

Unity Across Time

If listening to Paul's opening words to the letter of Ephesians feels like talking to someone who has had more coffee than you have, you are not alone.

If you feel like Paul's breathless writing style probably comes with wild hand gestures and defies every rule your English teacher told you about clear sentence structure, you are also not alone, nor entirely wrong.

Verses 15-23 of this chapter, in the original Greek, is in fact one long sentence.

This is not because Paul struggles in his writing, it is a stylistic choice.

There is actually a word for this:

Pleonasm: The use of more words than are necessary to convey meaning as a style for emphasis.

The piling of phrase upon phrase, until you have a cascading waterfall of words that awes and overwhelms, much as the cosmic mystery of God and our role in it should overwhelm us.

For those not excited about diagramming sentences or tracking parenthetical asides, and would simply like to know what Paul is getting at in a nutshell, and why we are reflecting on this text on All Saints Day, I will try to summarize briefly.

This letter, written by Paul (or in the voice of Paul) towards the end of the first century was likely intended to be circulated and read aloud in the churches in and around Ephesus.

These churches were probably composed mostly of Gentiles, but also some Jews.

The central message of the letter, as summed up by Thomas Yoder Neufeld,
is:

“God has blessed Jews and Gentiles alike in every conceivable way. He has chosen them, made them sons and daughters, and let them in on the secret, that in and through Christ, God is gathering up all things, especially all people, into a divine unity”

Certainly a statement of this magnitude deserves pleonasm.

Much ink has been spilled, especially by Paul, talking about Jew/Gentile unity. How do you get believers of an inherited tradition to work together with brand new believers, across cultural, theological and economic differences.

We frequently read Paul and other early church writings in *our* context at First Mennonite to talk about how we can achieve unity with our hispanic brothers and sisters, across cultural, theological and economic differences.

These texts open up conversation about unity *within time*, but we turn to Ephesians *today* on All Saints Day, because Paul also gives us a window into understanding unity in Christ *across time*.

Mennonites don't talk about “the saints” very much. We tend to see that as high church language and tradition, reserved for Catholics and Orthodox Christians.

But in this text we are not talking about saints as heroes of elevated status or holiness.

In the New Testament, “saints” (*hagioi*) is the most commonly used title for Christians. It refers to those both young and old, both living and departed. It includes all who have responded to God's call.

Paul is passionately laying the groundwork for how we understand the divine-human partnership that God has planned. That plan involves the here and now of course, but since God is eternal and this divine-human partnership extends beyond the lifetime of any one individual or community of people, we also need to talk about the church's unity *across* time.

My seminary professor Mary Schertz talks about saints as “the body of Christ reaching far and wide on both sides of the veil that separates us.”

We spend a lot of time talking about community behind this pulpit, in terms of those we fellowship with every Sunday, but it is worth acknowledging what church means across time as well, because I feel it very strongly in this congregation.

Relative to the life of this church I am new here. Yet I feel like I know way more about this church than I have experienced, because people talk about it all the time. Sometimes with melancholy sadness, sometimes with a chuckle, sometimes with a shake of the head, but always with fondness.

People know the blueprint of this church within time, but also across time. They can tell me where the old walls were, or where the choir loft was, or where the pews used to be.

A trip to the attic or the foyer sparks stories and memories.

But more importantly, you can tell me who was in the choir. And where everyone used to sit in these pews.

You love this building.

Raising money to replace the roof was the easiest bit of church fundraising I
have ever seen.

But you don't love and cling to this building because it's a building, but
because of all the saints it still holds.

You don't usually speak of the saints as presences inhabiting this space
(although sometimes loved ones show up in that way), but the impact of the
saints is apparent when you evaluate your faith and where your faith journey
is taking you, I sense it is intricately woven into the lives, stories and faith of
the saints who have come before you.

And in many ways, saints that have never left.

There are things that can be said about clinging too hard to the past, or how
too strong an attachment to the past can hinder the church's capacity to grow
into the newness of God's future.

But for today I want to recognize and celebrate that deep rich connection to
our past which is just as much a part of our faith story as our present.

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the
saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I
remember you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the
Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come
to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may
perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his
glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable
greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great
power.*

Robert Dunham says that hope is best perceived with the eyes of the heart.
Hope is best lived within the hopeful community, in the company of saints
both living and departed

Our faith inhabits a time and a space.
We worship, tithe, serve on committees, work at home and in the community
for the kingdom of God, in this time and space.

But our faith also transcends time and space. It may function in the present,
but it draws a lot of inspiration, wisdom and clarity from the memories and
reminders of the past.
Consequently, it is already shaping and impacting the lives of those who will
outlive us.

Christians and the church are each part of something greater than
themselves, transcending time and space through Christ.

Paul opens this text telling us that in Christ we have obtained an inheritance
so that we might live for the praise of God's glory.

May we be blessed with the passion and vision of Paul, who understood faith
not just as the unity in Christ that could be achieved in this life, but that also
contained the dimension of unity in Christ *across* time, that drew on the faith
and memory of the saints, and also looked with hope and anticipation towards
what the future would hold when we embrace the human-divine partnership
with God.