



A Declaration of Interdependence

Sermon Series:
Better Together: 40 Days of Community

Sunday, September 9, 2007
Baptism Sunday

Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 3:14-4:6

“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” *-Ephesians 3:17, 18*

You may have noticed on your way into church this morning that we have some work being done on the front patio of the Parish House. A non-skid, epoxy surface is being put down. The work – when it is finished – is supposed to look like natural stone.

There have been quite a few improvements to the church’s Parish House as a part of its renovation. Somebody walked into my office there

the other day and said, “Hey, this sure looks great!” He was admiring the church office and the new décor and layout, and said, “Wow! It’s great!”

Yes, it is! And if you haven’t been over to check it out you might want to take a “walk through.” Because of your contributions and a generous bequest from the Ed and Betty Lovell Fund the Parish House renovation has been made possible.

Did you know that God is building a temple? It's under construction, and while the dust is still flying the cornerstone of the temple has already been laid in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

You and I are “living stones” in that temple. In other words, we didn't just stumble in here randomly this morning, but you and I – each one of us – are a part of the grand design of the master architect who is configuring us together into the place that is his dwelling place on earth.

This temple is real; it's three dimensional; it's in time and space. It's not made out of marble or of limestone; it's not even made out of red brick or granite and glass, but of people!

And of course the only mortar that fits people together is a substance called LOVE – and you can't have love without connection. God has made us for connection. We are interdependent human beings. And even as Americans we declare politically our Declaration of Independence, as Christians we get together spiritually to announce our *Declaration of Interdependence*.

And friends, that's the theme of our scripture this morning, as we launch our 40 Days of Community. You'll find it in Ephesians, chapter 3, beginning at verse 14. And I really encourage you to reach for the Bible and at page 149 of the New Testament in your pew Bible you'll find this. In it the Apostle Paul is praying for the church.

Now is it too far-fetched for us to envision the Apostle Paul praying this

prayer today for us from heaven? Let's not think of it as an ancient prayer. Let's think of it as Paul interceding right now from heaven for us here at Poland Presbyterian Church.

Beginning with verse 14 of chapter 3 and extending to the 21st verse:

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

End of prayer.

As we look at this prayer this morning, here's what I want you to do for just a moment. Ask yourself, “Which adjective applies best to me?” The adjective “independent”? Or the adjective “interdependent”?

Independent? Or Interdependent?

And where are you on that spectrum, and how might we move towards greater

interdependency? And why is that important. That's the question.

Paul prays for two things here in this passage. First of all in verse 18 he prays that they may have a shared understanding of God's love. Verse 18: *"I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,"*¹⁹ *and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."*

Now he wants them to have an understanding, but he wants this he says – he says it's got to be a *shared* understanding. I want you, *together with all the saints*, to grasp this thing.

In other words, the insights that you or I gain in community are of higher quality than we gain when we're all by our lonesome. Those truths that we discover by ourselves are not as powerful and as trustworthy as the ones we discover when we're with other people. Truth is not something you find sitting cross-legged on top of a mountain. It's something you find together in community.

Why is that? Because as Paul would have us understand -- only in community do we learn the intimate dimensions of God's love. He says together with all the saints we grasp how wide it is and how long and how high and how deep is the love of Jesus Christ.

Watching that brief video this morning on the Logos program you see that, don't you? It's an interdependent thing. In a section of the video we weren't able to watch this morning a woman says: "Logos is not just a youth program; it's a program also for adults. We adults get so

much out of the program too. Logos is what being the church, being a Christian community is all about."

Logos is one avenue for experiencing, for getting a taste, for getting a feel for the breadth, length, height, and depth of God's love.

Now a lot of good things happen when we share Christian community together. A lot of good things happen to us. One of the things it does is: in community we get **CHALLENGED** to be our very best and truest selves.

There are people in every church who (without even trying) challenge us to be a better person. Early this summer one Sunday morning the elevator here at the church broke down. Two of our senior members, Hill and Mim MacDonald, depend on the elevator to get up here to the sanctuary from the back parking lot. Well, when they learned that the elevator that morning wasn't working Hill and Mim decided to get back in their car and drive home. But a couple of our members took it upon themselves to help Hill (who's in a wheelchair) and Mim. They carried Hill up the stairs in the wheelchair and assisted Mim.

I heard about that later that morning and thought about my own mom who's now in a wheelchair. I thought, "I hope somebody is willing to do that for my mom. And I want to do that for people here....especially the more elderly who have a hard time getting around."

We get challenged by being interdependent in the body of Christ.

The other thing that happens as well though is: --- we get PROTECTED in a certain way.

In 1994 the Pulitzer Prize for photography went to Kevin Carter, a South-African photo-journalist. And the photograph that Kevin Carter took was an absolutely heart-breaking photograph of a dying Sudanese child crawling to a feeding center under the gaze of a vulture. It's just standing, waiting, hovering over this dying child.

And that photograph brought a lot of attention to the famine-stricken Sudan in the early 1990s. If you saw that photograph you'll never forget it.

And it also brought a lot of attention to Kevin Carter's career. And he reveled in and soaked in the attention. After he got the Pulitzer Prize Kevin Carter sent a letter home to his parents and said, "I swear I got the most applause of anybody. I can't wait to show you my trophy. It's the highest acknowledgment of my work I could receive."

But another thing that happened at that time was people would begin to ask him, "Mr. Carter, what did you do for that child? What actions did you take in order to help that child?" And Kevin Carter painfully acknowledged that after taking 20 minutes to painstakingly set up the shot he snapped it and walked away.

Two months after receiving the Pulitzer Prize, the most coveted award for a journalist, Kevin Carter one night rigged up a hose from the exhaust of his pickup truck and took his own life.

And next to him they found a note on the seat and it said, "The pain of life so overrides the joy that there's no joy left."

Friends, I believe that Kevin Carter needed that child in his life as much as that child needed Kevin Carter.

When we cut ourselves off from other people, -- we live alone, isolated inside our own heads -- we get weird. Yes, we even get suicidal. Because what happens is fantasy eclipses reality. And when we try to create our own independent reality apart from others often what happens is we just go off into never-never land.

Paul's second prayer is that they would not just have a shared knowledge_but that they would also have a *shared experience*.

As we continue reading it says, "*that you might know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.*"

Well, how do you know the love that surpasses knowledge? How do you know the unknowable? You experience it! You experience it in connection with another, in connection with others....through shared experience.

So what does it mean for us practically speaking as Christians to live interdependently? Let me offer a few quick handles:

First thing: To live interdependently is to entrust your life, give all that you are, -- Perhaps you've heard the expression -- "Give all you know of yourself to all that you know of Jesus Christ." Give yourself to Him. That's number one.

Number two: Renounce your anonymity here at Poland Presbyterian Church. I know some of you are visitors; you come and are new here; you kind of revel in the anonymity; you want to kind of fly under the radar. And that's fine. You can do that for awhile, but we hope that our friendliness will open you up so that you surrender your anonymity.

Number three. We want to say, "Accept the countless invitations to find a group of people around here with which you can have Christian community – whether it be the choir or a Sunday School class or a LOGOS night or as part of a mission team from the church serving a chili lunch over at the Salvation Army – whatever it is. Find that group. That's number three.

Then number four: When you get in that group make sure you have the quality of Christian community that we find in the New Testament. Pray together, encourage one another, love each other, hold one another accountable to be your best selves and to behave as Christians. (What we see being modeled in the Logos Program.)

And then number five: We walk out of here as *missionaries* to carry the love of God into the world.

I want to close with a story of a man who lived that mission of caring God's love to his city, who saw his life connected to someone God put in his path. He was a man who reflects back to years ago when he drove a taxi-cab as a way of making his living.

He says:

"It was 2:30 in the morning when I arrived in the cab. The building was dark

except for a single light in a ground-floor window, and under these circumstances many taxi drivers would simply honk the horn once or twice and wait (then after waiting a bit) drive away.

But he said, "I've seen too many impoverished people dependent on taxis as their only means of transportation. So unless the situation smelled of danger I always went to the door. This passenger might be someone who needed my assistance.

"So I went to the door. An elderly woman in her 80s stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil-pin in it like something out of a 1940s movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase. The apartment looked like no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered in sheets. There were no clocks on the wall. No nick-knacks or utensils on the shelves and the counters.

"Would you carry my bag out to the car?" she asked me. I took the suitcase to the cab and then returned to assist the woman. She took my arm and walked slowly to the cab and thanked me for my kindness. "It's nothing Mam. -- I just try to treat my passengers the way I'd like my mother to be treated." She said, "Oh, you're such a good boy."

Then he goes on to say:

"When we got in the cab she gave me an address and asked, "Would you drive me through downtown?"

"That's not the shortest way," I answered.

And then she said, “Oh, I don’t mind; I’m in no hurry. I’m on my way to the hospice.”

“I looked in the rear-view mirror and her eyes were glistening.

“I don’t have any family left,” she continued. “The doctor says I don’t have very long.”

He says: “At that moment I quietly reached over and turned off the meter. “What route do you want me to take Mam?”

“For the next two hours we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived as newlyweds. She had me pull up in front of a warehouse building which had once been a ballroom and where she had gone dancing as a girl. Sometimes she’d ask me to slow down in front of a particular building or just sit at a corner in the darkness saying nothing.

At the first hint of sunlight creasing the horizon suddenly she said, “I’m tired now. Let’s go on.”

We drove to the address she had given me – a building like an old convalescent home. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. It was clear they had been looking for her for sometime.

I opened the trunk for her small suitcase and the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair. “How much do I owe you?” she said, reaching for her purse. “Nothing,” I said.

“Well you have to make a living,” she said. “I have other passengers, Mam.” And almost without thinking I bent down and gave her a hug.

She held me tight.

“You gave an old woman a moment of joy. Thank you.”

“I squeezed her hand and then walked through the dim light back to the cab. Behind me a door shut. The sound of a door closing on a life.

“I didn’t pick up any more passengers that morning, driving aimlessly lost in thought. For the rest of the day I could hardly talk. What if the woman had gotten an angry driver – someone impatient at the end of his shift to go home? Or somebody who didn’t take the risk to get out and walk up to see if everything was alright?”

Friends, when you meet someone this week make your declaration of interdependence. Make your declaration of interdependence to this church also.

See the people you meet this week – and the people here at Poland Presbyterian Church --- in the words of the poet, “the ‘we’ of ‘me.’” And ask God to give you a heart of love. Not just for your friends, not just for your family, not just for your church, but for all those the Lord puts in your path.

“Rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ

that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Please join me in prayer:

Lord, would you answer this great prayer of the Apostle Paul within this congregation. May we have a shared knowledge of the love of Christ. May we have a shared experience of this love

that surpasses all knowledge. And may we make every effort to be cemented together in love, that we might truly be “living stones” in your temple in which you dwell in this earth. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.