

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost  
Sermon 8.5.18  
Scripture:

Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,<sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,<sup>3</sup> making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,<sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism,<sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.<sup>7</sup> But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.<sup>8</sup> Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."<sup>9</sup> (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?<sup>10</sup> He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)<sup>11</sup> The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,<sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,<sup>13</sup> until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.<sup>14</sup> We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.<sup>15</sup> But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,<sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

John 6:24-35

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.<sup>25</sup> When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"<sup>26</sup> Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."<sup>27</sup> Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.<sup>28</sup> Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?"<sup>29</sup> Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."<sup>30</sup> So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?"<sup>31</sup> Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."<sup>32</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.<sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."<sup>34</sup> They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."<sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Marshall Poe is a recently retired professor who taught at Harvard and Columbia, and more recently at U. Mass. Amherst and Amherst College. He's 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* entitled, "Colleges Should Teach Religion to Their Students."

This was a few years ago but it's stayed with me.

In it, he was quick to clarify that he didn't mean they should teach World Religions or Comparative Religions (which they already do). He wrote, "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."

I'll tell you, I think I'd love teaching a course like that.

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, and what he discovered unnerved him.

"Many of the students I talked to were disappointed, confused, and lost," he wrote. "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..."

He continues, "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 one was 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 only for a relative few, and likely only for those who are already so inclined.

Another option occurred to him, though he was loath to admit it. He tells of a time in his 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.

As for 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.”

This spiritual fitness: it seems it was of concern to Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. “We must no longer be children,” it’s written. “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine [or opinion or ideology], by people’s trickery [or demagoguery], by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...”

For what it’s worth, this letter of Paul to the Ephesians might neither have been written by Paul nor written specifically to the Ephesians—so my own additions there maybe weren’t too unorthodox. Consider, the earliest extant versions of this book don’t feature an addressee. In

those versions, there's nothing like what we find in current Bibles: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Instead the earliest versions just dive right in: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love."

-which gets to second suggestion that this isn't Paul of Tarsus writing. The style just isn't his; it doesn't sound like Paul. The sentences are much too long and complex, not nearly as meandering and exploratory as Paul's typically are.

I don't mean this as a dig. Paul was hardly incapable of complexity. It's just that he was the first one to think through all that "the Christ event" seems to mean. Really, we should remember that Paul was the earliest interpreter (that we know of, at least) of Christ and the Church, which is reflected in his writing. His style was a sort of rhetorical trial-and-error and trying again, whereas this letter feels more liturgical and lyrical, concerning matters that had already been thought through to some extent, if not settled.

Finally, there's an absence here that's striking. In this "letter" there's no talk of how to integrate Gentiles with Jews as they form this new community—and this was one of Paul's chief concerns. It was also one of the earliest problems of the Church, beginning as a Jewish enterprise, but moving quickly into the Gentile world, and all too soon becoming a mostly Gentile enterprise. But now, with Ephesians, it's as if this is a problem already solved—or better to say now the problem of integration and community-making is a more confusing one than just how to help Jews and Gentiles get along because now it's about how to help everyone get along with everyone.

I don't want to get too anachronistic here. I don't mean to imply that the early church was facing the same problems that our cultural attempts to combine individualism and pluralism have presented to us. No, of course the early Church wasn't attempting individualism and pluralism at the same time because the Ancient Near East was hardly a time of individualism like we live amidst today. Though the city of Ephesus, which was already centuries old at the time of this letter's writing, might well have been pluralistic, a cosmopolitan crossroads, the people living there could hardly be thought of as "individualistic" in their self-imagining, or really even as "self-imagining"—self-imagining itself a notion occurring mostly to "Modern Man."

There's never been a time like the one we're living amidst, or a society like ours. Really, we're living out a social experiment in understanding the human being as radically individual and answerable only to that one's self, while also expected to "tolerate" everyone else's radical individualism, which though often comes shaded with "identity" that implies a sub-group belonging and an other-group excluding—all while unmoored from traditional practices and connected to people all over the world.

This "freedom from...": it's both blessing and curse, if you ask me.

I've recently finished reading Jonah Goldberg's book *Suicide of the West*, in which he argues that the last few centuries have ushered in an historic miracle, which he even calls "The Miracle," a time of prosperity and health, long life and free agency, though a thing we in this late Modern moment seem all too eager to dismiss or undermine. Goldberg warns that we do this at our own peril.

Now I'm reading Erich Fromm's midcentury masterpiece, *Escape from Freedom*, in which he argues that "Modern Man" has inherited a legacy of freedom from the Protestant Reformation that creates both a positive freedom—a freedom *for* something, but also a negative freedom—a freedom *from* something. And this "freedom from" when uncoupled from "freedom for" creates a welter of personal anxiety which can become unbearable.

It's all put me in mind of what one professor taught at Divinity School. The course was the Jewish Liturgical Year and he himself was an Orthodox Jew. He told the story of the Exodus as a move for the people in serving one master to serving another. They'd become free from slavery in Egypt, freed to become servants, or (as Paul would later consider himself) "prisoners" of the Lord. And he got real push-back on this point, Professor Levenson did. "No," us mostly liberal Protestants felt quietly to have decided. "No, freedom is *freedom*." Now they didn't have to serve anyone but themselves.

Erich Fromm would likely go with Prof. Levenson's version of what real freedom actually is—because the self-actualizing sort is oversold, so much so that, according to Fromm, "Modern Man" might seek release from it by throwing himself behind any authoritarian strongman to come along. Fromm wrote *Escape from Freedom* in reflecting on the *Fuhrer*. I'm reading it thinking of more contemporary examples of blind and foolish following behind reckless and nonsensical "strong" men.

They make interesting companion pieces, *Suicide of the West* and *Escape from Freedom*, one considering the last few centuries with awe at the progress humankind has made, what with the twin miracles of liberal democracy and marketplace capitalism, and the other considering the last few centuries as altogether more burdensome than simply “freeing” for the sake of human thriving. Funny that the one who sees progress would loath to consider himself a progressive, while the other who speaks from a place of caution is a classic liberal if ever there were one.

As for this ancient book, Ephesians, our writer here does seem to have as a problem, in regarding the congregation or community of congregations being addressed, general acrimony, collective disharmony. The people of Ephesians were perhaps not feeling themselves as of one body and one Spirit, called to serve one Lord by virtue of their one faith and one baptism. Otherwise, why say it? Otherwise, why emphasize the oneness of their purpose, though the many-ness of their gifts given for the service of that one purpose? This, which Paul already said elsewhere, though less elegantly, more as an idea in development and scattered over a few of his letters: why say it again here?

I’ll tell you why: because it’s a thing that will never not need to be said. After all, the puzzle as to how to be an individual among a group is a perennial one—and frankly I think it’s an easier one to solve when it’s about the clashing of grand narratives (Jews vs. Gentiles, Communists vs. Capitalists). I think it’s a lot harder to solve when it involves instead isolated, even atomized, individuals crashing into one another, trying to elbow their way into and out of belonging without any framework or storyline to give the struggle shape or purpose—no pursuit other than “rights,” what it is my *right* to do, what it is your *right* to do. For what shall we do when my *right* clashes with your *right*? And, really, is such rightfulness really the highest good we can imagine? Yes, it’s a lot harder when it’s more like Thomas Hobbes’ prophesied war of all against all. This founding father of the modern liberal secular state: he prophesied as much that we could so dissolve into a war of all against all.

And so can go the day wherein we fight over everything, big and small, massive crimes and little sleights. People will get shot over handicap parking spaces because of the right to “stand your ground.” People will clash where religious freedom and freedom of expression amount to discrimination in the marketplace of wedding cakes. The fighting is everywhere, and some of them are worth the struggle, but how can you tell which from which? The other day, I was making my

way slowly south along North Street in Pittsfield, watching the lane of parallel parked cars alongside me as one ahead seemed to be ready to pull out. It had me miss a pedestrian coming from the opposite direction through the crosswalk—though nothing dangerous. As I drove past and he approached, he flipped me the bird and told me through my open window, “F... off.” “I was being careful,” I wanted to cry. “I was trying to do the right thing!” I wanted to yell in his face.

This elbowing our way through: it hurts. And sometimes I can’t even figure out what we’re fighting about, other than trying to make sure the boundary line between me and you doesn’t cut my turf any smaller than yours, and is maybe just a *little bit bigger* than yours, just in case.

I’m exhausted. You?

Submitting religious practice to the marketplace of ideas invites a relativism, a cynicism that I admit I worry about. After all, I believe there’s truth in what we profess here, and what we confess—and it feels weird to put truth in a milieu where it’s to woo and win adherents as Mr. Poe imagines it. On the other hand, why not? It’s like Internet dating, which in the beginning people scoffed at—what an embarrassing thing to have to resort to! But in the intervening decades, it’s resulted in some happy marriages. So, really, why not?

I believe what we do here could stand up amidst scrutiny, could win people to the project because, to put it bluntly, I think it works. I think the task of gathering in a beloved community for the sake of self-giving love, and the means of accomplishing this task, in caring for one another, in being honest in our speech and responsible in our action, in seeking wisdom together as we move toward a future that is bright with abundant life for all: I think this works. It does at least for me. It calms me down. It soothes my soul. It gives order to my living as I know what to prioritize, measuring all possibilities up against the cross of sacrificial love.

I realize Mr. Poe’s idea is a fantasy, or is at least one for now. Meanwhile, we might consider how each of us could profess our faith in ways that give it credit, if not also ourselves. There’s a lot at stake—a lot more than grades. But I think we’re up to it.

Thanks be to God.