

## Highfield Rd Uniting Church

### ***Ephesians 4: 1- 16***      ***One in diversity***

This week I begin a series of sermons on Ephesians. There are differing understandings of who wrote this letter and why, but in these sermons I am going to refer to the author as Paul for simplicity. In my view, the fact that the Early Church judges this letter to be worthy of scripture is a bit more important than who wrote it and where and why it was written. If it wasn't Paul who wrote the letter, it was a disciple of Paul seeking to spread his teachings.

Ephesians is a powerful piece of writing that has been very influential over the centuries in moving people beyond the concept of personal salvation to an understanding of what it really means to be saved. We are jumping in at the middle of the letter – chapter 4. I don't propose to give you a summary of the first three chapters except to say that they are about theology: what God has done in Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to Him. In Christ, God's chosen people become the whole world, and what God has reconciled in grace should not be divided again.

At the end of chapter 3, you can almost sense an unasked question from Paul's readers – “So what?” What does all that theology mean in the daily living out of our faith? Then Paul begins the second half of this letter with “Therefore”. He is addressing the unspoken “So what?” and his first response is about unity.

Unity does not have to mean uniformity. Reconciliation in Christ united all the different people and cultures in Ephesus, and indeed throughout all Asia Minor, in this new thing called ‘church’. But this didn't mean that all members of the new church were expected to be the same. Instead, Paul talks of the “unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace”, which leads on to a great statement that sounds a bit like a liturgical creed or hymn: “one body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”

Paul then quickly shifts to talking about the gifts that we are each given. Some people look at this list and see a church structure with roles or ‘offices of the church’. But Paul sees them as gifts and says there is no expectation that we are all gifted the same way or called to be multi-talented. From other letters of Paul, we are familiar with this idea of gifts and the image of gifts working together as one body. But here, the idea is taken one step further. The named gifts identify special functions which are the organs working together as one body to build up all the saints in ministry. But there are many other small gifts and abilities which are the ligaments holding the whole body together.

All of us have the same high calling of representing the reconciliation of God to the world. We are united in this task – united in faith and hope and the one Spirit – but we are diversified in how we contribute to the task.

Some of us are doers – we contribute mainly through practical actions.

Some of us are prayers – we contribute mainly through prayer and worship and caring.

Some of us are visitors – we contribute mainly through connecting and uplifting.

These diverse gifts and actions are the ligaments. They are necessary for the whole body to function and stay unified in its calling.

You will notice that the wonderful list of ‘ones’ doesn’t include “one church”. If this is a circular letter, rather than a letter just to Ephesus, then it makes sense that Paul isn’t expecting all the churches in Asia Minor to be the same. The situation, the people and the needs are not the same in Laodicea as they are in Ephesus, or in Smyrna or Colossae or Philadelphia. A similar point is made in Revelation with the messages to the seven churches, all different. The ‘one church’ is many centuries into the future from this letter and this idea of diversity in unity. In fact, the ‘one church’ says more about being a part of the Roman Empire than it does about theology.

The ‘one church’ has splintered many times through the centuries, in great emotion and turmoil. But as time moves on after a split and the emotion dies down, the resulting denominations ultimately become expressions of diversity rather than difference when we look at what they all hold in common. All denominations can happily quote the list of ‘ones’ from Ephesians – “one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” – although the ‘one baptism’ might raise a few concerns. Where there are differences, these speak of the diversity of gifts and ministry. Groups like the Canterbury Council of Churches, for example, take up that diversity and focus it towards our united calling and task – the reconciliation of God in Christ to a world that is broken and hurting and in need of this reconciliation in so many places and ways.

The first “So what?” that comes from all the wonderful theology in Ephesians is about how we represent God to the world. Paul was writing to a divided community – Jew, Gentile, slave, free, Roman, barbarian, etc. But within this culture of division, a group of people was claiming to be ‘one’ and joining together despite their differences. This was a powerful expression of the God of reconciliation.

Today, despite our claim to be a multi-cultural society, our cross-cultural congregations are seen to be making a similar statement. In fact, within our culture of the individual, simply joining together in a harmonious community can be just as powerful an expression of God’s reconciling grace. Such communities are recognising that although we are different – in gifts, in understanding, in background and even in theology – we can be united in a community of faith and together can represent one God, one Lord, one faith and one hope.

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