

Forming Our Identity
Ephesians 4: 1-16
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One of my joys in being a minister is officiating at weddings. While weddings are usually a day of great happiness, they also can be a time of enormous stress.

I recently heard about a bride who was terribly anxious about making a mistake during her wedding ceremony. The minister reassured her, explaining the order of service was not difficult to remember. "All you have to keep in mind," the minister said, "is when you enter the sanctuary, you walk down the aisle. The groom and best man will be waiting in front of the altar next to me. After a brief welcome, the congregation will stand and sing a hymn. Then we will continue with the ceremony. Just remember this order, and nothing will go wrong."

The wedding day finally arrived, and the groom waited nervously for his bride to appear. As she took her place beside him, the groom was curious – then horrified!!! – to hear the woman he loved repeating, "Aisle, altar, hymn. Aisle, altar, hymn. Aisle, altar, hymn."¹

All too often, we want to change the people in our lives: I'll alter him; I'll alter her. Nothing too significant, mind you – just a **few** changes to make our spouse, or our parents, or our children perfect. Or perhaps we are expecting perfection in our siblings, friends, neighbors, or even the folks at church. Our standard for the behavior of other people can be pretty high.

A favorite reading at weddings is called "The Art of a Good Marriage." Author Wilferd Peterson emphasizes the daily, ongoing work needed to maintain a good relationship:

It is doing things for each other, not in the attitude of duty or sacrifice, but in the spirit of joy.
It is not looking for perfection in each other.
It is cultivating flexibility, patience, and understanding.
It is not only marrying the right partner; it is being the right partner.²

This idea is at the heart of Paul's thinking in today's passage. We already have said "**yes**" to being a member of God's beloved community. We have said "**I do**" to following Jesus. So, what does all this look like in our nitty-gritty, practical, everyday life together? How are we to behave as a member of the church?

In previous weeks, we have noted how excited Paul gets in his writing. He gushes forth long, eloquent, run-on sentences, as he uses the first half of Ephesians to describe the

foundational theology of Christianity. Now, in chapter four, Paul pivots by using the word “therefore.” In chapters four through six, Paul answers the burning question on all our minds: “**So what?**”

Remember where Paul started. He did not begin Ephesians with the ethical demands of Christian behavior. Instead, Paul devoted the first three chapters to describing God’s gift of salvation. Only **after** the story of God’s amazing grace has been shared, does Paul begin to describe our response to God’s love.

We live in a world where many of us think we have to be perfect to be loved, or accepted, or helpful to others. Well, Christianity says otherwise. Our Christian faith is grounded in the knowledge that salvation is not a prize to be won for perfect behavior. Our salvation is not something we earn or deserve. Rather, it is while we are still sinners that God claims us. We are redeemed in Christ **only** as a gracious gift from a good and generous God.

In today’s reading, you may have noticed the repetitive string of “ones.” As we enter the second half of this letter, Paul has not stopped gushing. In case you were not counting, Paul writes it seven times: “⁴There is **one** body and **one** Spirit, just as you were called to the **one** hope of your calling, ⁵ **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism, ⁶ **one** God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” What defines the community of God’s people – the body of Christ – is unity. All the different members are part of **one** body. Paul emphasizes our unity by listing this long, singularity of things: one Lord, one Spirit, one God and Father of all.

As Christians then, this challenge – this calling – is always before us. But with such diversity of flawed human beings, how do you and I form one identity and maintain that unity? After all, we inhabit a culture where an unhealthy mantra runs through our collective minds: “Aisle, altar, hymn. Aisle, altar, her. Aisle, altar, them.” If we all want to change and improve the person sitting next to us, how do we worship, serve, and live together as one body in Christ?

In answer to our question, Paul highlights four Christian qualities: “²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” By practicing humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance in love our identity in Christ is formed. This brings unity, not uniformity. We still will have our differences, but not division.

In a community of diverse people with a variety of gifts, our common purpose – our God-sized Dreams – will be more fully realized when these four characteristics are consistently practiced as the norm, and not the exception.

In *Love Does*, one of the books we read during Lent a few years ago, Bob Goff writes about his wedding day. Since Bob and his wife didn’t have much money when they got married, they cut costs wherever possible. So, instead of using a professional baker, Bob asked a teenager whose father owned a bakery to make a four-tiered cake for \$150.

The marriage ceremony went as planned, but when the happy couple arrived at the reception, they saw their young baker assembling the last tier of their wedding cake on the top of a rickety cart. As he pushed the cake across the parking lot, the back wheel hit a rock and abruptly stopped. But the upper levels of the cake didn't. In rapid succession, each layer fell off its pillars – splat, splat, splat – onto the asphalt!

Well, with the wedding guests arriving soon, this called for some quick thinking. So, Bob and his young baker scooped up the cake. Thirty minutes later, the same cake was reassembled covered by a batch of freshly made icing. To Bob's great embarrassment, they served this cake – gravel, small bits of asphalt, and all – to their guests!!!³

Reflecting on this gritty story, Bob considers how his *life* is like that cake. It is full of small rocks, broken relationships, and unwanted debris – *like all of our lives*. And yet, God uses flawed, imperfect people, even those embedded with years of accumulated dirt and gravel. Unlike Bob and his young baker, God does not ice over the faults and failures; rather, God uses us *in spite of* our faults and failures, as we practice humility, gentleness, patience, and love.

Perhaps what impresses me most about the Apostle Paul is his determination to maintain the unity in Christ, even from a prison cell. Walls, chains, divisions, imperfections, brokenness – NONE of them can prevent God from using us for the building up of the body of Christ. God continues to call, equip, and use broken, splattered, and imperfect people not just as followers, but as full participants in bringing about the fullness of God's kingdom.

You and I do not deserve the gift of God's grace, yet we all share in it. In response, we are "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Therefore, let us all consider how God wants to work in and through us to create a God-sized Dream. May we all hear and answer God's call. Amen.

¹ Adapted from *The Big Book of Church Jokes*, p. 316.

² Wilferd Arlan Peterson, "The Art of a Good Marriage."

³ Adapted from Bob Goff, *Love Does: Discovering a Secretly Incredible Life in an Ordinary World*, pp. 54-58.