics often tell their flocks to believe things that are frankly unbelievable. And some even tell the faithful that if they don’t believe these incredible things they will suffer some harsh penalty... But most clerics of my acquaintance are not very interested in fire and brimstone. Rather, they are interested in making sure those in their care are spiritually fit. The way they do this—

and, so far as I know, always have—is to give people a higher purpose and a set of guidelines necessary to pursue that purpose. They bring order to the thoughts and actions of people whose thoughts and actions are naturally disordered. They give people a way of life.”

I have to say I appreciate the high regard Mr. Poe holds out for religion and its “clerics.” I also have to say I don’t think it’s misplaced. Most of my colleagues, like most of the people I know who practice religion, do so in this spirit that Mr. Poe lifts up. Finally, I agree with him that they “always have.” Certainly, this is what the writer to the Ephesians has in mind when he addresses what was perhaps a once-quite wild group of people.

It strikes me that, in his describing the church as a “whole body” whose head is Christ (a familiar Pauline image) he uses the word “ligament.” The church, and this congregation, is meant to be a whole body “joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped.” Ligament has at its root *ligare*, which also gives us the word “religion.” And this unlocks whole sermons of thoughts for me, the heart of which is God’s giving to us of religion, God’s caution to us about religion, God’s hope that this might be a binding force but one that doesn’t bind too tightly as to ensnare or bind to exclusively as to leave whole swaths of people and the creation out.

This is the trick. This is *our* trick. If we mean to follow Christ, we will become a religious people, but we must be so by grace for the sake freedom and life for all—for to do anything otherwise is no longer to follow Christ.

This is our purpose. This is our paradox. Ultimately, this is our end.

That we have such things in life, which gives life shape: thanks be to God.