

*TOGETHERING*  
Ephesians 4:1-16  
September 2, 2018

On a Sunday morning when we punctuate our Mission Study with worship, I want to talk about vacation. It's a concept that can either conjure up images of relaxing days on the beach, or in my family, up in the High Sierra, among the pines and lakes and craggy mountains. But for many baby boomers in particular, it's memories of being crammed into the family station wagon (a la the Griswolds in *National Lampoon's Vacation*) and enduring a hot and contentious ride to some popular destination, stopping at points along the way to see, say, the world's largest ball of string and the like. (Boy, I hated those side trips. With a passion!) For many of us, our earliest ideas of a "group vacation" meant fighting with siblings over who owned sovereignty of the back seat.

Then of course, there are the official group vacations that have been offered by travel agents for years. Cruises, I think they're called. These days, though, group travel has taken on a whole new dimension. No longer is it just your average family of mother, father, and 2.4 kids, or the senior citizens group that hits the road in a pack. Enter the concept of "togethering," or the kind of leisure travel that involves diverse but connected people in groups like extended families, neighborhood groups, book clubs, or even just a gathering of friends. The new trend is for people who may not have any prior knowledge of each other—and probably don't—to plan a trip to an exotic location for an extended period of time . . . like having a picnic on the beach in the Caribbean instead of in the back yard.

In this post 9/11 world, says a travel marketing firm, people seem to desire more opportunities for bonding with family and friends in the face of uncertainty and the hectic pace of life that "leaves many with a horrible sense of guilt that they don't spend enough time with family."

Hitting the road or sailing the high seas with people you love is a great idea for family bonding and memory-making. But if there's any group that really needs to do some togetherness it's that diverse and connected body called the church.

It's interesting that one of the earliest metaphors that came to characterize the church was that of a ship. In most churches built with traditional ecclesiastical architecture, the place where the congregation sits is called the *nave*, which comes from the Latin word *navis*, or "ship." Looking up at the ceiling (particularly when there are buttresses and beams) is kind of like looking at the inside of an overturned boat. Even while the congregation is sitting still in the pews, the architecture itself invites the worshippers to launch out on a spiritual journey together. Think of it as the ultimate group cruising experience, with every Sunday being a family reunion.

Paul understood that the *life of the church is essentially communal*, reflecting the family relationship we all have as children of God. With the chains of his own imprisonment rattling in the background, Paul emphasizes an even stronger tie that should bind the Christian community together—"the bond of peace" (4:3). That bond is defined by the virtues that Paul writes about in verse 2: humility, gentleness, patience, dealing with each other with love and being unified in the Spirit—all of which are keys to both successful family vacations and healthy churches. I'll say the list again: humility, gentleness, patience, dealing with each other in love, and being unified in the Spirit.

So, Paul reminds us that the life of the church is essentially communal. But it's also *creedal*, as in sharing a creed, a set of common beliefs. As a community we have shared beliefs. It's the WHY of our being church together, right? Paul rattles off a litany of creedal elements we share as a community of faith: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. Do you hear reflections of the Apostles' Creed here? Well, it's no wonder, is it?

If togetherness centers a family or group around a common relationship or interest, then a togetherness church centers its life and journey around a core set

of shared beliefs in Jesus Christ. These elements are things, Paul argues, that unite us, not divide us. They are the stakes in the ground to which are tied the bonds which keeps us together -- the “one” relationship we share through our baptism and faith in Christ. The church is a community of shared beliefs. It’s why we come together. We believe in God. We believe God has a mission, so God creates a church to undertake that mission. So . . . unified in one body, one spirit, one hope, one lord, one faith , one God, (so unified in these core reasons of why we gather here in this place) we are better able to respond to the call of Jesus, to follow Him, to be His, to be “together” with Him on a journey of faith that is not merely an individual spiritual quest, but a group travel experience to some of the neediest people and places in the world. It’s the kind of trip where everybody has a role and a responsibility, providing part of the resources for the journey.

But we have to have the resources for this excursion. That’s why the life of the church is also *charismatic*. Now, don’t raise your eyebrows when I say we are a *charismatic* church. *Charisma* just means grace; a particular a grace of the Holy Spirit of God. We speak about Spiritual gifts—*charismas*. Paul says that each of us “was given *grace* according to the measure of *Christ’s gift*” (4:7).

There’s no doubt that God has graced the community, gifted the community with the skills to keep the ship of faith afloat on the seas of our spiritual adventure. That’s what spiritual gifts are really about. God has ensured that this vessel has all the necessary hands on deck to make the journey. The church at its best is not a homogenous group crammed on a bus to sightsee its way through the Christian experience. Instead, God equips and gifts every single one of us, people of all different ages, stages, and abilities as fellow travelers. The gifts that Paul lists in verse 11 are just a few of the roles that are needed to move the church forward in its journey and mission. The list isn’t meant to be exhaustive, but reminds us that the role of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers—be they “professionals” or laypersons— [You who have been part of our Mission Study yesterday and will be today, I hope this leadership list reminds you of all the leadership capabilities we have in this congregation, in you.] The role of our leadership together is to resource the body of Christ and

remind everyone on board of their common destination: which is “maturity to the measure of the full stature of Jesus Christ.”

The particular task of your giftedness is: “to equip the saints.” The word “equip” is the same word in the Greek that is used of the disciples “preparing” their nets in Matthew 4:21. Other versions have the disciples “mending” their nets; Matthew “preparing” them, making them serviceable or useful for the mission ahead.

See, that is precisely the task of those who are pastors/teachers: to equip others, to prepare others, to mend others, or as Paul calls them, “the saints.”

The object of this equipping is that the people here around you, might be prepared “for ministry,” which in turn has as its object “building up the body of Christ,” and should continue until “all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (4:13).

Paul continues to use the “ship” metaphor when he continues in the next sentence: “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine.” Being together, we can’t be deterred by various and sundry vacation brochures that happen to flutter past our field of vision. Not everything that looks good is central to our journey of Christ together in this church, huh? We know who we are, we know where we’re going, we know why we’re doing what we’re doing, and we must not be distracted by other things blowing in the wind.

As an aside, notice that there’s no mention here of heaven as the ultimate vacation destination. The church really “arrives” when it functions fully as the body of Christ and everyone has a stake in the adventure. Christianity is the ultimate group project where togetherness is more of a requirement than an option.

You may notice that I've used the word "adventure" to describe this Christian life together. I hope that says *hope* and *promise* and *fun*, and *delight* to you. It's supposed to. 'Cause what you and I should not miss is the "unity of the Spirit" that pushes the church outward and invites people to use their gifts and engage in a great adventure of serving God.

It's God's Spirit, not our programs, that binds us together as the family of God. Focus on the Spirit, on the common destination we have together in Christ, and on making the church community a place where everyone is gifted and everyone belongs, and you have a roadmap for an awesome journey of faith . . . to the measure of the full stature of Jesus Christ.

Amen.