

## **We Would be Building**

**Ephesians 4:1-13, John 15:1-5**  
**October 3, 2004**

**We hear a lot these days about church growth--about building up the body of Christ. Especially in our denomination, which keeps losing members every year, we keep looking for the perfect solution to our problem. Maybe if the pastors were more dynamic, maybe if we changed our service to attract young people, maybe if we developed new and exciting programs, we could build up the church, the body of Christ.**

**The passages that were just read are talking about just this, but the scripture has, not only a different solution, but also a different take on just what building up the church means. As we look at what is said, we find three very important insights to help us.**

**First insight: The solution doesn't lie with the pastors, or with the worship service, or with the program. The solution lies with all of us; the ministry, the service that builds the church is to be done by all of us. Listen to these words again:**

**The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, [why?] to equip the saints for the work of ministry [and what is the purpose?] for building up the body of Christ.**

**An example: When Habitat for Humanity builds a home, the executive director and the accountant and the other office staff don't build it. They provide the background work, and they make sure the volunteers have the tools they need. It's the volunteers who saw the wood and hammer the nails and raise the walls.**

**This stands things on their head, doesn't it? It's not the pastors, evangelists and teachers who are in the forefront. No, Pastors, evangelists, and teachers are the supply line, they provide the tools and equipment. The saints, the ordinary Christians are the ones on the front lines. They are the ministers.**

**Second insight. Building up the church, building up the body of Christ, is not about numbers. In Ephesians we read instead about unity and knowledge of God and maturity, about attaining the fullness of Christ. In other words, the goal is growing in unity and growing in faith. John Calvin**

said it this way, “God made us for each other. We need outward helps to beget an increased faith within us and advance it toward its goal.” We’re to help each other grow in faith. You may ask, “How can I possibly do that?” There are many answer to that question--probably as many answers as there a people here, since God gives us all different gifts.

Pastor Tim put me on to one answer to this question. He reminded me of the Barnabas, whom the disciples named “Son of Encouragement.” When we first meet him, Barnabas isn’t, as far as we can tell, a preacher or a leader. He’s not even from Jerusalem. He’s a foreigner from Cyprus, and he sells a field and brings the money to the disciples. He’s generous. And his gift encourages others in the community. We can do that! Later, when the disciples in Jerusalem, remembering and fearing Paul, who once persecuted believers, won’t accept him, it is Barnabas who speaks up for Paul, telling them about Paul’s conversion . It is Barnabas who brings about unity. Think how encouraging this must have been for Paul. Think of how encouraged the disciples must have been, to find a Christian brother in one they feared as an enemy. We can try to do that, we can try to be unity where there is fear and misunderstanding. Then, when Barnabas is sent to Antioch to help gentile believers, he goes to Tarsus and brings Paul to help him. He’s the one who started Paul on his ministry. Think how encouraged Paul must have been that recognized his gifts, that someone had a meaningful job for him. We can do that; we can recognize people’s gifts, we can encourage them to put them to use for Christ. To change the words of the old spiritual, If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can encourage people like Barnabas.

Christ may use us in surprising ways to encourage one another and help one another grow. Kathleen Norris tells about the ministry of one man when she first joined the church:

Before the service, the new members gathered with some of the elders. One was a man I’d never liked much. I’ll call him Ed. He’d always seemed ill-tempered to me, and also a terrible gossip, epitomizing the small mindedness that can make small-town life such a trial. The minister had asked him to formally greet the new members. Standing awkwardly before our small group, Ed cleared his throat and mumbled, “I’d like to welcome you to the body of Christ.” The minister’s mouth dropped upon, as did mine--neither of us had ever heard words remotely like this come from Ed’s mouth. Like distant thunder, the words made me more alert, attuned to further

disruptions in the atmosphere. What had I gotten myself into? I was astonished to realize, as that service began, the while I may never like Ed very much, I had just been commanded to love him. My own small mind had just been jolted, and the world seemed larger, opened in a new way.

By his words, Ed helped Kathleen grow in faith.

Third insight. We don't have to do it on our own. Christ is at work in us.

While we are charged to work for unity, in some mysterious way we're already one. As Ephesians says, "there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord." Our oneness has already been accomplished by Christ. We may look different and speak different languages, we may have different gifts and different ideas, we may come from North American or the far south in Indonesia, we may be from the East, from Pakistan or Taiwan, or from the Western United States, but we are all part of the one body--not because we chose to be one, but because Christ has made us one. And whatever service we perform to build up the body we do through the power of Christ. Jesus says it clearly in our gospel lesson today: "Apart from me you can do nothing." As the branch has no life apart from the vine, we have no life apart from the body of Christ. This table reminds us of that truth.

The book Sleeping with Bread tells of children orphaned during the Second World War. They were gathered up and placed in orphanages. Fearful, displaced, disoriented, the children had a very difficult time sleeping at night. So they were given bread, long baguettes, to hold when they went to bed. The bread reminded them that they had been fed the day before and that they would be fed the next day. With this tangible reassurance, they were able to sleep. This table reminds us that Christ was with us, Christ fed and nourished us yesterday, and Christ be with us and will feed and nourish us tomorrow.

Brothers and sisters, I declare to us this paradox: We, each of us, are called to build up the body of Christ. And Christ is already at work in and through us.

Thanks be to God.