



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector

Body Building

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, August 5, 2012

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Ephesians 4:1-16

Who's watching the Summer Olympics? I'm doing random check-ins most nights to see highlights of the day's events. Have to admit I appreciated the lightness in the James Bond spoof of the Queen's entrance to start the Games, appearing to parachute in with Daniel Craig. What I liked even more was learning that the Queen refused stunt doubles for her corgis (they played themselves), that the Queen did her part in one take, and that she didn't tell anyone, even her family, about it beforehand.

One of my first random check-ins landed me in the synchronized diving competition—two people performing the same dive at the same time, side by side. I was fascinated and astonished to find this is an Olympic sport. Who knew?

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) decides which sports are to be included, added, or dropped from the Games each time, based on a sport's current popularity. Baseball, tug of war, and golf have been dropped in recent years. Archery was dropped, but it's been added back, and was one of the most watched in this Game series. Heads up: for 2016 in Rio, golf will be back, along with rugby sevens.

If the IOC is going by what's popular, then one acerbic columnist suggests that it should add "Texting While Walking" to the Olympic sports list.

This year there are 26 sports, 302 events, and 10,960 athletes—some already global household names, like Michael Phelps, Ryan Lochte, Gabby Douglas, Missy Franklin. All these athletes are highly trained, their bodies in perfect or more than perfect condition from hours—make that years—of focused, rigorous training. These athletes spend a lot of time and effort building up their bodies, not for looks, but so they can excel at what they do.

The letter to the Ephesians is about building up the body, too—the body of Christ, that is. The body of Christ would be us, the Church (capital C). This is a remarkable letter in several ways, and it's addressed to us at St. Bart's.

One of the remarkable things about Ephesians is how its author visualizes the Church in its largest possible framework: as a cosmic body of all the faithful united with its head the risen Christ. This is a global vision rather than a local one, a vision so large that no single Christian community can embody it. Ephesians invites us to pull back from our day-to-day concerns—like St. Bart's budget, or the roof, or what programs we're going to offer, or the entire Episcopal Church's conflicts over sexuality—and take a big-picture look at who we are and why we're here. What does it mean to be the Church?

At the same time, for all its global visioning, Ephesians isn't some airy-fairy picture of unity of the saints with God/Christ up in the clouds somewhere; it also invites us to focus on practical realities. (Ephesians may be the original "think globally, act locally" folks.) What's the connection between what we believe and how we act? If we're members of this Church, then how does that influence how we behave, how we live our lives? How do we know ourselves in relationship to God? That's what Ephesians is getting at. It's like needing to use both a wide-angle lens and telephoto lens, and switch back and forth between them.

Ephesians sees the Church, the body of Christ, not as just another sociopolitical institution but as the vehicle by which God has chosen to reunite all things with God. Hold that thought on Reuniting . . . we'll come back to that.

Many if not most of the Letters of Paul (or someone close to Paul) are directed to a specific congregation and tend to have a corrective tone, to correct ways that the congregation is failing to live out the gospel. That's the case with Paul's letters to the Corinthians. You can tell by what Paul writes that the Corinthians are behaving in ways that are fractious and arrogant, and he wants to correct that.

Ephesians is different. It's written as a general letter to the churches, to the Christian communities in general rather than to a specific one. And it's written as a letter of encouragement, to encourage these believers in a way of life they've already begun and are likely doing pretty well at: behaving with "humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of Spirit in the bond of peace."

My mother was a genius at encouragement. She believed finding something good or right, some success however small; to encourage was much more effective than finding fault. That made her a wonderful mother and an excellent manager. She made her life's work, in all its facets, about building up.

Adopting a spirit and practice of encouragement is not to say we don't need to confront or to be confronted when behavior is destructive to ourselves or to others. It's often easy and oh so tempting to speak the truth. (Truth is usually defined as *my* truth.) It's much harder to "speak the truth in love." To speak the truth in love takes some hard work, some honest soul-searching, some effort to find the most compassionate way to say what needs to be said.

Developing skill and discipline in encouraging, in speaking the truth in love, in acting in gentleness and humility, in patience—all these take practice, as much practice as Olympic athletes put in, to grow into mature Christians, to build up the body of Christ. It is the work of a lifetime.

A central theme for Ephesians is unity. That goes along with the vision of the Church, all believers who make up this body of Christ, all together in their differences, as “a new creation.” Unity, not uniformity. For Ephesians, the Church is about bringing together into ONE those who were formerly divided.

You hear Ephesians’ emphasis on unity, on ONE: one body, one Spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

ONE means unity, not uniformity. God gives different gifts to each of us: some are to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, some teachers, each of us using the unique skills and gifts God has given us for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. This nurturing and building up of the body of Christ is not just the job of professional ministers; it’s what we’re all supposed to be about. And how we go about that matters. Almost 2000 years after this letter to the Ephesians was written, the Church is still working on this unity thing!

You may know that the Episcopal Church’s General Convention met earlier this summer, as it does every three years, to decide how we are going to go about building up the body of Christ. You may also know there was some disagreement there, and there were some particularly nasty—and uninformed—articles about the Episcopal Church published in the *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* just after General Convention ended.

I said earlier this letter to the Ephesians was addressed to St. Bart’s. And so it is. What would it be like for St. Bart’s to receive a letter from one of the leaders of the Episcopal Church today, encouraging us in the same way, and holding up a vision of unity in our diversity?

Well, all of us in the Episcopal Church got such a letter yesterday from our Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori. Reading it, I was reminded strongly of the letter to the Ephesians. Here are just a few sentences from the Presiding Bishop’s letter to us; what echoes do you hear?

General Convention addressed a number of significant issues that will impact the life and witness of this Church for years into the future—and they include many more things beyond what you’ve heard about in the news. The way we worked together also represented a new reality, working to adapt more creatively to our diverse nature as a Church.

It is that way of creative engagement that ultimately will be most transformative for The Episcopal Church and the world beyond it. On issue after issue, the resolutions addressed by General Convention emerged in creative responses that considered, but did not end in, the polarized positions expected as we went into Convention. People listened to the movement of the spirit and discerned a way forward that was mutually upbuilding, rather than creating greater divisiveness or win-lose outcomes.

The hot-button issues of the last decade have not been eternally resolved, but we have as a body found creative and pastoral ways to live with the differences of opinion, rather than resorting to old patterns of conflict.

The Presiding Bishop ends the letter this way:

All of this creative work means that we emerge with abundant hope, better discipline for working together and with partners beyond this Church, for our fundamental reason for being - engagement with God’s mission. We have moved beyond the entrenched conflict of recent years. I pray that our growing confidence is a sign of new humility, knowing that we are finite creatures who can always be wrong, that we can do God’s work only as part of the Body, and that disagreement is a mark of possibility.

*God still seems to have a use for this Church, if we can remember our central focus - to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, wherever we go, and wherever we find ourselves. **

I promised we’d come back to the Church as God’s vehicle for reuniting all things with God, so here we are. Our *Book of Common Prayer* says, “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” [page 855]

Restoring unity means reconciliation. That is what we’re to be about as Church, and it matters how we go about it.

The very good news is it’s not up to us alone to do this. We use the gifts God gives each of us. But we are not just passive recipients of those gifts. The *energia* (energy/power) of God is always present and working through us. As pastor and writer Eugene Peterson puts it: “The energy of reconciliation is the dynamo at the heart of the universe. It is imperative that we join in vigorously and perseveringly, convinced that every detail in our lives contributes (or not) to God’s plan worked out by Christ.” [*The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* by Eugene H. Peterson, c 2003, p. 395]

We build up the body of Christ so that we can be about our work, God’s work, of reconciliation. Reconciliation is what we, as Church and as Christians, are to be about. Reconciliation not only the global sense, but in our everyday lives. What might we do on a day-to-day basis to restore a personal relationship that is broken?

The energy of reconciliation is the dynamo at the heart of not only the Church, but of the universe.

Let us be part of it!

Amen.

* Full text of the Presiding Bishop’s letter is here:

<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2012/08/03/presiding-bishops-message-to-the-church-on-general-convention/>

©2012 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.

*For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
St. Bart’s, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022*