

“Joined at the Heart”

Ephesians 4: 1-16

10th Sunday after Pentecost/B, August 5, 2012

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Have you heard of Chick-Fil-A? For the few of you that have either never traveled in the South or have not paid attention to the news the last few weeks, Chick-Fil-A is a fast food restaurant chain that originated in Atlanta, GA. The CEO Dan Cathy set off a nationwide drama recently by saying he supports the “biblical definition of a family” and believes Americans have a “prideful, arrogant attitude” about gay marriage that risks “inviting God’s judgment on our nation.” I am not aware of the connection between same sex marriage and chicken sandwiches, however the CEO decided he needed to take a stand. In response to such outrageous comments, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and Chicago Mayor Raul Emanuel have taken up the food fight by insisting Dan Cathy and his Chick-Fil-A franchise are not welcome in their cities. What followed are subsequent calls to boycott the franchise and invitations to participate in a Chick-Fil-A appreciation day in support of their stance. Diane Brady comments “The issue isn’t that Dan Cathy disapproves of gay marriage; that’s hardly a shocker in a business so infused with Baptist values that its outlets are closed on Sundays. The problem is that he crossed the line in letting his faith become less about inspiration than alienation. Not only did he openly condemn the beliefs of a big chunk of Chick-fil-A’s audience, he implied that their views are unpatriotic and even put the country at risk.”¹

If Paul were here today, he would have been right in the middle of this fight. This letter comes to the church in Ephesus struggling to establish itself in a world of political and religious diversity. The Christian movement was evolving and taking shape. Followers were trying to figure out what it meant to be part of this emerging movement. There was little history to draw upon. They were making history. Jews and Gentiles were among the early believers in the church of Ephesus. According to the letter, thieves may also have been among the early believers. Their challenge was to embrace and affirm the unity within their diversity.

Paul is helping the church find a way to be more than a gathering of believers. His mission is to empower us to become the body of Christ. No longer can we be ruled by an “every person for oneself” mentality. We are now part of something bigger. We come together in community to seek the will of God, to lift one another up, to care for each other and to share each other’s burdens. It is in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. God is at work in each of our lives, our lives have purpose and each one of us is an important part of the plan that God has for us and for the world.

Paul speaks of the marks of discipleship as gentleness, humility, patience and love. That we know. We know we are supposed to be nice to one another and to people we don’t know and even to people we don’t like. It’s hard, but we have to do it. This goes beyond a sense of obligation to live according to the law. As disciples of Christ ours is our

¹ Diane Brady, “God and Gay Marriage: What Chick-Fil-A Could Learn from Marriott,” Bloomberg Business week, July 26, 2012.

sacred calling. Therefore, being able to quote chapter and verse of the Bible means little, if you then use that knowledge to tear down the body of Christ. Talking a good game in church on Sunday morning and then telling a racist joke on the golf course is not a mark of a faithful disciple. We must not only talk the talk (and the talk in this case is to be truthful with the intention of building up the Body of Christ), but we are to also walk that talk.

Our epistle lesson is a moving reminder to us in the United Church of Christ of whom we are, and who we are called to be as followers of Jesus, to understand “what we are living for.” The writer Kate Huey says, “within our own congregations and within our denomination, we are called to be one, to be reconciled, to be strong, to strive to be worthy of our calling. And yet we are called to seek the same unity across congregational and denominational lines, too, to reach out to our Christian sisters and brothers and to find common ground, common hope, common calling. All of this is to bear witness to the loving God who ‘laid down the earth’s foundation,’ thinking of us, focusing an immeasurable love on us, intending for us to be whole and holy through the power of that love.”

The power does not come from within us as our own resolve or determination. This is part of God’s dream for us. The dream won’t happen because we make it happen; God is bringing it to fulfillment. This is such a counterintuitive notion. Our identity is steeped in the American Dream that tells us when we use our gifts and ingenuity and persevere we will succeed. Paul sees it differently. It is God’s power at work within us that is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine. (Ephesians 3:20) We need not feel overwhelmed or powerless, because God’s power is at work within us. God has equipped each of us to do what needs to be done. We approach our work with humility, for nothing is of our own doing, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit. When we held our kitchen shower a few weeks ago for the Butzgy family, the blessing of this event was more than each person’s response to a crisis. It was the work of the Holy Spirit building up the body of Christ by bringing us together to take care of a family in need.

Paul calls the church to be reconciled and through the power of reconciliation to continue to grow into the fullness of our being. When we are reconciled to the one with whom we have experienced discord or alienation we remember, we recall, we may even “un-forget”, as Huey puts it, that we are one, deep down, that there is one body and one Spirit and one hope, and that all our divisions and discord are marks not of God or of God’s dream for us but of human failing, human pride, human striving against the dream.² She says, “often it feels as if we once knew something deep in our souls but our heads have forgotten it, or we have forgotten to live our lives by its truth, and we need to ‘un-forget.’”

This un-forgetting is truly challenging. Some wounds run deeper and are more difficult to heal. Sometimes it feels easier to stay isolated than to take the risk toward reconciliation. We wear our indignation and self-righteousness proudly. In our need to be right, we fail to be faithful. It is God’s vision that we find ways to foster unity, to

² Kathryn Huey, Sermon Seeds, Sunday August 5, 2012, UCC.org

offer an extravagant welcome to those whom others have turned away, to be patient and loving with our brothers and sisters on their journey toward wholeness. When we can not do these things, when we isolate ourselves for the sake of being right, we “grieve the Holy Spirit,” as the writer puts it. God is not absent when there is contention and strife among us. The Holy Spirit has not departed when we find ourselves arguing about who can marry whom and who can ordain whom. We have turned them away and we grieve the Holy Spirit when this happens.

We are exhorted to live a life worthy of our calling. Paul’s is just one lonely voice we hear rattling around in our brain. His voice competes with the voice of others who subtly and pervasively pull us away from what we know to be true. We are called to live in peace and yet, we do not speak up against the war. We are to live in unity with our brothers and sisters and we do not confront the friend who speaks divisively against our Muslim neighbors who are peace-loving, faithful people. We know that every person is created in the loving image of God and yet, we are quick to decide and dictate who is worthy of our love and commitment. We do not speak the truth in love. In fact, in the name of Jesus Christ, we can be mighty hateful.

What we hear this morning is an invitation to develop a more mature faith. The early church had little experience with their emerging faith. They were figuring it all out day by day. We are really no different. We are figuring it out day by day. We often think of the church, the body of Christ, as a social experience. We come together to worship, to pray, to address a need in the community or the larger world. Of course, these are important expressions of the body of Christ. Paul reminds us that this body also has a mind. It is important for the church to know what we believe and why we believe it. We live in a time that tends to undermine any claim of truth out of fear of being divisive or intolerant. Paul tells us to know the truth and to “speak the truth in love.”

In the name of Jesus Christ, we need to “put on our big girl and big boy shorts” (as the saying goes) and go toe to toe with the purveyors of hate. We have nothing to fear. We do not possess the truth, but merely point to the truth. The truth is Christ died for all of us, Christ’s sacrifice saves all of us, and we are to be reconciled to all people in the name of this life giving Christ. There is no place for bigotry in the body of Christ. There is no such thing as exclusion in the body of Christ. There is no bouncer at the door of this church determining whether or not you can stay. All are welcome. All are forgiven. All are blessed. We are just seekers on a journey striving to become the sacred body of Christ in this place. Come, let us journey together. Amen