

## Ephesians 4:1-16

### **Body Building**

The past two weeks those who have been watching the Olympics have been witness to some of the most amazingly physically fit people in the world. Their bodies and minds have been trained, stretched, and pushed to the limits of their endurance. It takes every muscle, ligament, and joint to be strong in order that no weakness in one part of the body limits the outcome of the athlete's achievements. For a couple of nights when I was watching it was weight lifting that was the featured event. The first night I watched as Canadian Maude Charron lifted her way to a gold medal in her weight class.

Olympic weight lifting consists two lifts, the "Snatch" and "Clean and Jerk." With the Snatch the weight must come off the ground in one smooth motion. In the Clean & Jerk the lifter rolls the barbell up the body, resting it in various spots along the way until it finally makes its way to the shoulders and then, with all their might, they press the barbell overhead. In Olympic Weightlifting for either of those lifts you get three attempts and have one minute to pick the bar up off the floor. Once you begin the lift, the bar must continue in an upward motion.

One minute, three attempts, and no guarantees that you will even make it to the podium. Glory may come in the fact that one had worked hard enough and was fit enough to represent your country at the Olympics. Not many of us ever challenge ourselves to the degree of an Olympic athlete with the number of hours, days, months, and years of training so that each part of the body...back, knees, elbows, shoulders, arms, legs and everything that holds the body together is in peak condition.

All of this training, strengthening, hours of work, and dedication came to mind as I read the last verse of this reading from Ephesians, "from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." (v16) Can you imagine what our churches might look like if we dedicated ourselves like an Olympic athlete to making sure that our own spiritual lives were strong and sure? Equipped and ready for ministry our participation in the body of Christ, which is the church, would strengthen and join together with other parts that are working properly, to promote the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Side note, when Paul is talking about the body's growth it is not about numbers of people sitting in the pew. It is about our spiritual growth and how each of us is connected to one another, building each other up in love. Having said that, a healthy and connected congregation that exudes love and care for all people is bound to grow in numbers as well.

Let's get back to the beginning of this piece of scripture as there are many important things to unpack there too. I have to admit that when I see words like "prisoner in the Lord" I usually have a moment because no one wants to be a prisoner, not physically or mentally. Everything in our being wants to move away from such language. Yet when the writer used that phrase, it was meant to be a statement of faith. That type of language is often misunderstood and for those who are not Christian, using words like prisoner or captive, even using the word "Lord" are all reasons to stay far away.

But for a Christian, to be a prisoner in the Lord actually means freedom. It is freedom to become who we truly are because we know that we are loved and forgiven – that we have every reason to hope, and live with joy because of God's love for us. This is not like being behind bars, but is exactly the opposite. As is written, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (vv 1-3) This is about living life in a way that we become people of unity and peace.

Another criticism of the Christian faith is that we have so many different denominations and to be honest, we don't interpret the scriptures in exactly the same way, so people only see the things that divide us rather than what unites us. In our denomination of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, we don't venerate the Virgin Mary or tend to say the rosary as our Catholic siblings do. Nor do we celebrate the feast days of the saints as would Lutherans and Anglicans, even if this particular church is named St. Andrew's.

Some churches would never have a woman in the pulpit, while obviously that is not the case here. Still even in the Presbyterian Church we will find a spectrum of understanding and belief about words of Scripture. The most recent example would be the vote to change the definition of marriage to include two consenting adults rather than only a man and woman, and the move to allow for the ordination of LGBTQI+ individuals to be ministers in the PCC.

Not only in the church, but in all parts of life it seems that divisions reign between people and their opinions from politics to medical advice and so much more. We would do well to remember that this scripture was written to a group of people who also were very much of two minds, Jews and Gentiles, each finding reasons to criticize the other. And yet, in Ephesians it is all about breaking down dividing walls and creating unity. This unity comes in realizing that, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (vv4-6).

This unity is not about uniformity. We are not called to all be the same, which is why all the different denominations of Christian faith work and why even within the same denomination there can be differences. This does not make it easy. How many times have I had to remember these words from Ephesians when I want to judge others? Yet, jumping over part of the scripture to get to another, there are also the words in the same

reading that say, “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” (v14). Still, one would be cautioned to not think so much of themselves that they believe their way of being a Christian in the world is the only way, and maybe leave the judging to God, who coincidentally loves all of us regardless of our flawed thinking.

Let’s get back to that section that was jumped over. It starts with the grace given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. The gift being his life. We are so loved that Christ gave his life in order for ours to be saved. Then through the work of the Holy Spirit many gifts are given to the body of Christ through each person to build up the body, equipping it to participate in God’s mission as the church in the world.

In this reading the emphasis is put on the gifts of those who are apostles, prophets, evangelist, pastors and teachers. That work is done “to equip the saints” – which is every single one of us – “for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (vv12-13). Now that is body building!

I may be a pastor and teacher that is called as part of the congregation to equip the church through preaching and the care of the congregation. Yet, each of us has the ability to care and teach, from our own space and place, those who God put in our realm of influence, from friends and neighbours to children and grandchildren. You don’t have to go to seminary to teach others about the love of God.

Still, being a learner, strengthening your heart and mind muscles, making sure that you are in the best spiritual condition that you can be in, is so important when it comes to the church and building the body of Christ. We are not body builders in the sense that weight lifters or other athletes are. Each of us is in a different place in our spiritual training and maturity, but without everyone of us, there is no body, there is no church equipped to work properly which in turn helps each one of us to grow and mature into Christ so that we too can teach others of God’s love. I cannot fully realize who I am to be in Christ without you, and each of us gives that gift one another.

The onus is on you and me to build up our individual spiritual lives and learning so that each of us can promote growth and maturity in the church, being joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped. It doesn’t matter what part of the body you think you are; you are necessary and needed to help the whole body, the whole church function, be healthy and strong for the work we are called to in the world. We help each other in becoming strong through our love for God, one another, and the world. This is like the kindness Olympics of Tokyo where two high jumpers share the gold, and two running rivals trip, fall together, and then put their arms across each other to finish the race together. Kindness and building the whole body where a triathlon runner consoles her sobbing competitor who came in last or a swimmer gives his gold medal to the teammate he had replaced in the finals.

This is not a competition; this is the church. It is not one church against another or one denomination at odds with another, Building the body of Christ, promoting the body's growth, building the church and every individual up in love, this is the church; one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. Amen.