

Ant Raft, Body-surfing Re-imagined

Ephesians 4:1-16

1 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8 This is why it says: "When He ascended on high, He took many captives and gave gifts to His people." (Psalm 68:18) 9 (What does "he ascended" mean except that He also descended to the lower, earthly regions? 10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 11 So Christ Himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Bodysurfing. Almost anyone braving the breakers on the ocean beach or even Lake Michigan, has tried it at some point. The concept is simple -- instead of riding waves using a surfboard or Boogie-board, a person surfs on his or her own body. Line up in front of a big enough wave, take off swimming, and that wave will pick you up and surf you along its crest. A great ride and a real rush -- if you can handle the crushing turbulence and foam at the end of the line.

Not only humans have been spotted bodysurfing. Recent scientific research has shown that *fire ants* are actually saving their own lives by ... bodysurfing. Yes, fire ants. And yes, bodysurfing -- of sorts. These painful pests have developed a stunning way to survive huge rains that flood their colonies -- common occurrences in the American South or their native Brazil. They'll link together and assemble into flat waterproof rafts that float atop the flood waters. [NOTE 1]

The disc-shaped rafts are actually water-repellent due to the interlocking pattern between the ants. Some ants in the raft even remain submerged below the water's surface, but the structure of their interconnection traps air bubbles between them that

these ants use to breath. On top of the raft, other ants surf along until the colony washes up onto dry ground.

Southerners are no doubt irritated that scientists haven't devised an efficient way to drown these stinging creatures. But linked together, they're so water repellent that an ant raft can float for up to two months! This has engineers trying to link ant raft methods to technologies for waterproof materials and self-sealing lifeboats. The key to these rafts is the strength of the interconnection between each ant. The whole raft is held together as the ants clutch to one another with jaws and claws. By measuring the force required to break these links, scientists have determined that the ant's grip force is on par with that of a human being able to suspend six elephants off the ground -- or on par with the clutch strength you have if someone tries to take away your coffee before 8 a.m

A couple of fascinating things here. One, grad students got their school paid for by trying to drown ants. Tell *that* to your under-motivated children when they don't want to study for their science class.

But the key finding surrounds the necessary interdependence of the fire ant community. *Drop one ant in the water, and it's dead. Drop in a tablespoon of ants, and they live through interconnection.* They know instinctively what Franklin reminded his fellow patriots who were about to sign *The Declaration of Independence*: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." [NOTE 1 b,c,d]

Okay -- so how does this stuff about bodysurfing ants speak to the body we call the church? The apostle Paul helps us with that. The ant raft is the church. It's the surfing body which hangs together, the body that when carried on a flood of cultural confusion, links up and survives. If the following applies to an ant raft, it also applies to the church:

- Individual lives are focused on helping others.
- What appears to be personal sacrifice is actually service.
- One's service has meaning only when others use it, accept it or take advantage of it.
- Nobody can survive and thrive without the help of others.

If churches could learn from ant rafts, there would be new meaning to Proverbs 6:6 -- "Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise." Or we go to Ephesians 4 and consider its ways.

Probably writing from a Roman prison, Paul wants believers at Ephesus to end the Jew-Gentile division that was fracturing the church. He wants them living on purpose and on mission. He wants them experiencing healthy interconnections.

He's begging a response from the church (v. 1), literally calling them to his side -- the Greek word is *parakaleh-oh*. This is Paul's ant raft exhortation -- a call to mutuality, unity and dependence. A challenge to Western individualism. Verse by verse he unfolds different aspects of how we are to be connected with one another. [NOTE 2 a,b,c]

Paul's vision for the church looks a lot like an AA meeting. Humility because of brokenness. Gentleness toward one another, as we need grace. Patience because we'll be imperfect again. Bearing with one another in love -- change rarely happens without it.

Paul's concept of the church is not that of a building one goes to once or twice a

week. Experiencing church isn't about the *quantity of time* spent at a purpose-built structure, but about the quality of relationships nurtured in a purpose-built community. It's what we experience when we're engaged in relational linkages, gathering around Good News, sharing common beliefs and practices, and living our shared lives in grace and truth with and for one another.

This fuller experience of church requires interdependence. Trusting others. Being dependent on and depended upon. Making mistakes and seeking forgiveness. Metaphorically, making a raft together instead of surfing solo. That's the church Paul's talking about. [NOTE 3]

Paul desires unity. The Jew-Gentile thing is bothering him. In just three verses, the word "one" shows up seven times referring to an element of faith shared by those divided (vv. 4-6). Paul wants singularity. Harmony through a shared identity. But we can't be naive about unity like this. It doesn't come naturally, or easily. Paul says we must make every effort to maintain it (v. 3).

Unity is like keeping a clean house. It isn't the result of cleaning just once. Life happens. Entropy happens. Kids happen. So a clean house must be maintained and attended to -- on a regular basis. Our relationships are no different. Think of the small group, the committee or the volunteer team. We all bring the same thing to those settings -- *ourselves*. We bring our brokenness to bear on our relationships. Like clean houses, our relationships in churches will degrade unless regularly maintained.

Paul has cultural reconciliation in mind in this passage, but we must apply the appeal for unity to all forms of division in the church -- racial, gender, age, maturity gaps, differences in personality, worship preferences, etc. With the grip strength of ants in a flood, an interconnected community requires so much external force to break it apart that it can survive for huge stretches of time against adversity. Our churches should have a *chosen* unity -- which is not always *natural* unity -- but it's unity nonetheless. The apostle doesn't care if it doesn't seem natural. Unity is something you work at, even if it's sometimes painful. [Note 4]

The church is intended to be a body living out the *missio Dei* -- the mission and purpose of God from the church and to the world. But to get there God envisions disciples making disciples. The gifts given by the Holy Spirit for ministry tend to aggregate in 5 different areas. If you look at personality and giftedness for ministry verse 11 identifies five areas of ministry: Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd, and Teacher. I am most gifted in the areas of Shepherd and Teacher according to the tests/inventories that help one identify those kinds of things. The Apostle is more entrepreneurial and sends and extends. The Prophet questions and critiques and helps us stay in alignment with the Spirit, the Evangelist invites and gathers, the Shepherd protects and provides and nurtures spiritual development and the Teacher explains and organizes helping people to grow in wisdom and understanding.

If you look at the way Jesus did things, He did not set up a hierarchical system or way of doing things. Listen to this passage from John chapter 15: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant doesn't know his master's business. Instead, I have called

you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” Jesus didn’t appoint positions among the disciples. Peter, in his personality, as he interacted and depended on the other disciples, had leadership gifts so he led.

Much has been made of the five-fold ministry of verse 11, but let's focus on the result of those gifts. The purpose of these ministerial functions is to encourage even greater ministry in and from the church. But less attention goes to the second purpose of this interconnectedness in the church -- *maturity*. Look at the early church and you will see an interconnectedness and interdependence among the disciples and churches.

[NOTE 5] Ask the average adult in our churches how we grow spiritually, and you'll probably receive a smattering of answers addressing good preaching, devotional life and small group discussion.

But ask most college students, and they will tell you about the mission trip when they were in youth group. They'll talk about being asked to lead freshmen when they were seniors. They'll share how their faith and comfort were stretched by feeding the homeless. Maybe we need to learn from ants *and* students? Is it possible that mission leads to maturation? That the fruit of service is spiritual growth?

Paul's concerned with the disorienting influence of false doctrine (v. 14). His sense of the church is that it might serve as an anchor of shared belief in a heretical storm. A 20-something in a Colorado church described his experience of the body this way: "Church is where I come to remember what I truly believe." We need each other.

Coastal redwoods are the tallest living species on Earth. They can exceed 300 feet in height, and may be 18-20 feet in diameter, nearly 12 feet above the ground. The Mother of the Forest, a 329-foot beauty, is the tallest tree in Big Basin Redwoods State Park. The tallest coast redwood anywhere at 367.8 feet, "Tall Tree," lives in Redwood National Park and is only 13 feet in diameter. The General Sherman Sequoia is the largest tree by volume of wood in the world and it is 37 feet in diameter and only 279 feet tall. But like the Coastal Redwoods the roots are very shallow. Believe it or not, the roots of a coastal redwood or Sequoia are very shallow, growing only four to six feet deep, but spread out from the tree as far as 125 feet. This isn't much support for a tall, heavy tree -- floodwaters can erode top layers of soil, exposing the roots and weakening a tree's support system. But these trees live for 100's of years and rarely fall. The reason they are so resilient and strong is that their roots grow intertwined with those of their neighbors. You rarely see a Redwood or Sequoia by itself. They grow in rows or more often groves. By "holding hands" underground, the roots form a network that allows the trees to withstand even great storms. They are interdependent trees. By depending on one another they grow to be the largest trees in the world and live in some cases over 800 years.

Many of us have had a spiritually disorienting experience when we shared our faith with a friend and they didn't respond or responded negatively. With all the *isms* of people today -- relativism, humanism, naturalism, pluralism -- it can be a daunting experience to share our faith. We can feel shaken. Discouraged. Confused. In need of hope again. We need one another. **[NOTE 6]**

During times of doubt like this, we need the security of our Christian relationships. We need others who will speak the truth in love (v. 15) -- to remind us of *who* we are and *whose* we are.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes relates a folk tale she heard from an old African-American man. "This is the way of the old African kings," he whispered, before telling the tale.

In the story, an old man is dying, and calls his people to his side. He gives a short, sturdy stick to each of his many offspring and relatives. "Break the stick," he instructs them. With no effort, they all snap their sticks in half. "This is how it is when a soul is alone without anyone," he tells them. "They can easily be broken."

Then the old man next gives each of his kin another stick, and says, "This is how I would like you to live after I pass. Put your sticks together in bundles of twos and threes. Now, break these bundles in half."

No one can break the sticks when there are two or more in a bundle. The old man smiles. "We are strong when we stand with another soul. When we are with another, we cannot be broken." --Clarissa Pinkola Estes, in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*; cited in *Spiritual Literacy*, ed. Frederic and Mary Ann

Brussat (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 476. **[NOTE 7]**

To pull all of these interconnected church images together, Paul concludes with a familiar metaphor. But while we know the words, are we experiencing the reality? With Christ as the head of the ChurchBody, we become an interlinked bodysurfing raft that by equipping, serving, sacrificing and hanging on survives for the glory of God. You may be an arm or a leg or just a ligament, but you are a part of the body of Christ, the church, the family of God and a vitally important part. It doesn't matter if you are a head, or a shoulder, or a ligament ...you are necessary and important to Doster Church! That's why we try to act more like a family. If you want to serve, teach, grow, you don't have to meet with three different committees. If one of the parents in a family sees a child doing something wrong, they don't schedule a committee meeting they discipline the child. In the same way we need to act like a family and encourage and spur one another on to good deeds, serving others, loving people, and making a difference, having an impact.

Together, discipling others, serving one another, teaching others what have we have been taught, encouraging one another, listening to the hurt, celebrating triumphs together, we can be the church we truly want to experience. The church, the place of worship, the mission base, that Jesus taught the disciples to establish, is what we want to be. Please think about what you might do about what you have heard God speak through me today. I challenge you to write an "I will ..." statement down on paper. James 1:22 reads: "Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." Let's pray ... AMEN

Sermon Notes for “Ant Raft or Body Surfing Re-imagined”

based on Ephesians 4: 1-16 given at Doster Community Church October 9, 2022

- I. Fire Ants teach us that interconnectedness and interdependence makes us a much stronger force with much more impact and much more strength to withstand outside forces.
 - a. Individual lives are focused on helping others.
 - b. What appears to be personal sacrifice is actually service.
 - c. One’s service has meaning only when others use it, accept it, or take advantage of it.
 - d. Nobody can survive and thrive without the help of others, we need one another.
- II. Paul, writing from a Roman prison, desires to heal the rift between the Jew and the Gentile. He calls the church to mutuality, unity, and dependence.
 - a. Humility because of brokenness.
 - b. Gentleness toward one another as we need grace.
 - c. Patience because we are all imperfect and need to bear with one another in love.
- III. Unity is like keeping a house clean. You get it clean and then life happens. It takes regular maintenance. It takes effort. Unity is something you work at, even if it’s sometimes painful.
- IV. The Five-fold ministry gifts are Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd and Teacher (APEST). The Hierarchical system is foreign to the way Jesus did things.
- V. The purpose of the five-fold ministry is to encourage even greater ministry in and from the church. How do you grow spiritually? One of the best ways, is to serve together.
- VI. During difficult times we need others who will speak the truth in love to remind us who we are and whose we are.
- VII. What are you going to do about it? Write an “I will ...” statement. How can I be or do better at, equipping, serving, and sacrificing for the Kingdom?