

“Called Into Fellowship”

Numbers 27:15-19; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9;
Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13; Matthew 18:15-22

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We have been talking about the story of our lives and the way a story builds. We have been talking about the characters of the story—human beings and God—and how in that story a tension is created. We began to talk about that kind of tension as God invites us to be a people together. We recognize that we struggle with that because there’s a tension we experience with those who we are not sure we want on the inside and those we do want on the outside. We struggle with relationships. God has invited us to overcome this struggle.

Then we recognize that those struggles, even as we form a family of faith, don’t go away. Certainly in our society they haven’t gone away. We have these struggles with one another. How can we go through this week and not realize that the allegations that were such a focus of the end of this week bring up a continual struggle with partisan perspectives. We struggle with understanding. We don’t understand somebody else’s perspective all the time and why one believes something and one believes another thing.

We also recognize that this conversation has brought up very hard memories for way too many. We know that, whatever that particular case is all about, there are too many cases of sexual abuse and struggle. What it points to, I think, is the nature of being human. We have struggled forever, it feels like, with our inability to deal with each other in ways that are not violent, that do not cause pain. This is a picture of somebody’s conception of Mary, the mother of Jesus, probably at the crucifixion. The pain in her eyes is a reminder of the pain we cause one another and the ways human beings too often are the cause of each other’s pain. We struggle with treating one another humanely.

We see that God doesn’t always give us an exact or clear answer as to why all that pain is there, but God certainly has entered into our pain, entered into the struggle of being human and the way we struggle at getting along together. And God invites us, I believe, to realize that through God’s grace there is another way. It is a way that we don’t have to go alone. We’re called into a community to encourage and enable one another, to build each other up in faith. It says in First Corinthians, “God is faithful and has called you into the fellowship of his Son.” You see, I think we’ve been called into that fellowship because it’s incredibly hard for us to deal with the ways we cause each other pain, the ways we struggle with one another, the ways we struggle to be good on our own. Even if we see that Jesus is leading us and shows us the way, doing it on our own is hard. Indeed, we’re called to become the body of Christ, and thus, to be transformed.

We see our history. I’ve struggled with our history, in fact, after I’ve gone to Scotland and heard about the various forms of torture that they created there. I don’t

understand that history. I don't understand why one person would cause pain to another. It feels to me that Christ is calling us away from that inclination in human nature and into a different way. To do that, he's calling us to be a people, to be the body of Christ, to be a people together. When our congregation did our discernment process, we saw our way forward together as a journey which included togetherness as the body of Christ because that's where Christ calls us, is in such a body.

Yet, even after being called, after coming together, I wish that we could say that once the community formed the struggle was over, and yet we hear Paul's words. He's writing to the Ephesians and says, "I beg you..." Isn't that interesting? He's writing to the church and he's saying, "I beg you, lead a life worthy of your calling to which you have been called with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." He's describing the church, or the body of Christ, as a place where there is gentleness and patience, humility, bearing with one another in love.

He's going to go on here and he's not saying, "It's because you all know exactly how right it all is." Or that it's about Paul rather than Apollos. In fact, he talks about that in another place when he says, "It's not either one of us. It's not the person." What is it he identifies as central? "As we go forward, there is one body, one Spirit, just as you are called into the one hope of your calling. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all who is above all, and through all, and in all."

I think when I get in the midst of human conflict, I forget about anything but that conflict. I forget about anything but my feelings and how those other folks are bad. I forget about the one God who is in all and through all, the one faith, the one hope.

So as we are called into the body of Christ, even Christ recognizes that even though we have this one hope, this one baptism, this one Lord, we're still going to struggle. So he gives us a way. He says, "When you encounter these kinds of struggles, talk to each other. Talk directly to each other. Don't go to a third person and tell them how bad this other person was. Go to that person and talk about what the problem is.

It's interesting to me that when you hear him say to go and speak directly, he says, "and if that other person listens to you." He doesn't say, "When the other person agrees you're right." He says, "When the other person listens to you." He's suggesting there begins a dialog. The other person cares enough about the relationship to listen and try to understand. I would suggest that in their time, listening meant that you changed. If you listened to somebody, you were changed by that listening. But if a person won't get into the dialog, won't listen to you, add more people.

Then the step that's really hard for us—bring it to your community. Now, in today's society it feels like there is nobody who should tell me what to do. Maybe my family. Maybe my family can hold me accountable, but outside that, we don't expect our larger community to hold us accountable unless we break a law. There are some limits, I guess. And why would the church hold somebody accountable? What's happening that

they are being held accountable for? Is it the fence that is the problem? No, it's the broken relationship. It matters in a community of faith if we have broken relationships. So the church has a responsibility, an accountability function. That's one reason we have a body. We're trying to help each other have good relationships, and when we struggle with those, the body should help us.

What happens if we won't allow that? You think of them as tax collectors and gentiles. I think the punch line to that is how did Jesus treat tax collectors and gentiles? He went and had dinner with them. He recognized when they had changed.

Jesus recognizes we're going to have some struggles with one another. We're not always going to see eye to eye. We're going to have miscommunications. We're going to want something and not pay attention to the needs of another because we are so focused on what we want. There are all kinds of ways that we will cause problems for each other. But our calling, as we become the body of Christ in the fellowship of Jesus Christ, is to try to work it out, to begin to be that place where the love of God is known.

I have always loved that phrase because you can think of it in two ways. If we're a place where the love of God is known, we know God's love for us. But it's also where the love of God is known because it is shown in the people, who we are and where we are. The question is how hard do we try to be the body of Christ, to be the people who try to live out what Christ is showing us, to love one another in spite of the ways we make each other mad, or in spite of the ways we disagree, or in spite of the ways whatever.

I think that's what Peter's question is about. How hard do I try? Can I just give it seven times? And basically, Jesus says you don't quit trying. Sometimes I think we think forgiveness is about absolution. I think that what Jesus is showing us in this idea is that forgiveness is about wanting good relationships. Forgiveness is recognizing our brokenness and wanting something better. Forgiveness is wanting the love of God to be held between us and before us. We want to recognize that we are part of one body, because we have one hope, one faith, one baptism, one Lord, one Savior, one God, who is above all, and through all, and in all. I find that an incredible challenge to try to be a disciple of Christ. I think it's a challenge of a lifetime, a challenge for the community of faith. Amen.