

**August 12, 2018**

**Ephesians 4: 1-6, 11-16, 4: 25 - 5:2**

Prayer: O Lord, we ask your blessing on the words spoken here today. We ask that they be your words, and that they be clear and true. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### **The Aspen Question**

I received a phone call last week from a researcher at The Aspen Institute.

The Aspen Institute is a nonpartisan research center and think tank. Since 1949, it has gathered all sorts of thought leaders, scholars, government leaders and creative people to address the world's most complex problems.

It started in Aspen, Colorado, but is now headquartered in Washington, DC. It has satellite locations in the States, and partners in Berlin, Rome, Paris, Prague, Tokyo, Mexico City and other global cities.

*So what in the world did they want with Triune?*

It seems that one of their many, many, many research projects is looking at how people welcome other people into community.

How can we prevent isolation?

How do we build bonds internally and bridges externally?

And if we do, does it have value? Is living in relationship an answer for some of our human problems?

I talked with the young researcher for an hour, and her questions made me look deep into what we are doing and why.

Because as she pointed out, you can offer services in all manner of areas – drug rehab, homelessness, legal services, hunger relief – without trying to build community.

So why did we choose community? Why did we choose communal worship, communal meals, a communal art room, Round Tables, Triune Circles, Playback Café, AA and NA meetings, the small group mentality of JustFaith, communal living at Jasmine Road?

It grew out of our Christian beliefs. We believe we are following Jesus's instructions when we invite people into relationship. We believe we are living out the gospel in the way he showed us through his life, his gathering of disciples, his living among the shoving crowds.

The Lord we follow did not live in isolation upon a mountaintop, dispensing wisdom. He lived among us. He got on the bus.

Such a life can be troublesome. There will always be disagreement and discord when we live in community. That's what Paul addresses in his letter to the believers at Ephesus.

Today's Scripture is a long passage about unity in the body of Christ. Paul talks about how we are to live in unity. How we are to live in community. What our behavior there should look like.

Because the passage is so long, we are going to skip around a little. If you'd like to read along, we will start with **Ephesians 4:1:**

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....

Then skip down to verse 11:

<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 knitted 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.

Let's stop here for a moment.

Now clearly, Paul is addressing the church. He is addressing how we are to live in *Christian* community.

So when the Aspen Institute researcher asked me if I knew of instances where internal bonding was taking place, even if there was no reaching across socioeconomic lines, I said, "Oh my goodness, yes. Probably every partner church we have."

All the churches I've ever been in – Overbrook Baptist, First Baptist Taylors, First Baptist Greenville – were wonderful about caring for their members. Visiting the sick and homebound. Bringing meals to the bereaved. Providing meals after funerals.

That is where churches shine, and that is tremendously important to the fabric of our society.

*So why build bridges to whole other groups of people? Why not simply take care of the people who find their way to your sanctuary?*

The decision to reach outward grows out of Jesus's instructions to care for the widow and orphan, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, welcome the stranger. That's why almost every Christian church has a missions committee, a mission outreach, a mission project, mission trips.

Yet, those projects can be done outside the notion of community. In fact, they usually are.

The researcher and I talked for a long time about why we at Triune have tried to turn that mission model on its head. Why we've tried to bring Greenvillians of all socioeconomic and racial and political and gender-orientations into one place. *Is there a down side?* she asked.

*Oh, yeah.* I had to admit that we have stealing and fighting and violence in ways most churches don't. We have transience and turnover in ways most churches don't. We have a lot of failures and a lot of things that haven't worked well.

Paul knew that whether a congregation had the diversity we have or not, there would be issues. Whenever we live in human community, there are issues. Just ask anyone who's lived through a church split – even when everyone was the same race and middle-class and theologically conservative.

That's why Paul calls us to live in humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to live in peaceful harmony. And then he gets more specific.

Jumping down to **verse 25 of Ephesians 4:**

25 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. <sup>26</sup>Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup>and do not make room for the devil. <sup>28</sup>Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work

honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

<sup>29</sup>Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. <sup>30</sup>And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

<sup>31</sup>Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, <sup>32</sup>and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

**5**<sup>1</sup>Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, <sup>2</sup>and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

We have talked often about this passage because I think it's one of the most important in the New Testament. Paul gives us rules for the new life we are to live as Christians. The old rules do not apply any longer for the new people we have become.

But every piece of it – every single piece of it – is about living in relationship, living in community.

I know that the Aspen Institute is not looking at community as a theological or religious construct. And that is fine. I think they are right that there is something inherently good about community, whether it is in a church setting or not.

Some of you may remember when Vince and I returned from an anniversary trip to the Turks and Caicos Islands in 2015. Turks and Caicos are in the Caribbean, a part of the British West Indies.

In our hotel room was a magazine article that explained that the natives of the islands are called *belongers*. *Belongers*. It gives them a certain status regarding citizenship and travel and so forth.

I have used that word in almost every speech I've given since then. Don't we all want to be *belongers*? Isn't there something inherently good about belonging – to a family, to a neighborhood, to a small group, to a church, to a civic organization, to a city, to a community? Don't we all want to be accepted and valued and cherished?

This is the society Paul is describing when he tells us “**we are members of one another....**” He might just as well say, *We belong to one another*.

I have just spent two days traveling through rural Georgia with a group of JustFaith members. We visited Koinonia Farm, where our own Nikki Day lived for a time.

Koinonia was a radical experiment in Christian interracial living that started in the 1940s. That community paid a heavy price as they were terrorized by the Ku Klux Klan,

banned from nearby churches and denied the purchase of seed and equipment in downtown Americus.

We also visited Jubilee which is another intentional Christian community that spun off from Koinonia and became a refugee resettlement community. Back when refugees from Vietnam and Afghanistan and Iraq and Africa and Central America were coming into the States more freely, often fleeing genocides, they lived for two months, intensely studying English, deep in the woods of Comer, Georgia. Living in intentional community with a group of Americans who saw their welcome as Christian witness.

That might not be for all of us – there were a lot of gnats involved. But what a witness to our faith!

Every Thanksgiving, about 300 international guests return to Jubilee for a potluck meal, sharing their stories of the lives they've staked out in the United States and Canada.

In secular human society, we have laws – laws for everything from stopping at a red light to a ban on murder. Most of us follow those laws without thinking.

But in Paul's Christianity, the guidelines are stricter. For in many cases, they require us to lay down our human nature, our self-centeredness, and concentrate on the community.

**“Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil,”** says Paul. **“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is useful for building up....”**

Anger, evil talk – those erupt only in community.

And like the letter writer James who cautions us to tame our tongues, Paul cautions us to watch our speech. To think about those who will *hear us* in community.

The like-minded James even uses a similar metaphor of the human body: **“So also the tongue is a small member, yet boasts of great exploits,”** he warns. **“How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body....”** (James 3: 5-6)

We burn down community with an evil tongue.

We build community by kind speech, words of welcome. And occasionally we build community ... by holding our tongues.

But living in community also means living in tension at times, holding each other accountable for our behaviors. **“Thieves must give up stealing,”** says Paul. **“Rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands....”**

One of my greatest heartaches here is our offenders’ list – a list of people who have been put out of the dining hall for a month or two months or indefinitely. We have asked many people to leave for stealing or fighting or panhandling or cursing at our staff.

You might think we are doing that out of our human nature, out of the bitterness and wrath and anger that Paul mentions. And sometimes you might be right. I hope not, but I’m sure there have been those occasions.

But what we’re *trying* to do by not allowing stealing and violence, lying and abusive behavior is to create a safe, welcoming place for those who need our help. So we are asking

people to leave *not out of our anger*, but out of a desire to make it a more hospitable, Christ-like environment for hurting people.

I hope we are following Scripture when we make those decisions. We are certainly trying to.

Because Paul also writes, **“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”**

If that’s not hard enough, Paul issues a heady challenge at the conclusion of this passage. **“Therefore be imitators of God....”**

*Be imitators of God.*

As I said, we’ve brought up this passage several times before. It doesn’t say “be imitators of Jesus” who at least walked on earth as a human and understood our anger and bitterness and wrangling. Who understood our outrage when we are treated unfairly. But **“be imitators of God.”**

Be imitators of a God who came to earth to show us a radical way to live in community. To show us a radical way to die unjustly.

The action of Jesus on the cross was not rational, was not human nature, was not fair in any sense of the word. And yet, we are asked to behave in a similar way if we are to follow him. We are asked to behave in a similar way if we are to live in Christian community.

The old ways, the ways of human nature, simply won't do anymore. Not if we are to sincerely follow Christ.

So do I believe, as the Aspen Institute postulated, that there is value in welcoming people into community? Value in worshiping together, eating together, studying together (like JustFaith), encouraging together (like Circles)?

I absolutely do. But I believe it on more than an intellectual, think-tank level.

I believe it because it was what our Lord modeled.

Amen.