

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2015  
Lectionary 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-12; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

## **Let's Get Together**

Do you remember your baptism? For many of us that means going back to six weeks or six months of age! A long way to travel back, but according to the apostle we need to make the effort to remember it. Let's Get Together to remember!

Baptism is where we got bound to the church, brought into the family. No one is born into the church. We get adopted. Baptism is the rite of adoption. We might say we were adopted without our permission and given a family we didn't choose.

It is amazing that we belong to a faith that gives us perfect strangers as relatives. How odd is the church family: multi-coloured, each member has different origins, various attitudes and levels of growth and maturity.

In the world outside this church family we see fragmented and often warring groups, restricted memberships, sub-cultures and factions.

It is remarkable that the church attempts unity amidst such diversity. Yet the diversity is not only outside, it is inside the church as well, despite the surface appearances. Other groups don't have the diversity of ages, amount or lack of wealth, people who are whole and people who are infirm.

Sometimes we find its not easy to get it together or keep it together in this congregation or in any other worshipping community. We have our discords, disagreements and arguments. There are some people we don't easily mix with. It can be challenging to pass the peace to someone with whom you've just had a flaming row, or someone who is as obstinate in their opinions as you are!

How on earth can we keep it together? Ephesians is addressed to a painfully divided church, and again the author is concerned to press home arguments for the necessity of unity. We are called upon to examine the many facets of Christian unity. After the message about God's grace always comes the call to practical, nitty-gritty ethics. Baptism is a sacrament of grace.

It is a calling, is baptism, which includes a baptismally bestowed Spirit. This Spirit is not some purely personal endowment, but rather bestowed in order to give unity to the church. Unity in the church is a gift of the Spirit. See verses 4 and 5 in in our text in Ephesians.

What is the mark of the true church? Is it pure doctrine? Success in raising money? Rousing preaching? Large and growing congregation? Not according to Paul. It is unity. "See how they love one another" outsiders said of the first churches.

How can this happen when we are so different? Different in race, sex, age, understanding, preferences, outlook, politics and world-view. What could make us one? Can you trust me? Can I trust you? What can bridge the gap between us?

I can feel fine about you until you begin to challenge my prejudices, my ways of doing things, my values. The fine feelings may vanish right then! And I also know that you could never have enough good will to love me anyhow! Your fine feeling may vanish like mine!

Whatever it is that brings us together must be something or someone who is better or greater than you or me, something or someone who is large enough to embody some cosmic wholeness, someone who is the source of who we are and who we are meant to be.

Clearly sentimentality is not enough. Liking one another is not sufficient. That is not unity. Unity happens despite the odds being stacked against it. It involves an overcoming of separateness, being together in spite of differences. Something greater than our precious self-regard.

Thus Paul refers the Ephesians and us to baptism. In baptism we see “one body and one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.”

These words in Ephesians might have been part of an early baptismal ritual. So to what does Paul go on after this accent on unity bestowed in baptism? A list all the officer-bearers and leaders of the church. These persons have one main function: to build up the body of Christ, to help all to grow up into unity. Not the pastor's role alone. A mutual responsibility.

Although the body is made up of many parts it is still one body. How much poorer you and I would have been if we had not been baptised into the Christian community. Look around you now, at the person sitting behind you or at the side or in front. Your life is richer for knowing them.

Your faith is strengthened by your adopted brothers and sisters. You have a much wider range of experiences and perspectives because of them than you would have if you had stayed with people of your workplace or social or sporting group.

Let's broaden our definition of family. The nuclear family cannot survive. Families need to expand, to grow, to become more inclusive. In fact the family eventually needs to include the whole human race and beyond that, all that is.

Baptism reminds us that God did not intend any of us to exist alone. God's “family values” are wider, deeper, broader higher than race, nationality or region. We are a family by virtue of baptism.

In Genesis creation came forth out of the waters of chaos. Every time we baptise it is like a recapitulation of creation. A new being emerges from the waters of baptism, rather like the land emerging from the sea. Something out of nothing. Life is brought forth. Strangers are made into family.

So we care for each other because we are family. That's what families do. If one of us is in need we are obliged to respond creatively. We don't shrug our shoulders and say that if someone else has a problem they'll have to find help from somewhere else.

We are the paramedics, the doctors and healers. We have been inducted into caring because we have been baptised into the Spirit of Christ, we have adopted each other into our family.

So we look at each other. We look at each other and remember our baptism. We're all in this together. We are family. “Therefore, ” as Paul writes, “I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called...one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

The one who calls us into this caring life of the baptismal family is the one who provides “food that endures for eternal life” to the hungry crowd, and also reminds the crowd of the calling to believe in the true bread from heaven, which is himself who gives life to the world. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Remember, remember, I beg you, remember. We're all in this together. We are baptised by the Word of life, the light of the world, the true shepherd, the bread of heaven and we are one family! As our hymn says in 631 v3 and it could be a baptismal hymn:

“May your love unite our action, nevermore to speak alone.  
God in us abolish faction, and through us your love make known.”