

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: ⁴there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Let us pray for inspiration from God's Spirit. O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in Your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Before we begin today, I want to pause and take a moment to acknowledge the tragedy that happened in Georgia on the fourth. For several weeks, in preparation for today, I've been thinking about my high school experiences because I've never been a part of a church that had a Rally Day, so I've only been able to refer back to high school pep rally days as a reference point, but then, a fourteen-year-old took the AR-15 his father gave him as a Christmas present, despite his history of threatening violence toward others,

and he killed two students and two teachers and wounded several others. Since then, my thoughts have instead shifted to grief for those families and the school, and I've remembered how I felt each time I heard about Sandy Hook, Parkland, Columbine, Santa Fe, the Amish Schoolhouse, Oxford Michigan, Nashville, Tennessee, and Uvalde, Texas, and of course, others like them.

I don't want to lose track of what today is about, but I would like to ask for a moment of silence and ask you to reflect on what you might do, beyond thoughts and prayers, to respond the threats that our students, teachers, and school staff now have to train for as early as the first week of school.

Thank you.

Now, I'm going to make a big pivot and talk about the joy of Rally Day. It's been twenty-five years since I went to a high school pep rally. That's hard for me to wrap my head around. I was class of 1999 – naively living in a time before the Y2K scare, before cell phones were smart, before 9-11; but to my understanding, pep rallies are still pretty much the same. Maybe there's more technology involved. Better sound equipment, but it's still got the same essential elements. You pack the entire school body into the gymnasium or auditorium. Not two pep rallies at 8 a.m. and 10 a.m., but all together at the same time. The band sits all together playing fight songs and the cheerleaders have made posters about the home team and the opponent. The sports team is all dressed up. The principal does his or her best to act cool and use the modern slang like “the school lunch today was bussin' bussin',” or, “if you think there's no homework this weekend, you're delulu,” and “our school counselor has so much rizz.” And there may be a really funny element like the English department rapping about the upcoming game, or the coach shaving his head because he lost a bet.

Pep rallies are super loud and designed to create lots of enthusiasm and pride in your school. Always, always, there's a group of students who roll their eyes and act like they don't care. They sit through it with snarky comments about how there's never a pep rally for

the drama team before opening night. And they're right about that. High schools and colleges pay way to much attention and money to sports compared to fine arts.

But a pep rally is fun. Not only do you get out of class, and laugh at your teacher who has humbly embarrassed herself in front of everyone, but you get to be with your friends and take pride in who you are and the larger group you belong to. You hear about opportunities you may not have known about. You celebrate your collective identity as the Westerly Bulldogs (are there any Bulldogs in the house of the Lord) or the Chariho Chargers (let me hear you), or the Stonington Bears (where are you, Bruce), or the Exeter-West Greenwich Scarlet Knights (I can't leave you out!). It's a joyful, energizing time.

Today is our version of a pep rally. After several long weeks, we have the choir sitting together again and making a joyful noise! (Welcome back, choir!) I can tell you, worship sound great with the choir in full force. Amen? We have food and a passport adventure around the church campus, and a prize if you complete the passport. It's a fun day of collective pride in ourselves and a launching of a new season of church activities and programs. We're highlighting what it is we're good at and what "clubs" you can join. We're saying, it's ok to take pride in what we do for our community and feel good about our legacy. It's also a recruiting day. Did you know you were needed? You are.

And today's scripture is like a pep rally, too. Paul is exhorting the Ephesians, who – if you remember, are a diverse and tension-filled blend of Gentile and Jewish believers - that they need to unite over the things they have in common and see their differences not as things to be put aside but as essential to the church's growth.

Paul celebrates all the different parts of the church. As I remembered my pep rallies, I imagined the Apostle Paul with a microphone, standing at center court in a school gymnasium saying, "I, your principal, beg you to represent us this weekend as young ladies and gentlemen. Be humble in victory and gentle after the game, be patient with the traffic on the way home, treat one another with love, make every effort to not bully or leave any fellow student on their own. We are all Ephesians! We have one Coach, Jesus Christ! Some of us are athletes and some of us are band members. Some of us are on dance team and

others are cheerleaders. Some of us are equipment managers and some of us work the concession stand. And some of us, our job, is to not do any of those things. For some of us, we were just supposed to show up and watch the game and cheer. And even if you don't want to cheer, just showing up is a great start. It takes all of us to be the Mighty Ephesians! Now let's get out there and beat the Philippians!

For us at Dunn's Corners, the metaphor still holds true. The gifts the Spirit has given us are that some would be choir members, and some instrumentalists, some provide fellowship foods and drinks, some are good with numbers and become trustees, some are good with kids and volunteer for Vacation Bible School, some are handy and become Tuesday Guys, and some are hand bell ringers. Some sew clothing and quilts, some are worship assistants, some fold and stuff bulletins, and some create graphics and organize brunch. At this very moment, there are some flipping pancakes and cooking sausages, so I promise this will end soon.

Some volunteer for the Johnnycake Center and some for Habitat for Humanity. Some teach Bible Study and some are Presbyterian Women. Some run the online streaming and audio/visual booth. Thank you! Some usher and some are deacons. Some are elders, and some run grief support groups. Some have been here for twenty years or more and some are newer. All of us are a part of Dunn's Corners. Do you think that the church would be the church if it didn't have this variety of gifts? Do you think that we would be the same without you? No! You all have unique gifts, and Ephesians 4 says that the diversity within us is for a purpose, and that purpose is to equip the saints (that's us) for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. . . the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Now, just for a moment, let me speak to the introverted, independent spirits, the ones who didn't enjoy pep rallies and sat through them without feeling connected to the school body. I want you to hear me say, that's ok. Not all of us get excited about rallies. I am more of an introvert than an extrovert, and when I was younger, I used to have such anxiety during the passing of the peace that I'd actually leave the sanctuary. We promise not to bear hug you at the end of the service.

Dunn's Corners is happy that you come and worship with us, AND I will end with this thought. At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, when he had the chance to hold a final, encouraging pep rally for his disciples and fuel them with energy and intelligence and imagination and love for the work to come, he gave them what he called a new commandment, *"that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35)."*

Now, I know faithful people who are introverts and whose spiritual lives are largely private. Your faith is valid and real and true, and there were many times Jesus retreated from the crowds to pray alone or rest, but I have come to appreciate this tenant from the founder of the Methodist church, John Wesley. In the preface of his book, Hymns and Sacred Poems, he says, many before me have advised that if you want to grow in discipleship and faith, you should isolate yourself into a spiritual desert. Be alone. Practice a monastic way of life. But this is, quote, "directly opposite to the Gospel of Christ and the teachings of Paul! Solitary Religion is not to be found there. The Gospel of CHRIST knows of no Religion, but Social; no Holiness but Social Holiness." Wesley goes on to say, *"This Commandment have we from CHRIST, that those who love GOD, love their neighbors also: especially to them that are of the same congregation of Faith. And in truth,"* he says, "they feel in their Soul a burning, restless Desire, of spending time with other believers."

So, with that, I'm going to close with a thought that you may not agree with, but I'll say it anyway, because I'm new here and we're still in our honeymoon phase, so, I think, you're a bit more gracious to me right now.

I truly believe that if you come here on Sunday morning, either at 8 o'clock or 10 o'clock, you can and do worship God Almighty. I do. You are loving God with heart and soul and mind and strength. But if that's all you do at Dunn's Corners, I doubt very much that you can fulfill the new commandment to love fellow believers in the faith and grow in discipleship as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps this is the time, on Rally Day, with opportunities to learn about the life of the church coming in just minutes, to commit to being a part of this church in a new way. To do something other than just attend worship. You might meet someone who worships at a different time than you do who becomes a dear friend. Or you'll volunteer together on a project and it will spark energy in you, you didn't know you had.

Our scripture for today ends with these words, "speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

To me, that means, that lovingly, I say to you, Dunn's Corners is a team. All of us – you, me, the people you recognize, and the people you don't, with all of our unique gifts and talents, and if we use our gifts and spend time with one another outside of Sunday morning worship, we'll be victorious over our enemies – hate and fear and hypocrisy and greed. Let's be victorious in being known in the area as the church people would go to if they went to church. Let's be victorious as long as it's measured not by our financial reserves but as the church that has a wealth of love and fellowship.

Dunn's Corners, I love you. I'm proud of you! Now let's go get ourselves a victory! If you leave it all on the field this year, then next Rally Day, maybe I'll shave my head. Amen!