

JOINED TOGETHER IN LOVE

Ephesians 4:11-16.... *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into 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.”* (NIV)

“Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.

Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.” (NLT)

Most people love a good tree, particularly a good evergreen that stretches up to the sky. There is something about the strength seen in a tree. It tells you that it stands alone. It tells you that it does not need help from others. It can withstand the elements and grow strong and tall. It is a loner and finds its strength from itself. Trees stretch to the sky and tell you that they mean business! They grow a little more each year, slowly but steadily. They can be decades and even centuries old. In Cyprus, we see trees that have been standing since Jesus walked the earth. I'm sure you will agree - there is something great and powerful about the lone tree.

After a violent windstorm had swept the UK a few years back, flattening more than a million trees. An official investigation discovered that the trees had been planted just far enough apart that their roots were not intertwined with each other. Each tree stood alone, with no help from the tree next to it, and over a million were lost. They discovered that even trees need each other. Though they seem so individual above ground, below ground they need to be connected. If they are not connected with each other they are not nearly as strong as they could be.

And like trees, we have a need for each other. We need to have others around us to strengthen us, to build us up, to protect us. Often, it may seem that we can do it by ourselves, but this is just not the case. And this is what Paul was writing about in **Ephesians 4**, our need for each other. It is through this gathering together that our roots are able to strengthen each other and we are able to keep standing strong.

I. The Body

Today's scripture talks about the Body of Christ. That is, it talks about the church. We sometimes fail to understand or act upon the fact that we are the body of Christ. In other scriptures, Paul talks about how each part of the body plays a certain part in the whole of the body. Paul explains that we cannot all be eyes or mouths or fingers. If we were all ears, we'd make a pretty crazy looking body. These teachings of Paul are important. They mean that we all have our own purpose. They mean that we should not look with envy on those who are better at certain things than us. Paul tells us that we each have a part to play in this thing we call 'the church', what he calls Christ's body. Sometimes it seems like what we have to offer doesn't really matter, but this is not true. There are parts of the body that seem pointless, but have real value. You all have real value.

This is very important. You should not allow your own feelings of inadequacy and your inferiority complexes keep you from being a part of the plan that God has for you. You are valuable and precious in His eyes!

II. Gifts of Community

Christian community brings us to maturity in our faith. Paul likes to contrast maturity with immaturity in his writings. He likes to tell us that when we are not following the right path we are like infants, we are like babies. Infants cannot take care of themselves. In today's scripture he says that they will be blown here and there by every wind of teaching. Infants have not yet learned to think for themselves and they are not protected against those things in this world that stand against them. And let me make this very clear, there are things in this world that do stand against us. So maturity is important. And maturity comes when we come together. It is gathering with other Christians where we learn how to better live our own lives as Christians. In fact, we learn from each other!

Christian community helps us move toward unity in our faith and knowledge of God. That's right, Christian community brings unity. I realize it doesn't always feel that way. As Christians, we often don't live the unity that we are called to. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't strive for unity. And this passage gives us a good hint on where to start. It talks about how we will "*all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God*". This is a good place to start. We start with the unity that ties all Christians together. When we come together in Christian community, we should find that the thing that we hold in common: "*forgiveness from our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus*", is so much greater than anything that can separate us. And we can revel in that which unites us.

Christian community helps us to grow and build each other up in love. I love this imagery of building each other up in love. I think of those trees in Britain that were planted too far apart from each other and they were not able to strengthen each other. They did not build each other up and when trial came, they came down. We don't need to be like them. Instead we can come together and find strength in each other.

III. Responsibilities of Community

So coming together as Christian community is good for us. It helps us to grow as individuals and as a group. But there are also responsibilities that come when we come together as the Body of Christ. When we accept that we are all different parts of the body, we realize that we all have gifts to offer to that body. This means that we are called to use those gifts. This means that we are not doing our duty if we aren't using our gifts. Ephesians 4:16 talks about how we grow and build ourselves up in love. But it says that this happens when each part does its work. What part of the body are you? What is your responsibility to the greater body of Christ? What is your role to play? There are different ways to discover the answer to this question.

For most people, this involves a "gifts assessment". This is worthwhile because it helps us to know better where we might be gifted, as well as helping us to realize where our interests and passions lie. Someone who is good at playing the piano might not necessarily be passionate about doing so, and it is important to balance these things.

We sometimes, as a church, are so busy trying to make sure that we have enough people in the Hospitality Team that we don't really find ways to allow true ministry to happen as we each do our part. But if you aren't into gift assessments, there are other ways to find out what your role is. The best of these is just to get involved. Find a way that you can participate. Don't wait to be asked. Instead find something that you think you could help with and see if they need your help. As long as you wait, you are missing opportunities that could be before you. And we as a church are missing out on what you have to offer to us.

When we become a community where people are finding maturity in their faith, when we become a place of unity, when we become a growing loving group where people are allowed to blossom, people will want to be a part of what we offer. And in the end, this is what church is supposed to be. We are supposed to be a group of Christians who grow in our faith, but also who call others into that same faith.

So, when we better become this thing called the church, we will find that our forest will grow and strengthen itself. We will find that others will want to plant their trees in our forest. And when the wind does come, we will hold each other together because our roots will be deep in Jesus and our roots (being intertwined) will help us to stay strong. And this is a wonderful thing.

Amen....