

One Bread, One Body

Ephesians 4:1-16

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Our state of Rhode Island gave us a wonderful image of the kingdom of heaven last Sunday. Last Sunday, July 26, 2015, was Bay Day for Rhode Island. On that day the Governor decreed that the beautiful beaches that give us the name The Ocean State would all be open to the public for free. You did not have to pay to park. You did not have to pay to fish. You could just show up and use the beautiful beaches free of charge. Every state beach was open to the public.

Bay Day is like the kingdom of heaven in that God has invited every person to come to the waters of baptism. The invitation is generous. The invitation is gracious. The invitation is free. Come to the waters. Come swim in this ocean. It is open to anyone. It is open to everyone.

You don't need the right license plate. You can come from Connecticut and you can come from California. You can come from Maine and Massachusetts and Mississippi and Missouri. You can come from Mexico and lands from the south, you can come from Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe. You can even leave that hot and humid land known as the Lonestar State, the Great State of Texas, and all you Texans can come to the waters. Y'all can come. And if you are really a Texan you will know what I mean when I say All Y'all can come. You don't need the right license plate. The waters of baptism are open to everyone.

And the waters are free. There will no credit check, no preference given to those with deep pockets. You don't have to buy a parking pass. Admission is free to the waters of baptism. That is the beauty of these waters that are open to everyone. Come if you are rich and come if you are poor. Come if you are tall and come if you are short. Come if you are skinny and come if you are not. Come if you are young and come if you are old. Come if you are married, or single, or divorced, or widowed.

Come. Come if your skin is black, brown, yellow, white, freckled and fair or bronzed and tanned. Come. Come if you are a model citizen. Come if you have done time and have a record to prove it. Come if you are walking the straight and narrow and come if you are working the twelve steps. Come if you are tattooed up and pierced, come if you root Red Sox and come if you love the Bronx Bombers. Come if you lean to the left, come if you lean to the right, come because here you don't have to stand up and fight, fight, fight! Just come, because these waters are open to all.

What waters they are. The waters of baptism are cleansing. Baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, and we leap into these waters celebrating the free gift of forgiveness that comes through trusting Jesus Christ. We splash and celebrate in these waters that tell us though our sin is like scarlet it will be as white as snow, that as far as the east is from the west so far has God removed our transgressions from us. We come to these waters because Jesus said he did not come to call the righteous, those who had no need for forgiveness, he came to call us sinners, we who have failed and struggled and bungled up and been caught short by life's trials and tribulations. We come with skinned knees and stubbed toes and we come with broken hearts and wounded spirits. We come because we heard there was some rejoicing going on in heaven every time one of us sinners repents. We come to these waters because there is forgiveness, and that forgiveness is free.

We come to the waters because they tell a story of deliverance. God parted the waters of the Red Sea when he delivered his children from slavery. Now these waters tell us that there are no chains that can bind us any longer. We once were shackled and drawn and lived as prisoners and carried heavy burdens, but now we have been delivered. We come to the waters because Jesus has proclaimed release for the captives, and that deliverance is free.

We come to the waters because there is restoration, and revival, renewal, and even resurrection. In Christ Jesus there is new creation. What was old is gone, and what takes its place is something new and alive and full of hope. We are like the leper who has been made clean, like the blind man who can see, like the lame who can walk, like Lazarus who has been called out of the tomb and told to take off those grave cloths. We have been restored and revived, renewed and resurrected, and it has all been free.

We come to the waters of baptism because we have been given a new identity. Once we were known by who bore us and where we called home and what we did in school and at work and with a soccer ball or a musical instrument. Now we have been immersed in those waters of baptism and everything changed, including our identity. There is no human title that can even compare with our new identity. It used to matter if we were a doctor, a lawyer, a chief, or an emperor. Now the Father in heaven, the one who spoke to Jesus in the waters of his baptism sees Jesus in us, sees the Son of God living in us and filling us and shaping us. The Father in heaven says to us, “You are my beloved child, and with you I am well pleased.” Here in the waters of baptism we claim our true identity as God’s beloved children, an identity that has been given to us freely, completely out of God’s generous and gracious love.

Now for the first time in our lives we experience what it truly means to belong. Splashing in the waters, frolicking and flapping as wave after wave of love sweeps over us and literally engulfs us in grace, we realize we have a place. We are no longer outsiders, no longer strangers, no longer aliens, no longer bullied, no longer judged, no longer excluded, no longer cut from the team, no longer flunked out of school, no longer anxious about whether we have passed the test or been admitted or promoted, fired or retired. We have been given the incredible and beautiful gift of simply belonging. We are home, and there is a place for us. Through the love of Jesus Christ we belong, we have the inalienable right of belonging, a right that can never be taken, and guess what? It is free.

All this and more has been the wonderful news proclaimed in the first three chapters of Ephesians. We have been invited to explore this incredible love of God that is wider and longer and deeper and higher than we can ever imagine. We have been told of our election, of God's plan to bring us into these waters of baptism and this fountain of living water since before the dawn of creation. We have been told over and over again that it is not because of who we are or what we have done that we have been given this great gift. It is just what it says it is, a gift. By grace we have been saved. All of it, every bit of it, has been a gift. It is all freely given by the God who loves us with an everlasting love. Now as chapter four of Ephesians begins we see it has come time to ask ourselves how we respond to this free and gracious and generous gift.

This week I have been reading again one of the documents that undergirds our faith. It is one of the creeds in our Book of Confessions. The creed is the Heidelberg Catechism. The catechism uses a question and answer format to help us gain an understanding of the Christian faith. The creed explores the great gift of grace and then directs us in how we can respond faithfully to such amazing love. The response the creed envisions is one of gratitude. God has done all this for me, how can I respond to this love with anything but gratitude. But before we envision responding with gratitude, the creed asks a rather scary question. If it is true, if it is really true that everything we have has been given graciously and as a gift, that we didn't have one single part in the whole process, isn't it possible that instead of gratitude we could simply take it all for granted. Friends, that is a scary proposition. Question 64 asks about this free and unmerited grace, "But does not this teaching make people careless and sinful?" Isn't it possible that some would be given this great gift and take it for granted, basically saying to God, "So what"? This question literally lights up the authors of the catechism. "But does not this teaching make people careless and sinful?" The answer, almost indignant, is a resounding NO! "No, for it is impossible for those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith not to bring forth the fruit of gratitude."

I believe that. I believe that when you have come to the waters of baptism and found forgiveness, deliverance, restoration and renewal and resurrection, when you have found a new identity in Christ Jesus that assures you that you are God's beloved child, and when you experience that incredible sense of belonging, of being home, of being found, I believe that you and I will not take it for granted. I believe we will respond with gratitude. So does the author of Ephesians. Here in chapter four we are urged to live a life worthy of the calling we have received. Because everything we have received is a gift, we are urged to respond with humility and gentleness. We know the proud ways of a world where you have to prove yourself. We know the rough ways of a world where to stand taller you have to climb over others and knock them down. Those days and those ways are gone. In gratitude be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. And do everything you can to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

In a world that rips and pulls and fragments and divides and is filled with hostility, do everything you can to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Do this because Jesus has torn down the dividing walls of hostility and he has proclaimed peace to those who were far away and peace to those who were near. In a world that is pulled and ripped apart Jesus is bringing unity, is bringing all things together. Listen to the statements of unity. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as we were called to one hope when we were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." One, one, one, one, one, one, one. Seven times we hear the word one, because Jesus Christ is bringing all things together, and it begins in the waters of baptism when differences and marks of distinction are washed away. In those waters of baptism we come to see that there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. There is just one Body, and Jesus is our one Lord.

As you hear the word one and you try to understand the unity of the Body of Christ, do not make the mistake of thinking this is dull or boring or plain or predictable. The waters of baptism are teeming with life and we thrash in them joyfully and exuberantly. Then we all become one. No variety, no differences, no uniqueness. After the wild and wonderful waters of baptism, does it feel like a letdown now to know we are all going to be one? Clunk. But read on, for what follows is not boring or dull and certainly not uniform and monochrome.. As soon as we are told of the unity, of the oneness, the next thing we are told is that in the midst of this precious unity, there is a bold and vibrant diversity. We are one Body, but in this one Body God has poured out a multitude of gifts, gifts that are varied, unique, alive, colorful, bright, and so, so beautiful.

How do you respond in gratitude to the gift of God's free love? Be humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. And let the Spirit of God work in and through you so that you find hundreds and thousands and even more ways to spend your days building up the Body of Christ. Whatever gifts God has given you, use those gifts, those unique, special, wonderful gifts to build up the Body of Christ.

I met a woman once who had taken a swim in the waters of baptism and it changed her life. She was forgiven and delivered and restored, revived, renewed and resurrected, she had a new identity in Christ, and she was overwhelmed with knowing that in Christ Jesus she truly found a place of belonging. In gratitude, she then used her gifts to build up the Body of Christ. Her name was Jan Stone, and she just so happened to be Julie's mom. I had just started dating Julie in December of 1981, and the first time I met her parents we were riding in a car with them. Her dad Bob was driving the car, but that did not mean he was in charge of where we were going. Right before we pulled up to an intersection, Jan yelled out, "Stop the car! Bob Stone, stop the car right now!" I think there are still skid marks where we screeched to a halt. Jan jumped out of the car, a woman on a mission. I had no idea what was happening, but I never would have expected what followed. She jumped back in the car

holding an angel food cake pan. She said, “Someone threw this perfectly good cake pan away. I wasn’t going to let it go to waste.” Bob simply started to drive again, acting as if this type of thing happened all the time. At that moment I realized my life was going to have a new normal.

I’ll never forget the last time I rode in a car with Jan Stone. I had flown to California with our two sons, Jake and Alex, to pick up a van the Stones were giving us. We were about to drive it back to Houston. Before we headed out, we went to a driving range to hit some golf balls. We had a great day at the driving range, and there was lots of laughter and bragging and imagining we were a lot better than we really were. Jan kept doing something curious. Whenever we looked away, she would rifle through the balls that were spread out on the ground. I have known Jan long enough not to give it a second thought, that new normal thing and all. It turns out not every ball had been marked out as a driving range ball. Every once and a while a good ball had been included. She was picking out the golf balls that were still perfectly good and putting them in a plastic bag. We drove back to Houston with eight boxes of perfectly good golf balls she had scavenged.

In the thirty years between the first and last time I rode in the car with Jan, I realized her normal was to search out and find things others had thrown away or discarded, things others thought to be of little or no value, and rescue and redeem them. From angel food cake pans to golf balls, with countless homemade aprons that were given to show her love and care for others, and thousands of sticker letters to remember birthdays, anniversaries, losses, and celebrations, and more prayers than you could ever imagine for people facing every challenge on this created earth, Jan Stone embodied a phrase I have come to love. I came across it studying the Gospel of Luke. As Jesus spent his life rescuing and redeeming what others saw as being of little value, one person coined the phrase that Jesus came for the least, the last, and the lost. As much fun as it is to remember cake pans and golf balls and aprons and sticker notes, those are only symbols of a much greater purpose in Jan’s life. She believed every person was of value, and she spent her days caring and loving and reaching out to the least, the last, and the lost.

The last day of her life, as Jan was dying, Julie and her father Bob spent most of the day at her bedside. Out in the waiting room was a huge crowd of people. Because she loved other she herself was deeply loved. By her bedside, Julie talked and prayed her mom into glory, with tender words, precious words of hope, and comfort, and promise, and peace, and blessing, and assurance. Then at one point Julie said, “You know mom, everyone keeps telling me how much I remind them of you. Mom, those are the nicest words people could tell me. It means so much for me to be your daughter. I love it when people tell me, “You are your mother’s daughter.”

It’s true. Julie is her mother’s daughter. My life has been blessed because God has surrounded me with people like Jan Stone, like my wife Julie, who do not take the precious gift of God’s love for granted. I have been blessed because I have been surrounded with people who respond with gratitude to God’s love. I have been blessed to spend my days with people who live humble and gentle lives, bearing patiently with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. I have been blessed to be in a community where people use the gifts God has given them in creative and kind ways, bold and beautiful ways, in ways that are sacrificial and show the heart of a servant. Where in the world is such a place? In the church. In the community of faith. With people like you. With people who have been washed in the waters of baptism and have come out of those waters ready to give yourselves wholeheartedly and with every fiber of your being to building up the Body of Christ. With glad and grateful hearts let us come to this table. Let us come as family. Let us come as brothers and sisters. Let us come in unity. Let us come to this sacrament, rejoicing that because of Jesus Christ there is one bread and we are one body.