

A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost 2015
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As I said a couple of weeks ago, we don't really know who wrote the letter to the Ephesians. It says at the beginning that it is from Paul, but most New Testament scholars, in studying the content, have decided that is unlikely. And we don't really know to whom the letter was written. The earliest and best ancient manuscripts we have don't mention Ephesus in the salutation, only "the Saints," and there are no references to specific circumstances in the church in Ephesus either. So we're really reading from the letter of mmmmp to the mmmmp.

It's a fine letter, though, that has been in circulation since early times and accepted into the canon of scripture from the start. And it is very faithful to the themes and teachings of St. Paul – so much so that the great scholar C. H. Dodd, although he doubted Paul's authorship, called the letter to the Ephesians "the crown of Paulinism." And it was certainly common in late antiquity to attribute one's writings to the person who most influenced them – classical literature is littered with "Pseudo-this" and "Pseudo-thats," writing in the style of their namesakes. The letter has one theme: that the faithful are the Body of Christ. And it seems to be focused on how a diverse community, one made up of Jews and gentiles, newcomers and old-timers, rich and poor, can live in unity and serve the world as the Body of Christ. We can infer from the exhortations in the letter that the

intended audience was having trouble with this, and that Jewish converts were having a hard time overcoming their resistance to violating the Old Testament bans on having dealings with gentiles, the rich were being selfish with their money and food, arguments were rife and unsettled, and, from the repeated direction to speak the truth, that there was plenty of dishonesty among the “saints.”

In general, it seems that the letter is addressed to a community that has been drawn to the Good News that Jesus spread, but has been unwilling, unable, or merely afraid to be transformed by that Good News. And the Good News: that God loves us unconditionally, that we are meant to live in peace and love with one another and with God, and that we are called to make that Good News true for the rest of the world by forgiveness, healing, feeding and liberating of all who are in need – that Good News is nothing if not transformative.

The Reign of God, as Jesus describes it, is a worldwide community where there is forgiveness for all, and love for all, and enough for all. The worldview that is implied by Jesus’ teaching – that the community is more important than the individual, but that the individual has power to build the community; that living as though there were plenty for all insures that there will be plenty for all; that loving and forgiving your enemies may transform them but will certainly transform you – this is a worldview that is attractive to contemplate but sometimes terrifying to adopt.

What if, after I share what I have, there isn't enough? What if I love my enemies and they still hate and hurt me? What if we welcome strangers into our midst and they take over our community so I become the stranger?

These are, of course, reasonable fears. Any one of those things might happen.

Some of them, from time to time, probably will happen, probably have happened to you.

The world around us is not yet the transformed world of the Reign of God.

Transforming it is a difficult business, because the old ways – greed, divisiveness, enmity, insularity, fear-mongering – have many rewards for those who stick to them and sometimes have terrible consequences for those who oppose them – just ask Jesus.

And sometimes, no matter how inspired you are by the vision of a world of peace and plenty that Jesus has put before us, it's just too hard, just too frightening, just too wearying to keep at the task of building that world.

Which is why, although our letter from Pseudo-Paul to the Pseudo-Ephesians gives lots of practical advice for individual followers of Jesus, things like: “speak the truth to our neighbors... do not let the sun go down on your anger...let no evil talk come out of your mouths...put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you,” still the

main message of the letter is that we are the Body of Christ. There is much that we, as individuals can do to help accomplish the Reign of God, but there is much more that we can do together. Indeed, it is only as a community that we can help one another through the difficulty, the fear, the weariness that we are sure to encounter as we try to transform a world that often forcefully resists transformation.

You are not the Body of Christ. You are not the Bread of Life. You are not the True Vine or the Good Shepherd, or the Way or the Truth or the Life. But we are all of those things. We together can feed the hungry with material and spiritual food and drink, lead others into the sheltering embrace of God, guard and heal and teach and forgive and welcome in a way that none of us can do alone.

Indeed, the most difficult instruction from the letter to the Ephesians, “Therefore be imitators of God,” would seem a tall order if any of us had to do it alone. The imitation of Christ, an ancient focus of Christianity, seems hard enough. But imitating God? Really? Who can do that?

Well, the truth is, we can. We *can* love the world in the expansive, generous way that God does. We *can* offer the same comfort God offers to all who are in need: “I am with you.” We *can* fill the world with love and kindness, food and healing, art and beauty, warmth and shelter, peace and welcome, until there is no room left for fear or greed or hate. It won’t be easy, but with God’s help, we can do it.

Where to start? With honesty. “Putting away falsehood,” we are told a little later in Ephesians, “let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors.” This is more than just honesty, more than “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” It is “Capital ‘T’ truth – “I am the way and the truth and the life” truth that we are called to share, and the context for it is the famous passage “speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Christ.”

We imitate God best when we do that hardest of things, speaking the truth in love. This is hard because in order to do it, we must both know the truth and love the person to whom we are speaking. Those things come naturally to God, but to us each one is impossible without God. But bear in mind that the two things are not actually separable. Love is God’s ultimate truth. And anything that cannot be said in love is not, in fact, the truth.

Whatever cannot be said in love is not the truth.

Remember this when challenges arise, when anger or mistrust or differences of vision or goal make mutual ministry or even mutual conversation difficult. In such times, and no congregation is free from them, it is all too easy to use facts as weapons or as snares, and to try to make our opinions and feelings into truths for the whole community. But if those facts and feelings and opinions that consume us cannot be spoken in love, they are not, in the end, the truth. And our God demands of us that we find a loving way to speak what is on our hearts if we are to say it at

all. And if we learn to speak only in love to our own community, we will then be able to speak only in love to our divided church, to our hurting neighbors, and to the world. And that will make all the difference.

God is Love. Jesus is Truth. So to speak the truth in Love, we must speak of the love of God that we know in Jesus – we must tell, and live, the vision of a world transformed by love that has inspired us, drawn us together in community, and impels us out into a needy world.

Amen.