

Ephesians 4:1-16 New International Version (NIV)

4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

⁷But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,^{SEP} he took many captives^{SEP} and gave gifts to his people.”

⁹(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up¹³until 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.

¹⁴Then 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 people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From 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.

John 6:24-35

²⁴Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.

²⁵When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

²⁶Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

²⁸Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”

²⁹Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

³⁰So they asked him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

³²Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴“Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

³⁵Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

“Immaturity”
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee
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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Sometimes a passage of scripture makes sense to me best through the lens of someone whose work I have read, and today is one of those days. So, you can be thankful this morning to a favorite poet, T.S. Eliot, and to a less than favorite but somewhat astute theologian, Irenaeus of Lyon, who was an early bishop who lived during the second and third centuries after Christ. You can credit them for reminding us that we are all really immature. Well, that we are immature is Irenaeus’ word; T.S. Eliot phrases this a bit more gently, in that we grow into more full awareness as we grow in faith. Both these ideas help me read these passages, and I invite you to consider them in this way, as when we read scripture, it is sometimes for the great story, but also is so that we might grow in faith and faithfulness to God.

For anyone who happens to have read the theologian Irenaeus and wonders why I agree with him on anything, I will say that we disagree on much. Nonetheless, there are several ideas that have been bulleted by a branch of the Orthodox Christian Church that I find helpful as an introduction to his ideas, ones whose truth might help us embrace the Apostle Paul’s good advice as we read it in today’s passage from Ephesians.

- Humans were created in the image and likeness of God.
- We are in an immature moral state, though we have the potential for moral perfection.
- Throughout our lives we change from being human animals to ‘children of God’.
- This is a choice made after struggle and experience, as we choose God rather than our baser instinct.

As Paul writes about our immaturity in today's lesson, he helps us understand how when we lean into our more base instinct, we are kept distinct—from each other and from God. So, when we choose God and live into the gifts of grace each of us has been given, we grow in the maturity of our faith, and therefore into greater unity. Maybe some of you are thinking that you have no particularly base instinct. Sure, you may not always be your best self, but base? Animal? If any of us doubts it, I would like to offer our lesson from the Gospel of John as illustration of our more base, more animal understanding of Jesus. Maybe we are not too different from those who wonder at Jesus' words and intention, even after they have just miraculously been fed by him through the loaves and fishes that were multiplied on their behalf.

Do you wonder as I do how those persons who speak to him about needing a sign can be so blind? "Our ancestors were given manna from heaven," they say to Jesus. The bread they have received may not have been gathered as from morning dew, but they have been delivered from their physical hunger through a miraculous moment of abundance. Still, they cannot see Jesus for what he is—their savior . . . God's son. They want to be faithful, but they somehow draw shy of complete belief in what Jesus can and does provide them. Donald MacLeod in his book *Know The Way, Keep The Truth, Win The Life* shares a reflection by T.S. Eliot regarding spiritual awareness; one that may help us in understanding this kind of immaturity in faith, which acknowledges what *can* be understood, but isn't quite there yet. Eliot responds to our passage from John's Gospel in the following: "In a broadcast address in London, T. S. Eliot talked about "spiritual awareness." He observed that many persons aspire to become Christians and believe, presumably, in the efficacy of the Christian faith, but never reach the stage of actually experiencing it. Aspiring towards real belief, i.e., becoming truly Christian, is one thing, whereas complete awareness of it is another. Aspiring can easily become an end in itself. And, as Charles H. Duthie of Edinburgh remarked: "It is a matter of living forever in the preface and never becoming involved in the story."

How mature is our faith? Clearly it is mature enough that we are aware of our need to worship together, or we wouldn't be here this morning. We certainly see

our church somehow as a part of the Body of Christ, but we may not be as fully aware of our role in this body. We may recognize that Jesus has something to show us; something to teach us, but not understand that Jesus himself is what we need to know. We want to be fed in a way that sustains us, but we haven't grown to a state of mature understanding that recognizes Jesus as the way, the truth and the life in himself. This is true whether you have a sure sense of Christ's divinity, Christ's oneness with God, or whether you understand Christ to be the embodiment of self-sacrificing love. The central symbol of Christian faith points to God's love for us *and our ability to love one another*. Our celebration of the Communion feast this morning is a celebration of our unity in Christ, who is the head of the table and the meal himself. Yes, it is a mystery, but is also the most real and even physical connection we can make. Jesus is here with us, and we are with him; when we share in the feast of Communion, Jesus is in us, and we are in Jesus. It is a holy mystery whose understanding we may seek without thinking; whose gifts are extended without our asking.

So, we come to this table in order to attain what Paul tries to teach us: ¹⁵speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From 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." Let us pray.

Loving and gracious God, we thank you for the gifts we are about to receive at your table, and we pray that in being fed through you, we might offer our lives in service to you, each doing our part to build your Kin-dom in love. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.