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Ephesians 4:1-16

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost B

Male or female? Young or old? Democrat or Republican? Gay or straight? Gun rights or gun control? Pro-choice or pro-life? 8:45er or 11 o'clocker.? As I read those "OR" questions, I'm sure most of you were thinking in your head what so-called "side" you, me or your neighbor identified with. Divisions are created by doing just that. In my short life, I've seen a lot of division. After all, only two years ago, I watched the election and all the resulting polarization. But division isn't always just political. There is also much division within and among Christian churches. If you take a look at our own town of Benicia, there are churches who go by the rules of "don't ask, don't tell", those who genuinely believe they can "pray the gay away," and us at St. Paul's, which is one of only two official affirming congregations in Benicia. Today, the Epistle was all about unity--unity in God. Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." All are united in Christ.

As Bishop Curry recently said in his address to the General Convention, "The Holy Trinity is our tradition's way of telling us that we can embrace individuality and multiplicity at the same time. God is not worried about uniformity. God can have unity and diversity (not uniformity) at the same time."

A good example of this diversity in thought is a recent experience I had. As you may or may not know, several months ago, Bishop Barry invited me to speak at a service of Lamentation at Trinity Cathedral after the Parkland school shooting. I gave my perspective on gun control and shared my own experiences as a high school student living in an era of so many school shootings. I spoke about how I feel I should not have to live in a world where I know how to escape from an active shooter situation better than I know how to take a chemistry test. I spoke

about how people can do their part to defund organizations that push for gun proliferation.

Because of my personal experience, I have grown to fear guns, rather than see them as protection or security. Bishop Barry also invited my good friend Iris to speak about her experience. Iris, growing up in a small town outside Sacramento, had a different perspective on school shootings and how to prevent them. From a young age, she had learned to use guns and to treat them with respect. In fact, her school even has a sport shooting team. She was shocked to hear how much Benicia High had prepared us for the possibility of a school shooting. In fact, Iris actually wanted her school to prepare students more. The two of us came from opposite ends of the spectrum: her school with no active shooter preparation, while I felt I was over prepared and overburdened at my school. In addition, Iris had a positive relationship with guns, as long as they were used in a safe way, while I didn't want to be near one. Though we had different experiences and ideas, we agreed that the larger issue of school shootings needs to be addressed.

I think this story illustrates that that despite people's very different values and experiences, there is room for a diversity of opinions and ideas in God's heart. We all are unified in the Body of Christ because of our differences, not despite them.

I'm sure you've heard the analogies: We are many parts, we are all one body. We are all branches of a tree. We are all members of the family of God. As Paul wrote, "we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

After explaining how we are all unified in God, Paul talks about how each of us are given gifts. He says that the gifts God gave to us were to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." In other words, God equipped us with gifts so that we can build one another up. One of these gifts, I believe, is communication. Through communication, we can make somebody happy or sad, hurt them, teach them, or learn from them. I recently returned from a pilgrimage with other young people from the Episcopal Diocese of Northern California, where I learned about nonviolent communication. I've made up an informational sheet which

you can pick up in the Parish Hall with a much more detailed explanation than I have time to give now.

Nonviolent communication is communication centered around the idea of not harming anybody else mentally or spiritually, in addition to steering away from situations of physical violence. Nonviolent communication, also called Compassionate or Collaborative communication, is based on the idea that humans only resort to violent behavior when they do not have better strategies for meeting their needs. Nonviolent Communication theory states that human behavior is always in search of getting their needs met. When people take the time to share their needs and the resulting feelings about them, conflicts can be resolved and empathy can be grown.

If we are to get along with people unlike ourselves to build up the Body of Christ, it is important to be able to communicate with compassion. Nonviolent, or compassionate communication shows a genuine desire to understand and get to know the other person. It builds connection and helps work out solutions when problems arise. It takes time and energy to build these relationships and connections, especially with people you may not agree with. Sometimes, you will find that you may not be able to build a relationship with someone very easily, but practicing nonviolent communication allows you to maintain respect for them. Moreover, our baptismal vows require us to respect the dignity of every human being.

“There’s no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are” said Mr. Rogers. That’s how God feels about us, and that’s how we should strive to feel about our “neighbors,” whether or not we agree with them. It may sound obvious, but compassion, communication, empathy, and understanding are only way to progress as a society. Another thing Mr. Rogers said is “Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.” This is important to remember when you are trying to be unified with others in Christ. Don’t feel you need to be perfectly equipped to love them already, but you can grow with them in understanding. We must, as Paul wrote and I mentioned earlier, make “every effort to

maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” and we do this through nonviolence, and through love, and through listening.

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