



“Thinking and Practicing Reconciliation”: The Ephesians Texts for Pentecost 8-14

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Back when, the official documents of Vatican II included both *Lumen Gentium*, the “Dogmatic Constitution of the Church,” and *Gaudium Et Spes*, the “Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World.” Those distinctive concerns, dogmatic and pastoral, well describe the two major sections of Ephesians, too. The “Amen” at the end of chapter three signals the end of a powerful theological statement about the church as the locus of reconciliation in the world. The next chapters offer concrete pastoral counsel about the distinctive shape of reconciliation in the community of faith.

Preachers making their way through the Ephesians texts for Propers 10-16 (Pentecost 8-14, Series B) may notice appropriate shifts in the mood of their sermons as they move from the more doctrinal section to the pastoral one. This would be good, in fact. However, some caution is also suggested. Proclamation of these scriptures demands that sermons from chapters 1-3 also capture the concrete

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character of the church’s life in the world, and not remain too abstract, too dogmatic. Sermons from the pastoral section will want to capture the communal aspects of reconciled living, and not reduce things merely to individual behaviors or circumstances. Even there, the main concern is not a matter of family or personal counseling, but of vocational training for the whole church.

Thinking Blessing—Pentecost 8: Ephesians 1:3-14

Here is a summary of the whole message of Ephesians. Those great, all-encompassing spiritual blessings that belong to the being-saved-in-the-world community of faith are all God’s doing. They rest on God’s favorable decision, God’s grace, God’s beloved Son, and the shedding of that Son’s blood. As these lavish blessings have come first to Jewish Christians and now to Gentile ones too, there is a gracious given-ness that always attends them. Some translations use the word “predestinated” as a way to characterize the participation of both these communities in the same love, election, and grace of God—one body, some called first, others added later. We are reminded of Augustine’s watchword: “What do we have that we have not received?”

But as always God’s grace establishes a dynamic. This is a living, bodily, history-shaping movement of God toward the world through and in the church. So the words used here suggest an “administration” of the fullness of time. In the community is found a new life in which the

fullness God planned from the start is now experienced. A newness not in utter completeness, but as an “earnest,” a guarantee of the inheritance. The secret is let out. God plans nothing less than the gathering of everything (the cosmos) into a living unity with him.

And something is entrusted to the church in this. We are living actively as heirs, enjoying our inheritance toward redemption. God is not only spending the divine self on the world, on humanity, but investing therein. God has a stake in us, in the world. Could we possibly look to the cross of Christ and deny that God has much invested in the lives of sinners? The fullness of time has captured the church, making us participants in God’s gracious purpose to reunite everything in Christ. The community of faith, as a locus of reconciliation, projected into God’s future, will be instrumental in showing this divine purpose.

What a powerful claim about the church in the world. Ours is to live the oneness we already have “in Christ.” Such unity is our starting place, as well as our goal. Martin Luther may have been right when he said in *The Bondage of the Will*, “The kingdom is not in the process of preparation, but was prepared before, and the children of the kingdom do not prepare the kingdom, but are in the process of being themselves prepared; that is, the kingdom merits the children, not the children the kingdom.”¹ The pressure is off, we can be bold to pray and praise. That is quite an inheritance.

¹*Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*, tr. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1957) 182.

Thinking Unity—Pentecost 9: Ephesians 2:11-22

One can only imagine the countless separations between first-century Jews and their Gentile neighbors. The ethnic, national, and religious divisiveness of our own day has nothing on that great ancient divide. Small wonder that Jewish and Gentile Christians who found themselves together in the company of the church would consider such an occurrence proof or evidence of the Spirit’s power. The fact that these groups had been grafted into one living structure, the body of Christ, surely announced the breakdown of obstacles to their reconciliation and reconstruction in the household of God.

That which had previously stood between them (and had been standing there for years) had suffered a breakdown. Having been reconciled to God, peace declared to those far and near, they were fitted together in Christ as fellow citizens with the saints and members of the community of faith. Just think of that! In the unity of the Spirit here was a first instance of the identity of the church as the community of reconciliation. Oneness in Christ was embodied by the inclusion of these enemies (not too strong a word) in that whole construction laid on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. There is an echo here, “Once you were no people [i.e., no people together—no congregation], but now you are God’s people.”

Yet the remarkable thing about this scripture is how clearly it announces that the church’s potential as a dwelling place for God depends on community, on being joined together. Just as the church then, as a locus of reconciliation, stood for the overcoming of fundamental, deep-seated, ingrained, sedimented divisions between Jewish and Gentile peoples in the world of the first century, so too does the church today stand for the overcoming of divisions forced on the world by tradition, class, color, nation. The cross of Christ, lifted up, draws the world in its diversity and witnesses to the wiping out, the abolition, the breakdown of that which divides. We

cannot be the one we are meant to be in Christ without at the same time being the many we surely are in the church. We are fitted together so as to be a dwelling place, and only so is humanity capable of God. Only as we are joined are we able to signal God's presence in the world.

Congregations, real honest-to-goodness communities of faith, still are called together to mission and service. They find in their communion a holy strength that no one enjoys alone. The tie that binds becomes a cornerstone for community. Our being brought close to one another, our sense of reconciliation, leads us to believe that God has something in mind for us. Else God would not have bothered to knit us together in such communities. We may not always be convinced what that purpose is, we may even contend about that, yet never deny that God has a purpose. We get and gain strength from one another, from such closeness. There is immediate payoff for mission and ministry when dividing walls of hostility are broken down.

Thinking Fulfillment—Pentecost 10: Ephesians 3:14-21

The first section of Ephesians, which may be characterized as the more

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theological portion, closes with a bold prayer for the church's perfection. This is not a timid prayer—indeed, it is one of scripture's most powerful. Like the Lord's Prayer, it simply asks everything, that the church's experience of God be complete. Then, however, the prayer recognizes that God's purposeful presence always offers far more than we can ask or even imagine. The fullness of God is a filling that continues, ever fuller—God outdoing all that we ask, anticipating our need.

And the church is aware of its dependence. Andrew Lincoln says, "If the church is going to become in history an effective preview of God's purposes for the end of history, then God is going to have to help it in a big way."² And the prayer is specific in its petition for God's help. The church prays for inner strength, for knowledge, for the fullness of God. This is prayer for the company of believers in the Ephesus church(es). So while each believer needs inner strength, so too does the community. There is a resilience that the whole body requires and for which it must pray.

The need for knowledge likewise involves the community. As individual believers we have knowledge of God in part. However, as we are joined with others our knowledge of God is increased, our knowledge of God's love compounded. This strength in numbers is not a matter of simple addition, but of faith's enrichment in the fullness of God. The body of Christ is not just isolated persons of faith grasping something of Christ's love; in the world the larger voice belongs to the witness of the whole community, and the greater wisdom.

So might we all be filled with the fullness of God. The prayer is for the church to enjoy to the fullest extent possible the living power of God, Christ's love. The church as the community of reconciliation has begun to live in and toward redemption—"rooted and grounded in love." Maybe we need to post a sign: GROUND UNDER REPAIR! In and through the church the world is being worked on, restored. Foundational changes are underway, people are being grounded in God's love, rooted in grace, to all generations, forever and ever. This part of the letter ends on the same note with which Ephesians began—the worship and praise of God. Amen and amen.

Practicing Wholeness—Pentecost 11: Ephesians 4:1-16

This section begins, “I therefore.” And now follows the pastoral constitution of the locus of reconciliation. Because of what the church is, because of its identity in Christ, these next things follow—and ought, perhaps, to come naturally to it. God is at work fitting and joining the whole body together. There is an explicit imperative to grow—better, to grow up. The call is for maturity of faith.

The church, gifted, equipped, and built up, moves toward and has momentum for the unity of faith, the knowledge of God’s Son, and the measure of the full stature of Christ. No one is left out. All members play their part in the church’s attainment of the unity and maturity that rightly belong to it. The church is the context in which believers live out their calling. This is something quite remark-

²*Ephesians* (Dallas: Word, 1990) 218.

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able; something remarkable actually happens as a result of this constitution. The many gifts of Christ, the various measures of grace, the multiple ministries, are drawn together and put to good purpose in the church’s life.

In such communal living, diversity is not an obstacle but a vehicle for unity and maturity. The variety in the church does not hinder, but rather promotes the desired growth. Seminary professor Gerhard Frost used to say to students, “We need each other’s differences.” This was no mere nod to some fuzzy tolerance, but a tough-minded appraisal of the necessity for diversity, no matter how difficult that might be for us in the church. We may need God’s help to be mature enough to welcome differences among us with humility, gentleness, and patience, and to put up with one another in love as we are encouraged to do.

In such an economy, the many are unified by a common charge to build up, to stabilize, to enable growth. This structured unity in diversity is powerful witness to the rest of the world concerning God’s purposes for all creation. What is being set forth (in the dogmatic constitution of the first section) and called for (in the pastoral second portion) in this letter is not an impossibly unattainable ideal, but the conviction of faith that the church has been given resources to demonstrate unity, proclaim truth in love, and become whole in Christ.

Practicing Newness—Pentecost 12: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Once again, the “therefore.” The letter gets down to specifics. Faith’s concrete expression follows. The community of reconciliation is to be, and will be, a neighborhood where the old is put off and the new put on. Out with bitterness, anger, shouting, cursing, and any kind of malice. Instead, goodness, warm-heartedness, and forgiveness, with Christ as its example, are to be in evidence. We probably ought to be on the lookout for these things in ourselves and in the congregations we belong to and serve.

All those things we are counseled to guard against—lying, the indulgence of anger, stealing, foul talk, grieving the Holy Spirit, giving opportunity to the devil—are counter-weighted with concern for beneficial effects on the rest of the community. Sharing with those in need, saying the right thing, and honest work give clues as to the ways in which God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are experienced in faith’s community. Everyday living is seen here as though it were always lived in Christ, which of course it is. Such is life in the reconciled community.

Responsiveness, imagination, and public profession (witness) are called for. The letter charges us to be “imitators of God.” The claim that we should mimic God sounds preposterous. But it also alerts us that the church’s ministry, witness, and example still count. Day by day, the community of faith is growing into him who is its head, Jesus Christ. The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, the one in which we confess our faith, is following Christ’s example. Where the life of faith is founded on the humility, gentleness, and patience of Christ, there is imitation—Christ-like behavior. This is no cheap imitation either, but the genuine article. Our faith has marked us for redemption. Living as redeemed, our lives are the real thing, not “knock-offs” of the humans we would be without God. In Christ, the

church has begun to resemble the creature humanity was meant to be—a humanity created in God’s image.

Practicing Wisdom—Pentecost 13: Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful how you conduct yourself. The rhetorical distinction here is between acting as fools or acting as wise persons. There is no argument about which one to prefer; we ought, everyone ought, to live smart. Wisdom is applied here to the living of our days. Time is not featured as some cosmic catchall which we simply fill up by living so long. Rather, time is an ingredient in human life, standing in need of redemption as much as any other aspect of human being. “Making the most of the time” is a call to consider our lifetimes a time of salvation—now is the day of salvation!

In the fullness of time, in the completeness of the church’s blessing, drunkenness exemplifies wasted time, pure and simple. John Doberstein, in his *Minister’s Prayer Book*, quotes Martin Luther’s “Treatise on the Life of the Priest” where Luther counsels:

Long talk and drinking until late at night make a weak heart and a confused head and in the morning it is filled with catarrh and rheum and phlegm, which gravely hinders the priest in his office of prayer and service.

Therefore, that you may guard against this general evil, remember seriously that you cannot ruin an evening without at the same time partly or wholly ruining the next morning and, indeed, the whole of the following day. Believe those who speak from experience; if you do not believe them, then you will have to learn by your own experience.³

A hard lesson, perhaps, but we still can’t afford the waste. And even teetotalers may squander themselves in trivial pursuits.

So instead we are urged to wisdom, filling ourselves not with wine but with Spirit, with Christ, with God. The Pentecost church was taken for a bunch of drunkards. To be brimful in this way is the better part of wisdom. To be drawn into singing, psalms, hymns, spirituals, thanksgiving, glad worship is no ignorance, no waste. For the fullness of Spirit is properly experienced only in community. Where drunkenness, or any other selfish diversion for that matter—even a religious one—tends to isolate, take away, or destroy family and community, the church is encouraged in another direction. This is the course of wisdom as the church always

tries to find out what is pleasing to the Lord (v. 10).

Standing Firm in Thought and Practice—Pentecost 14: Ephesians 6:10-20

These concluding appeals draw us back to the whole body of Christ once more. Christians are charged to draw on the rich resources of faith present to the community. No other strength than God's own can fortify the saints. And the call to battle dress imagined here is not a metaphor for self-discipline. This is armor that is somewhat external to us. Because the reconciliation the -

³Cited in John W. Doberstein, *Minister's Prayer Book* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 276.

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tive gear available to it—which caution makes obvious sense to anyone heading into battle.

People of faith the world over find themselves contending against oppressive authorities and sanctions. There are entire systems of violence and despair at work against us. That is the dimension of the struggle. The church is confronted with opposing forces. No military hardware is going to help here. Against flesh and blood, firepower, bullet-proof vests, and bigger sticks might work. But against God's ancient enemy these won't do any good. Instead the church finds strength in the whole armor of God. A curious checklist: truth, righteousness, gospel peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God strengthen the church against all that threatens its mission. These are standard issue to every Christian community, given to resist the devil's scheming, the ruler and authorities. Here we see the real power of God against evil. We are outfitted with what allows us to stand firm.

Ancient Roman armies simply marched headlong into enemy forces. But the well-protected soldiers stayed in such close formation, shoulder to shoulder, shields overlapping, that the blows of their opponents had little effect. When their enemy was worn out, the Roman legions were still standing. In American football, the fabled "flying wedge" has been ruled out for years—just too hard to stop. But there is no law against Christians standing together in truth, righteousness, peace, prayer, and perseverance. Nothing to keep us from joining forces, side by side, against violence and oppression. Haven't we sung, "Though hordes of devils fill the land all threat'ning to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us"?⁴ We need not fear being overrun. Within the garrison of God's provision, the word has come down the chain of command—stand ground! We have been commanded, charged, and commissioned to stand firm in this world for Christ's reconciliation. Faith's resources are sufficient to prevail.

And being so armor-clad, we pray in the Spirit for wakefulness that, being on guard, we may stand firm. The church is attentive to the world with a watchfulness that comes only through prayer. "And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, Steals on the ear the distant triumph song, And hearts are brave again and arms are strong. Alleluia!"⁵

With all the saints, strengthened ever and anew, we pray that our proclamation of reconciliation would be fresh and bold too. That is our identity and our task.

⁴Stanza 3 of Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," *Lutheran Book of Worship*, No. 228.

⁵Stanza 5 of William V. How, "For All the Saints," *Lutheran Book of Worship*, No. 174.