

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / September 19, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Everybody in the Game Series

Maturing Through Serving (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Genesis 1-3 shows the loss of loving unity in diversity

Good morning. It's so great to hear from our missions' partners Paul and Laura and be part of their ministry around the world!

Now as we continue our service sermon series, I'd like to thank everyone serving with our graphics, tech, and video team. If Dave and I were in charge of that, the slides and livestream would have the quality of a hostage video 😊. So thank you for using your gifts to serve. As we all look to grow as servants this morning, let's ask for God's help in prayer...

In the first chapters of Genesis, we see God and humans enjoying a loving unity in diversity. Adam and Eve are different from each other. Yet in their diversity, they enjoy intimacy together: knowing, loving, serving, and trusting each other, naked and unashamed.

Though Adam and Eve are different from God, they also enjoy a loving intimacy with Him: walking in the Garden together, God providing abundantly, Adam and Eve trusting, serving, and obeying in response. A loving unity in diversity.

One of my seminary counseling professors, Dr. Gary Barnes, describes this loving unity in diversity with the phrase "oneness not based in sameness."

But then this amazing oneness is threatened as crafty Satan invites Adam and Eve to wonder if God is holding out on them. Adam and Eve believe that lie and choose life apart from God as they eat the forbidden fruit. And their loving unity in diversity unravels.

Where Adam and Eve once enjoyed intimate oneness, there is now painful separateness from God and with each other as Adam and Eve's fearful hiding begins.

After they sin, Adam and Eve try to hide from God in the Garden. And when "found", rather than try to repair their oneness by repenting of their rebellion, Adam and Eve instead blame others for their actions. Unloving disunity.

Adam and Eve also begin hiding from each other, covering their private parts, the place where they are most physically different from each other and with which they are meant to enjoy a special intimacy as husband and wife.

And rather than serve each other in love, Adam and Eve now seek to control one another. Adam and Eve lost loving unity in diversity, no longer able to fully know and love each other,

their sin causing brokenness inside themselves, with each other, and with God as they now blame and hide, no more oneness not based in sameness.

Relevance: We've lost loving unity in diversity

As Dr. Barnes goes on to explain, we continue their tragic story. We're born in sin, as broken people in a broken world. We all have dysfunction that encourages unloving disunity. I know I have a lot. And we're raised by dysfunctional parents, who were raised by dysfunctional parents. So there's also gaps in our development as we don't always experience being known and loved in the ways we need, even if our parents and caregivers were trying their best.

Our own dysfunctions plus childhood gaps plus everyone else's dysfunctions and childhood gaps means that we all sometimes bring to the table things like blaming, hiding, judging, prejudice, distrust, selfishness, fear, ignorance, lies, boasting, control issues, and more leading to unloving disunity.

We long for loving unity in diversity. But we and everyone around us keep sabotaging those efforts in ways big and small. We just don't seem to have the maturity we need to enjoy oneness not based in sameness.

Orienting to God's Word – Ephesians 4 shares about regaining what was lost

Now the apostle Paul, along with the churches he ministered to, also experienced this struggle: broken people in a broken world desperate for what Adam and Eve once enjoyed. Longing for loving unity in diversity, but lacking the maturity to live out this oneness not based in sameness.

So Paul shared in the book of Ephesians the good news of what Jesus has done and is doing to help regain what was lost. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the New Testament book of Ephesians, chapter 4, or you can follow along with the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Ephesians was written by Paul to some early Christian churches a few decades after Jesus rose from the dead. Chapters 1-3 of Ephesians show that Jesus came to restore oneness not based in sameness, our loving unity in diversity with God and with each other.

Chapters 1-3 say in Jesus we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing: forgiven of all our sins, adopted as God's beloved children, given bold and confident access to God in prayer, provided opportunities to do good works, and empowered by God's Spirit to deeply know and serve God. Jesus restores our loving unity in diversity with God.

And Jesus is also restoring our loving unity in diversity with one another. Ephesians chapters 1-3 talk about how Jesus is our peace, bringing together Jews and Gentiles into one new humanity, the church.

We the church, not only in ethnic diversity, like Jews and Gentiles, but in all our kinds of diversity, we the church are united as the body of Jesus. We are reconciled to one another, share in His glorious inheritance together, and are given God's Spirit to help us embody unity in diversity. The church is the place of oneness not based in sameness.

So that's Ephesians chapters 1-3. Then starting in chapter 4, Paul urges us to live a life worthy of our loving unity in diversity in Jesus. In verses 1-6 of chapter 4, Paul urges that we make every effort to keep our unity. Then verses 7-10 of chapter 4 shares that Jesus has given us a diversity of spiritual gifts, a diversity meant to help us to mature together.

Teaching: We need Jesus' body maturing through loving service

Jesus gives leaders that help everyone to serve – If we're going to mature together into loving unity in diversity, even with all our dysfunctions, it's going to take God working through all of us. We see this in verse 11 of Ephesians chapter 4. Verse 11:

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service,

These verses show that Jesus has given some in the church gifts of leadership, shepherding, and communicating God's truth. Jesus provides leaders with these foundational spiritual gifts so that they can help everyone in the church to be equipped to serve, as verse 12 says.

And Jesus not only provides gifted leaders to serve the whole church. He also provides gifted leaders for specific ministries, who also have opportunities to encourage and equip others to serve.

Leaders like Ms. Lisa, who leads the *God and Me* program for the kids during the Thursday Ladies Bible Study. Lisa has invited one of church's awesome youth, Sadie, as well as my 2nd grade daughter, Kate, to help Lisa serve the younger kids.

So now each Thursday, as Kate and I leave the house, I say to Stephanie, "Bye Sweetie, Kate and I are going now to minister at the church." That opportunity's there because of Lisa's heart to encourage and equip the next generation to serve. May all our leaders have this heart.

Jesus' body matures as everybody serves – In the middle of verse 12, Paul begins to share why it's important to have everybody in the church serving, whatever your age. It's, as the middle of verse 12 says...

so that the body of Christ may be built up

Here in verse 12 Paul describes the church using the metaphor of the body of Christ, which Pastor Dave helped us to understand last Sunday.

The physical body, with its many parts designed to work together as one, is a metaphor of Northwest's unity in diversity, of us being united without being uniform, of us expressing our oneness not based in sameness.

So what's the goal of all the next steps ministry going on at Northwest? It's to prepare all God's people for works for service so that the body of Christ may be built up, as verse 12 says. So we all serve until we all reach maturity in Jesus together, as verse 13 says. All serving...

¹³until 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.

Just as the physical body works right when every part is working, so Jesus' body matures as everybody serves. Notice that this maturing in verse 13 starts with reaching unity. Paul has been talking a lot about unity in Ephesians.

Which makes sense, because ongoing conflict, divisions, and disunity do not create the best environment for everyone's spiritual growth. If we all are to mature together, we need unity. As we all serve in unity, we grow in faith together, and we know about Jesus, which leads to more faith. This growth process leads, as the middle of verse 13 says, to becoming mature.

The translation "become mature" in the middle of verse 13 is more literally translated "become a mature man" or "become a mature person". What's interesting is that Paul does not

use the plural. Paul does not say that as we grow up, we become mature persons, plural. No, Paul says that we become a mature person, singular, maturing together as one body.

As we serve, and Jesus' body matures, we don't want to get just a little more mature. The goal is maturity to Jesus' fullness, as the end of verse 13 says. And we can only pursue the whole measure of Jesus' fullness if every single one of us is serving with our gifts. Like Ms. Lisa is doing in *God and Me*, inviting others to serve alongside her, seeing that Jesus body matures as everyone serves.

We move away from immaturity and vulnerability – There are dangers if we don't mature, so Paul says we've got to mature together in Jesus. Verse 14 explains this, saying that as we mature...

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.

Biological babies are adorable, wonderful image bearers. And they're also immature. Infants are worried about their own needs, not the needs of others. And babies lack steadiness, easily influenced by whatever goes on around them. And babies are also easily confused and deceived.

So spiritual babies can be prone to focusing on their own needs rather than on the needs of others and the church's unity. And spiritual babies can be easily influenced by whatever goes on around them, tossed back and forth by the waves. I had an experience this week where I was reminded that I still have some spiritual baby in me. Spiritual babies can also be more easily confused and deceived, vulnerable to every wind of false teaching and to the deceitful schemes of crafty people.

If you're new to faith in Jesus and you're a spiritual baby, we praise God for you. As verse 13 talked about, your church family is here so that we can all grow in faith and knowledge in Jesus, which includes teaching God's Word so that you're less vulnerable to deception. And also helping you to encourage our oneness not based in sameness as you serve and grow in Christlikeness.

But what if instead you've been a Christian for many years, and you or I still see some spiritual baby? Then it's time to grow up, to not only be served but also to serve others. It's

time to no longer use our words in careless, judgmental ways that encourage unloving disunity here. It's time we no longer know so little of the Scriptures that we're easily deceived.

We talked about Genesis at the beginning, and Genesis chapter 3 starts with the words, "Now the serpent was more crafty..." In the Garden, crafty Satan schemed a lie that Adam and Eve then lived out, losing their oneness not based in sameness, entering an unloving disunity that plagues our world to this day.

Notice in verse 14 here how those scheming are described: as cunning, deceitful, crafty. Satan didn't stop working back in the Garden, he's still crafty. Both inside and outside the church he wants to deceive people into unloving disunity with God and each other. He's happy to use masks, vaccines, political news and talk radio, racial issues, theological debates, social media, anything he can leverage towards unloving disunity.

And if you're not yet part of Jesus' body in a consistent, ongoing kind of way, you're more vulnerable to Satan's divisive schemes. And if we don't have everybody serving, then we're all more vulnerable since Jesus' body matures as everybody serves.

I find it interesting that "infants" in verse 14 is plural. It's not one infant, it's infants, plural. So when we're immature, we're separate infants. In contrast, as we mature, as verse 13 says, we become a mature person, singular. Maturing together as one, where the best version of each of us is only found connected with the "us", this body of Jesus.

We mature together as everybody speaks and serves in love – So let's continue to mature together as we embody truth in love, which we see in verse 15.

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.

In contrast to those in verse 14 who deceive with their words and behavior, we are to embody truth in love. As we all do, we will become in every respect the mature body of Jesus. Jesus helps us mature as the head: giving us gifts, connecting us, and helping us to grow. An important part of maturity together is speaking the truth in love, as verse 15 says. Relationships of truth and love are essential to maturing together.

If I speak truth without love, that truth probably won't win the day. Have you been persuaded to change your mind from a social media post or conversation where the other person was clearly talking down to you? Or persuaded when the other person was spewing out truth as

a form of personal therapy, getting something off their chest without regard to how its impacting you?

If we speak the truth without love, speaking insensitively and making it about ourselves rather than about serving the other person, it hinders the other person from having ears to hear. It might even drive them away from the truth and away from the kind of relationships we need to help each other mature together in Jesus.

On the other hand, a relationship of only love without helpful truth is not really loving. If you or I aren't willing to share truth that could help someone to grow spiritually here because we don't want to feel anxiety before we share it, or because we don't want to feel negative emotions afterwards if it goes poorly, is that loving?

Now I'm not suggesting it's always the right time to share truth. Sometimes we're too worked up to share truth in love. Sometimes it's according to the need of the moment to instead just understand and empathize. Sometimes we should protect ourselves from someone who is unsafe. But when it's the right time to share truth, let's speak it in loving ways with a heart to help the other person to grow, speaking to cultivate loving unity in diversity.

As to grow up together, we must love not only in our speech, but also in our service, as we see in verse 16.

¹⁶From 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.

Verse 16 starts by reminding us that Jesus is the source of our growth. He joins and holds us together in His body. As we're connected with Him and each other, the body grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

We start every Welcome Class reading verses 15 and 16 here. It's because we need everyone speaking and serving in love for this body to really grow, including those who are newer. Every single part of Jesus' body here at Northwest functioning correctly in love to experience a mature oneness in Jesus together.

So if you've ever thought, "it doesn't really matter if I come to church this morning" you're very mistaken. God's Word declares here that Jesus' body matures as everybody lovingly serves.

So you have an important part to play in Jesus maturing His body. And your service isn't limited only to formal roles, like Deacon or Children's Ministry volunteer, though those roles are

essential. It's also as the parts of the body informally connect and share what Jesus has given each of us to build others up.

If you or I am struggling to experience God's forgiveness directly, members of this body can bring us forgiveness, through that ministry helping us to experience Jesus' forgiveness. If we're going to grow into the fullness of Jesus together, it's going to take all of us bringing everything Jesus has given us.

And further, as Christ's body we're also called together to represent Him to the world: loving all our neighbors, sharing the good news, serving the vulnerable, and displaying the beauty of oneness not based in sameness with each other and God.

To be and do all that God has for us we need you speaking and serving in love. We need the gifting and talents and intelligence and passion and yearnings that God has placed in you.

If you're here in person or streaming with others, I invite you to look at the people around you, even if it's a bit awkward ☺ Here around you is God's plan to mature His body and represent Himself to the whole world. You play an important part.

Next Step

We've seen this morning that Jesus came to live for us and to die for our sins to restore loving unity in diversity. If you don't yet identify as a follower of Jesus, He invites you now to place your trust in Him, beginning a relationship with Him and His body of oneness not based in sameness.

Gifted and empowered by Jesus, together we grow into maturity as everybody speaks and serves in love. Jesus' body matures when everybody lovingly serves.

So our next step this morning is to speak and serve in love. That's our application: speak and serve in love.

If you're not sure where to start, check out our website at www.nwchurch.org/serve to get some ideas and connect with ministry leaders. And also, please don't leave right after the service each week. Stick around for a bit and be part of building the body relationships that we all need.

And if you're one of the many needed servants here at Northwest already speaking and serving in love, thank you!

I think deep down we all want the kinds of relationships these verses describe. Relationships where we're all closely connected to Jesus, taking what He's giving each of us and

passing it along to the other parts of the body, as we grow together. That where I'm weak, others are strong and have gifts that help fill my lack and help us all to mature together.

Relationships where we all realize that it's not about me trying to grow as an individual. We're in this together as Jesus' body, contending for each other's growth, taking care of each other, as we travel to maturity in Jesus together.

Truth in love relationships where we steward our words to bless others. Where we're willing to put ourselves out there in love to share truth that helps others to grow, helping us all to have a better future together. And when we fall short of any of that, relationships where we apologize and forgive because of God's perfect love and forgiveness.

Relationships where everyone feels our oneness not based in sameness with God and each other. A return to what God intended for our relationships from the very beginning. Relationships that even reflect something of the oneness not based in sameness of God Himself, as Father, Son, and Spirit.

We'll enjoy oneness not based in sameness to the extent that everyone speaks and serves in love. I praise God that so many of you are speaking and serving in love, helping us to maturity together.

If you're not yet really part of that, I invite you to step out of the isolation that feels safe. Step away from a noncommittal life of personal autonomy that feels convenient. Take the risk of connecting with Jesus body at Northwest, trusting that He's brought us together not to make us something less, but to make us something more.

Loving unity in diversity, oneness not based in sameness with Him and each other that's the hope of the world. Amen? Let's pray...

Dismissal – You're dismissed. Go in peace to speak and serve in love.