

Go into any health club, any exercise center, any YMCA, and you're bound to see weight machines and free weights. When I was in seminary we had privileges at the recreation center on the Louisville Baptist Seminary campus, and along with a walking track and swimming pool there was a weight room—again, with weight machines and free weights as well as treadmills and stair climbers and stationary bikes. Anything you might want to exercise your body, to keep it healthy.

In the passage from Ephesians Paul is talking about another kind of body building: building up the body of Christ. This theme is a primary one in Paul's letters to the different churches he's had a hand in starting, and for Paul the way this is achieved is through unity of purpose and maturity of faith. In the letter to the Ephesians this passage comes at the end of section that contains more doctrinal instruction—teachings about theology and Christology and the good news that he wants the Ephesians to recognize there—that salvation is theirs in Christ Jesus. But as with every good sermon, doctrine is followed by practical application: what does it mean to live as a Christian in the world? And that really is the question, isn't it?—even for us today: What does it mean to us to live as Christians in the world?

In a way, Paul is calling the Ephesians out, challenging them to lead lives worthy of their belief in Christ, characterized by four qualities: humility, gentleness, patience, and loving forbearance. In other words, in Paul's eyes this is the kind of behavior that will mark believers as believers. Not only what they say with their mouths, but how they act towards other people. When the believers take on these qualities the result will be a unity and a peace throughout the body—the church—which allows the body to get on with its intended purposes—equipping its members for ministry and seeking out and incorporating non-believers into the body.

Now Paul, as usual, has some tough words for the Ephesians: he wants them to grow up! He wants them to give up their arrogant ways and insistence that their ways are the only right ways. I'm sure that as good church people you all can imagine the arguments: the “right” food to eat, the “right” way to use the collected offerings, the “right” way to teach the children and new converts. A saying of Dr. Phil's keeps ringing in my head: he's always saying to people, “do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy?” when he's talking to couples or families that just can't seem to resolve their differences. The idea is simple: being right, and especially insisting that everyone acknowledge your rightness, is not necessarily all it's cracked up to be. Because sometimes there are issues that people

are going to disagree about; and as anyone who has ever been married or worked in an office or had friendships with other people, sometimes we're not going to agree. And so sometimes it's more important that the relationship be maintained than our rightness—or someone else's wrongness—be conceded.

Paul is, in essence, saying the same thing; for him, happiness equals the peace and unity of the body. There was a lot of diversity within the body even in that time—especially when you think about the fact that there were both Jewish converts and Gentile converts to Christianity. One group was coming from almost hyper-religious background, while the other was coming out of a hedonistic, secular background. Each group brought its own expectations of what the faith and the church would be like; each group believed its experience of faith was the one true experience. And not only that, but each individual within both groups would bring his or her own baggage into the mix. Talk about having your hands full! I'll bet Paul got plenty of grey hairs trying to manage these new groups of faithful believers.

And this is where Paul begins to emphasize the importance of building up the body of Christ. He reminds the Ephesians that even though there is a great diversity of backgrounds among the members of that particular body, it was important to remember the common elements that brought them together in faith: One body—the common existence in the Christian life. One Spirit—the Spirit of God that is present among them on earth. One hope—the hope of new life with Christ through salvation. One Lord—Jesus Christ. One faith—that Christ, the redeemer, had come in the flesh and would come again. One baptism—the sign of conversion that all believers shared in. And one God—the God who was father of all. These were the really important things that all believers needed to share in, these were the commonalities through which they were to build their lives together as the Christ's body. And as they dropped their need to be right, as they grew into a mature faith that was neither manipulative nor self-serving, as they focused on their commonalities rather than worrying about their differences—then, and only then, would the body be strengthened and built up into a healthy, growing entity.

I am reminded in all of this of our baptismal vows. I guess it's the way Paul outlined those important elements of the faith: one body, one spirit, one hope; one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God. Our baptismal vows aren't so different: we declare our faith in God and Jesus Christ and we promise to be faithful disciples through obedience to the word and by showing his love to all people. This is one reason that baptism in the Presbyterian church is a public affair: because every time someone

comes forward for baptism, every person present in the church is reminded of those vows that were taken at baptism, and we all promise to help and encourage the newly baptized persons in their walk of faith. It truly takes the whole community working together to lead the newly baptized person into their new life in Christ. And it is good for us all to remember our baptisms and the promises that were made by us or in our behalf—even if we were baptized at such a young age that we don't consciously remember it. Remembering our baptisms is a shortcut to remembering the essences of our faith: one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.

But the knowing and understanding of these concepts and the following through with them are two different things. It's easy to say, "yeah, yeah, unity of the body, what a great idea" until we have to budget our offerings into 90 different church programs, or when we have to decide on what color the new carpet for the sanctuary is going to be, or when the liberal or conservative in the next pew challenges our dearly-held political or theological beliefs. Then it becomes all too easy to dismiss the opinions and ideas of other people in favor our own interests. The maturity of faith that we so proudly congratulate ourselves on becomes the manipulative faith of immaturity, one that isn't humble, or gentle, or patient, or forgiving, or loving—or even especially nice. And for some reason, it's easy to see when other people in the church are behaving badly, and it's easy to say, "if only they'd just see it my way!"

My point here is that it's very easy to slip into behavior that isn't beneficial to the body of Christ—and may even be detrimental. And we all do it; it's part of being human. But our task, our goal is to be more and more Christ-like in our behavior, to serve him rather than ourselves, and to enable the work of the church through our support and encouragement of others. It's tempting to rationalize our behavior by saying, "I just don't want to let myself be walked on." And it's true, there are people who will take advantage of our good behavior and we'll end up not having our needs met; and my point isn't that our needs are never important. Everyone needs to feel that they are being heard from time to time and there are some situations where it isn't healthy to give in, but within the church everyone needs to make sure that the needs of others are being met. You know, speak up for what you want, but don't hold a grudge if what you want doesn't happen this time. I think a some good rules of thumb might be that you should rethink what you're doing if...

1. Your behavior around an issue threatens to cause a rift in the congregation
2. Your behavior around an issue is designed to manipulate others for your own benefit

3. You find yourself reacting with jealousy, impatience, miserliness, or superiority to the ideas and opinions of other people

There are other behaviors that are destructive within the body of Christ, and I could go on and on, but I think you get the picture. Mature faith has a generous spirit that isn't afraid to share its resources; immature faith counts every penny that someone else uses. Mature faith builds up people who are unchurched, bringing them to Christ through its compassionate witness; immature faith avoids the unchurched, fearing that the unchurched will be a bad influence on the faithful. Mature faith remembers that it is Christ we are serving, not our own interests; immature faith insists on the rightness of its positions at all costs—serving itself rather than Christ.

As Christians who make up the body of Christ we must order our behavior so that it enhances our ministry and witness to the world rather than takes away from it. We as Presbyterians are connectional on three levels: in our home churches, within our denomination, and in the worldwide church, and so we must make sure that in all three arenas our behavior reflects our status as Christians. If we're too busy squabbling amongst ourselves, the result will be that we won't be successful in equipping the saints for ministry and we won't fulfill our charge to seek out and invite in new converts to the faith. But if we clothe ourselves in Christ and exhibit a generosity of spirit and a maturity of faith that allows for the rich diversity that humanity encompasses, then we will truly be successful at building up the body of Christ.

Let us pray: God of unity and peace, grant us the ability to put ourselves aside and allow for the many differences that you have created within your people. Bring us together in a harmony of many voices who sing your praises into eternity. Make us new creations who build up and strengthen your church in everything we do. Amen.