

# A Whole, New Life

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Ephesians 4:1-16

Church is a collective noun.

Of all the truths that I learned in my childhood, Trinity Presbyterian Church taught me that church was about the people. I learned this by example from Emma Ruth Atkinson (Mrs. A to her students), a retired school teacher who taught elementary Sunday School, from Mrs. Miles who nurtured preschoolers three days a week, from Pauline Keeley who was an effective church leader in an era that didn't always welcome women's leadership.

I learned from G. Taft Lyons who baptized me on his first Sunday and whose pastorate would extend past my confirmation, from my dad who served as Clerk of Session, from my mother who responded to the call for a Sunday School coordinator, from Dorothy Cleveland who made our modest organ swing every week, from the Pfeiffers and the Barns and the Bucklins and the Bryants, and from my peers Travis and Peggy, Greg, Libby and Craig, and Andy.

I learned early on that the church was the people who made the building come alive.

Church is a collective noun.

This letter to the Ephesians was a primer for the early church, and if we wanted more evidence of the collective nature of the church, we could not ask for a more convincing passage. The accent on unity is so emphatic that the writer—Paul or one of Paul's students—extolls a sevenfold oneness, count them:

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

We are the one body of Christ, and we have unity through our connection to the *pater*, the progenitor who "passes on the potential for likeness" so that we might grow into "the measure of the full stature of Christ." The Greek word *pater* or progenitor, come from the Greek root *pa*, which means nourisher, protector, upholder. The progenitor is known to be the author of a family or society of persons who are all animated by the same spirit.<sup>1</sup>

We can see the connections between a gaggle of geese, because geese share similar features. We come to know the connection between members of the body of Christ through the Spirit that we share.

Over the last three weeks, we have listened in to the letter sent to Ephesus. The first half of the letter has explored the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It proclaimed that:

- In Christ, God gathers up ALL THINGS in heaven and on earth into the divine reign;
- In Christ, God extends the covenant of promise to those who have been aliens and strangers;
- In Christ, God reconciles all humanity to God and to one another;
- In Christ, God adopts us, visits us with redemption, and gives us to know the dimensions of divine love;
- In Christ, God enfolds us in new life.

Now we listen once again, as the letter makes a deep transition from the theological to the ethical, from the shape of God to the shape of our lives lived in God's blessing.

The generative power who calls us in, claims us for something greater than ourselves and then sends us out to participate in "nothing less than the ongoing reconciliation of all humanity to God and each other in Christ, into whom we ceaselessly grow."<sup>2</sup>

We are called to grow up into the fullness of Christ, **together**; called to participate in the ongoing work of reconciliation, **together**; called to exercise humility, gentleness, forbearance, and love, **together**.

My cousin Katie posted a Facebook photo this week of her first tattoo. No hearts or flowers, butterflies or dolphins—Katie now wears the Greek word πληρωμα—the word for "fullness" on the inside of her left wrist.



She shared this passage: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness" (Col 2:9-10a). Then she wrote, "First tattoo happened today, and I'm grateful for the reminder that I am enough."

Katie is a child of God and a daughter of the church. I am reminded that Katie's enough-ness and her understanding of participation in the fullness of God spring from the nurture of her family and her church, that collective body of Christ.

The Ephesians hear (and we overhear) a vision of church as a body of nurture. God supports that body by gifting it:

- with leaders,
- with those whose voices become our conscience calling us to justice,
- with those who share the good news,
- with those who nurture,
- with those who help us enter into the story of God's people:

These apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers, are gifted to the church so that together we might be equipped for the work of ministry that is the mission of the church.

Sarah Henrich asserts, that our “unity is based not in similarity of gifts, but in connections created by the Spirit... All has been given; believers have not attained or reached or otherwise brought upon themselves the great gifts of God. Even as all has been given, the one Spirit, Lord, baptism, and so forth such that everyone has been filled with a whole new life, there is a calling inherent in the bond.”<sup>3</sup>

I am reminded of the vocational examples of my childhood.

I remember how Mrs. A continued to work as a substitute Math teacher well after retirement so that the local Junior High—experiencing the turbulence of racial integration—could continue to provide quality education even in the gaps.

I remember how Pauline Keeley shared her leadership as an ordained Elder, not only with our Session, but also the local Presbytery, and the regional Synod.

I remember how Bobbi Pfeiffer ran for school board to fight for equitable education and decent textbooks in HISD, and how, in her retirement, she served as a long-term volunteer for Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston.

I remember how the Trinity congregation joined with others in the Presbytery, and shared the leadership gifts of Pastor Taft Lyons in founding the Seaman’s Center ministry in the Port of Houston. How the people and leaders of the congregation responded to changing neighborhood demographics by seeking partnership with a Hispanic congregation eventually merging to form a bi-lingual, multi-cultural, Presbyterian witness to Jesus Christ in Houston’s East End.

I remember my sister and her husband sharing their time and their gifts for teaching and shepherding (and frankly nurse-maiding) a pack of unruly teens who were growing up in Christ, *together*.

It was not perfect, it was not exhaustive, but it was *enough*.

I look out as we gather here and wonder about the examples of faithfulness and community and ministry that will touch the hearts and minds of this generation of children... What will lead them into their future as church?

The Presbyterian description of our collective calling is stated at the very beginning of our church’s constitution:

The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God’s mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God’s love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God’s mission.<sup>4</sup>

No pressure, right? Yet, we take heart, because CHURCH is a collective noun.

We are joined and knit together, each part working according to its measure as we grow into the fullness of Christ and are built up in love.

William Loader affirms that “The ministry of all is about living out the life and love which constituted us in the first place and keeps us going together. The ministry is fully incorporated into the God-body who takes shape in Christ. It is all about ‘filling all things’ (4: 10) with the glory/goodness of God.”<sup>5</sup>

- In Jesus Christ, we are one.
- Reconciled with God and one another, we are made whole.
- Sharing in God’s love and justice, we are sustained in new life.
- Living into the one hope of our calling, we participate in God’s transformation of the world.

It is an aspirational mission; yet, in the fullness of Christ *together*, we are *enough*.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Thayer, Joseph. “*pater*.” *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*. Electronic Ed. 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Marsall, Paul. “Pastoral Perspective on Ephesians 4:1-16.” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol 3*. Louisville: WJK, 2009. 304.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich, Sarah. “Commentary on Ephesians 4:1-16.” *Working Preacher: Preach This Week*. Web. July 2015.

<sup>4</sup> *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part II: The Book of Order*. Louisville: OGA, 2015. Digital Ed. Paragraph F-1.01

<sup>5</sup> Loader, William. “First Thoughts on Year B *Epistle* Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 10.” *Murdoch University*. Web. 2015.