

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, August 2, 2009
Ephesians 4: 1-16

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Why do you go to church? Can you articulate what is it that you look for, maybe even find, when you go – whether here or anywhere else? Why is it important to you? There are lots of reasons for sure – maybe you have a need for some quiet time, you come to worship – whatever that means to you. Maybe you come out of habit. I've asked confirmation classes over the years that very question – once some of them have answered what you'd expect – that my parents make me come – they often say they come to church to find God. We're in God's house so God must be here. That makes sense, doesn't it. We might respond the same way.

Alice Parker writes in The Color Purple, “Tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folk did too. They come to church to share God, not find God... God is inside you and inside everyone else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifests itself, even if you are not looking, or don't know what you are looking for.”

It seems to me that most of us come to church, come to worship, because somehow, in some way, we have a deep and profound need to be connected – to God and to each other. Of course, we don't need to come to church to find God – if we can open ourselves to see, realize, and own it, we know God is always, always present. We know God works in and through other people, that God's wonderful creation points us to the majesty and even to the peace of God, God's presence.

Is worship, being in church, the only place we can find God? Of course not – although being here for many of us helps us focus on God's presence in a different way. Maybe makes us more open to God's presence. Maybe that makes us more aware of the center – maybe being here together gives us a grounding that we so desperately yearn.

Our passage this morning was written about 90 AD – maybe by Paul, maybe by one of his closest disciples. It is a letter to the struggling early church – a letter that is a strong faith statement, a letter with a variety of ethical instructions, a letter that brings us right to the center of our Christian faith. It's a letter that has many implications to us, both as individuals and as a church, the gathered Body of Christ.

The faith statement comes first: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all. All of us are one in Christ – this is the bedrock of the church, then and now. And these words are familiar to us – from every baptism that we do – at the moment of our baptism we become part of the Body, part of the unity of faith shared by all Christians everywhere.

Then come the ethical instructions – how we live into the faith statement. Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love. It's easy, I think, to slide over these statements – sure, that's how we're supposed to live. That's what living Christianity is all about – especially in church. But it's not so simple is it – patience –

that's my favorite. Remember the old bumper sticker that says, "Give me patience – NOW." I'm sure I'll be working on that one all my life.

And there's "bearing with one another" – haven't you heard speakers say, "bear with me" and know that you're in for a long speech. I've heard it often both at long meetings when I was at the bank and also at a number of church meetings. "Bear with me" often has truly tested my patience. The point is, I think, that all these instructions are there for us to remind us of what it means to live the life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. And we all need those reminders from time to time – I know I do.

But the text that really struck me as I thought about my message this morning though, is the caution that we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind. We have to be grounded. We have to be centered. We have to be in touch with the bedrock – because that's where our lives begin, isn't it. If our bedrock is shaky, so are our lives.

The image that keeps coming into my mind is that of a whirlpool – and it seems to me that we spend so terribly much energy swimming against the pull to the center – it's certainly clear during the school year I think. We are so busy – many of us – that we are swept along with the tide, with the current, leaving us no time or energy to get back to the center, to ground ourselves so we can meet the challenges of daily living. Or maybe we find the draw of a false center, I think, even without realizing it. What's really important in our lives? How do we find that center? How do we ground ourselves – on what do we ground ourselves?

Now it's summer – vacation time for many of us. The pace is slower – our pews certainly aren't as filled at this time of year. And the office phone here is much quieter for sure. Some of you have yet to take your vacations – some of us are just back. I had a wonderful time during my time away from the daily pace – I needed it badly, after this past year. I was really looking forward to catching my breath – and it has taken me a while to do that. So my garden was a welcome respite – I did a lot of painting in my house that I'd wanted to do for a long time – and I confess, watching reruns of NCIS and The West Wing was great too. My time at the beach was wonderfully restoring – the rhythm of the water has never failed to bring back my sense of priorities, and my sense of the movement of God – you and I can't control the tides – you and I can't control what God is doing in our lives. All we have to do is pay attention. And isn't that a real gift – really liberating too. And seeing the dolphins that day was an unexpected delight too. It was a really good time.

So that became a metaphor for my vacation – getting myself re-grounded – letting go of what I can't control, letting God be God, and trying to listen harder to what God is telling me, paying attention to where God is leading me – finding my way home, grounded, centered in the life God is calling me to. And maybe that metaphor has something to say to all of us too as we try to find our way home – home to the center of our faith, home to a sense of wholeness, home to our calling to the One Body, One Spirit, One God. And we all know that's not just a summer vacation activity – how do we continue to ground ourselves all the year long? How do we maintain that grounding we find when the pace slows when the hectic activity of life starts up again in the fall?

Fredrick Buechner is one of my favorite writers – I love his both simple and yet profound writings about living the life to which we as Christians are called, into a life of wholeness centered in Christ. It was at the time approaching his 70th birthday, when he

wrote a book called “The Longing for Home” – it’s a book about searching – his search specifically but our search too – our search for, in his words, “a good self to be and for good work to do.” He continues, “We search to become human in a world that tempts us always to be less than human or looks to us to be more. We search to love and to be loved. And in a world where it is often hard to believe in much of anything, we search to believe in something holy and beautiful and life transcending that will give meaning and purpose to our lives here.” (p. 66)

Isn’t that what we all want. Isn’t that what we’re called to. Isn’t that what our passage from Ephesians is talking about this morning. The call to unity. The call to wholeness.

Buechner continues, “The world floods in on all of us. The world can be kind, and it can be cruel. It can be beautiful and it can be appalling. It can give us good reason to hope and good reason to give up all hope. It can strengthen our faith in a loving God and it can decimate our faith. In our lives in the world, the temptation is always to go where the world takes us, to drift with whatever current happens to be running strongest. When good things happen, we rise to heaven; when bad things happen, we descend to hell.”

We are tossed to and fro, aren’t we. And it’s that tossing that fragments our lives – Buechner puts it, “the fragmentary nature of our experience shatters us into fragments. Instead of being whole, most of the time we are in pieces, and we see the world in pieces, full of darkness at one moment, full of light the next.” (p. 109)

Paul tells us in our passage that we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, into the wholeness that is Christ. Again, Buechner puts it so well: “it is in Jesus, of course, and in the people whose lives have been deeply touched by Jesus, and in ourselves at those moments when we also are deeply touched by him, that we see another way of being human in this world which is the way of wholeness. When we glimpse that wholeness in others, we recognize it immediately for what it is. And the reason we recognize it is that no matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us. It’s what Paul refers to when he says the deepest undercurrent of all creation is the current that seeks to draw us toward what he calls mature personhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (p. 110)

There’s that whirlpool image again – but at the center of the whirlpool there is peace – the water swirls around at a breathtaking pace – but at the center is peace. Just like at our center comes the peace of Christ. A peace we can’t describe really – a peace we can only experience and then want to share.

And that brings us back to the first question: why do we come to church? Perhaps to experience for a few moments that vision of peace, that vision of wholeness that calls to us all the time. That wholeness that comes in being part of the Body of Christ – sounds mutually exclusive, doesn’t it – wholeness that comes being a part of something. But that something is bigger and stronger as we as a group of Christians are joined together in Christ. As we as a group of Christians are firmly grounded in the center, finding strength in each other – a strength that will serve us well as we go our separate ways after our worship time together.

I’ve always believed that one of the major reasons for the existence of a youth group, for instance, is to give our students a sense of strength in the Body, a way to

combat the whirlpools of peer pressure, to give each other strength to make choices that might well be counter-cultural.

And the same thing is true for us adults: we come to church because we need each other – we need to share our strengths and we need to share our weaknesses. We come to church to create a unity – not a uniformity for sure – we’re not all alike and that’s the beauty of creation. But we come to join together with all our strengths and weaknesses to create a unity in the Body of Christ and to see the vision of wholeness in our lives as individuals and in our life together as the Glen Ridge Congregational Church and the church universal. As today we come to the Table with all our strengths, all our weaknesses, all our fears, all our joys to be nourished in our search for wholeness, let us celebrate our neediness for each other. Let us feel the relief that we’re all in this together – we don’t have to do it all alone. In fact, we shouldn’t! In fact, we can’t. Isn’t that good news! Take that vision of wholeness into your very being now and as you walk through the pieces, the fragments of your lives. And may we each know the peace that comes at the center. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we bow before you. We come in gratitude for our lives, our talents, for that which makes us truly human, for being created in your own image. We ask that we may be strengthened in our inner beings through your Spirit and that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith as we are rooted and grounded in love. May we know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge so we may be filled with wholeness and peace. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.