

**The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost • August 2, 2009**

*St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA*

*Rev. Braun Campbell*

Ephesians 4:1-16

“Walking by Faith: Walking Together”

When I can on Sunday afternoon, I appreciate being able to go home and just crash on the sofa for a little while and turn on whatever sporting event's on the television. For several of the Sundays in July, that event was the Tour de France. Like many other Americans, I don't know all that much about the world of road cycling races. But this year, I learned that there's a lot that goes on in the Tour over its twenty-three day run; however, one thing in particular jumped out at me: the peloton. The peloton – which is French for the “pack” when referring to sports – is the large, main group of riders that you'll see zooming along the streets like a flock of low-flying birds. The riders from many teams stay together in the peloton (at times a group some 200 strong) to save energy, reducing aerodynamic drag. I was a little surprised to learn that on stages that involve descents down mountains, the riders in the peloton can even gain ground on the faster riders out in front of the pack through that dynamic. But I was even more surprised to learn that all those in the peloton receive the same time as the first rider of the pack that crosses the finish line. Effectively, everyone in the pack finishes together, as if they were one body.

Looking into the epistle lessons this summer, we've sought to explore what it means to live as Christians, people who are walking by faith. This weekend, our reading from Ephesians 4 calls us to consider an essential aspect of the Christian life: walking together with other Christians – not as a peloton of rivals, but as a single team. In fact, “walking together” is such an important part of who we are to be as Jesus' disciples that it's part of the name of our church body, The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. The word “Synod” comes from the combination of two Greek words, meaning “going the same way.” The Church is about walking together in Christ.

Now, not everyone wants to walk together as the Church. **Some people despise the Church**, saying that they won't take part in any kind of “organized religion.” Others say that they don't need the Church, that they can worship God all by themselves. And still others feel that there are “more important things” that need their attention, and they don't have time for the Church. But for all of these people, the result is the same: they have set themselves apart. They are alone. **On the other end of the gamut**, there are those people who are in the very midst of the Church, surrounded by other believers, but **who take the Church for granted**. They go through the motions of attending worship – even coming to the Lord's Supper – without appreciating the meaning of the community around them. They may see the Church as yet another provider of services in a consumer-oriented world, or, maybe, they have grown up in the Church but have never considered what it means to *be* the Church. They, too, stand apart; alone. But either despising the Church or taking it for granted ultimately reflects a lack of understanding of what the Church truly *is*.

**What is the Church to us, then, and what are we to the Church?** God's Word through Paul's epistle brings us an answer: the Church is the community of all believers, in Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ. The Church is a fellowship of recovering sinners. We need what Jesus offers, because you and I each have this stubborn inclination to go our own way. We need the bond that he gives to hold us together. Jesus creates peace and unity. That's what he did on the cross: he made peace between God and man so that the human and the divine could once again have unity. And Jesus' work didn't stop there: through his sacrifice leading to renewed relationship with God, Jesus creates peace among human beings as we share his forgiveness. He brings us together as parts of something greater than our individual selves.

We're members, not just of a congregation, but of that greater community that is the Church. Paul prompts us to think of the Church as a body, with Christ as our head. The Holy Spirit enlivens the body of the Church: He keeps us moving, walking together in the same direction in our journey through life. When we follow that old, selfish inclination to go our own way, we set ourselves apart and disregard the

community and what we are meant to be – and people then fail to see the Church as the community of grace that *it* is meant to be. But for the sake of the Church and for us Christians, God is still at work even in the face of our failings. God brings His grace to bear in the world, even through imperfect Christian communities – and by that, I mean every Christian community on earth! **The Church, though made up of so many flawed human beings, is even still an instrument of God’s grace in the world.**

In the upcoming year’s adult education courses, we’re planning on studying one of the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and writer who was imprisoned and executed by the Gestapo for his opposition to the Nazi regime. I highly recommend *Life Together*, one of Bonhoeffer’s most well-known texts, as it calls us as readers to consider the impact of Christian community in the life of the believer. In this little book, Bonhoeffer reminds us, along with St. Paul, that the Church is a real and powerful fellowship in which we experience God’s grace in a number of ways.

As we walk together in Christ as his people, the Holy Spirit uses the Church **to correct and to forgive**. When Paul tells us that we are to **speak the truth in love**, he means just that. In every aspect of life, the community of the Church must clearly bear witness to God’s Word. The company of believers stands rooted in the Gospel despite the winds of shifting doctrines that would have us abandon the truth of God’s Word as revealed in scripture. Sometimes, that Word can offend our sensibilities of what’s right and wrong, confronting our “go your own way” style of living. We never want to hear that we’re not right, that we have missed the mark. But sometimes speaking the truth in love means that we must confront and be confronted by the reality of sin in our lives. In the wake of such confrontation, God is at work in the Church to deliver forgiveness and changed lives through the Holy Spirit’s power. Our true community is and always will be founded in the Gospel of forgiveness through Christ’s cross.

As we walk together in Christ as his people, the fellowship of the Church is also a **community of support**. As Paul reminds us, Christians are “*to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” **Living in community requires interest outside of self.** The apostle calls each of us to think and to act on how the Spirit is leading us to care for others in our fellowship. There are those among us with needs, some of which may be widely known and some of which may be very private. Whatever such needs may be, God’s grace is at work in the body of believers to give strength – in the visit to a hospital bed, in the meeting of a small group of friends, in the raking of a yard. As people who are bound together – not alone, not apart, but together – with Jesus as our head, we in the Church are to give of our selves in the service of those around us. And as it often plays out, that giving can be well performed through self-restraint! **Humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another all involve holding our egos and desires in check for the good of others.** Through Christ and in Christ, we are able to honor others above ourselves.

Most importantly, as we walk together in Christ as his people, we proclaim God’s love. That word that we read as “love” shows up three times in our passage from Ephesians today. It’s the Greek word “agape” (ἀγάπη), which points to love that gives of self. That’s the love that God has for you, the love that He shows the fellowship of believers in His Church. Everything that we as the Church are to do, everything that we as the Church are to be, begins *and remains* rooted in God’s self-giving love through and in Jesus. Jesus has given this gift of the community of grace to each of us, and we, in turn, have the message of God’s grace in Christ to share with anyone who would seek to understand what the Church is. Because it is in Christ’s community of Church, as one body, that we walk together in this life. And it is in that same community, as one body, that we would cross the finish line of this life, together, as Jesus makes our peace and unity perfect.

Amen.