

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

²The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert. ³The Israelites said to them, "Oh, how we wish that the LORD had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead, you've brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death."

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, "I'm going to make bread rain down from the sky for you. The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I'll test them to see whether or not they follow my instruction."

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole Israelite community, 'Come near to the LORD, because he's heard your complaints.'" ¹⁰As Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned to look toward the desert, and just then the glorious presence of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses, ¹²"I've heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat. And in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'"

¹³In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp. And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the desert surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What^[a] is it?" They didn't know what it was.

Moses said to them, "This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

Ephesians 4:1-16

Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. ²Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, ³and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. ⁴You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. ⁵There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.

⁷God has given his grace to each one of us measured out by the gift that is given by Christ. ⁸That's why scripture says, *When he climbed up to the heights, he captured prisoners, and he gave gifts to people.*^[a]

⁹What does the phrase "he climbed up" mean if it doesn't mean that he had first gone down into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰The one who went down is the same one who climbed up above all the heavens so that he might fill everything.

¹¹He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. ¹²His purpose was to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ ¹³until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son. God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴As a result, we aren't supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. ¹⁵Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ, ¹⁶who is the head. The whole body grows from him, as it is

joined and held together by all the supporting ligaments. The body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love as each one does its part.

John 6:24-35

24 When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. **25** When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

26 Jesus replied, "I assure you that you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted. **27** Don't work for the food that doesn't last but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Human One^[c] will give you. God the Father has confirmed him as his agent to give life."

28 They asked, "What must we do in order to accomplish what God requires?"

29 Jesus replied, "This is what God requires, that you believe in him whom God sent."

30 They asked, "What miraculous sign will you do, that we can see and believe you? What will you do? **31** Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, *He gave them bread from heaven to eat.*"^[d]

32 Jesus told them, "I assure you, it wasn't Moses who gave the bread from heaven to you, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. **33** The bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

34 They said, "Sir,^[e] give us this bread all the time!"

35 Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. **36** But I told you that you have seen me and still don't believe. **37** Everyone whom the Father gives to me will come to me, and I won't send away anyone who comes to me. **38** I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me. **39** This is the will of the one who sent me, that I won't lose anything he has given me, but I will raise it up at the last day. **40** This is my Father's will: that all who see the Son and believe in him will have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

“You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.” There seems to be a theme of oneness, of togetherness, of unity. What does this unity look like for us? How has our one Lord, Jesus, called us through our baptism to share our faith in harmony with one another? These are the questions that we will explore today, to consider where we’ve been together as members of one body, where we’re going as members of the same body, and explore the areas where our one Lord is calling us to grow.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is something like a State of the Union address for the church at Ephesus. When the

president of our country gives this kind of speech, there's a chance for looking backward and looking forward, a chance to detail both the progress we've made and the progress we hope for. From Paul's perspective, he's seen disunity, strife and division in the church at Ephesus. That's what appears in the first few chapters, a rehearsal of the former divisions in that church and the work of God to bring reconciliation and healing to the church. Paul spends the latter half of the letter talking about the present and future that he believes God has in store for the congregation in Ephesus, with a significant emphasis on the unity of the church, one where we share in the life of Christ who is our Bread of Life.

What is the state of our union, our unity? What are the markers of unity we've seen in our midst? How are we experiencing the grace of God together? One place that I've witnessed this growth in is our worship life.

Now, y'all know this history much more than I do, but from the stories you've shared with me, we've seen God grow us from a place where our average attendance was under ten to a place where it's consistently between twenty and thirty. We've seen growth in leadership, having more people take roles as readers, communion assistants, and preachers. Even our offering has grown. We've come to a place where our giving was at a record low for our congregation to place where our giving has doubled over the last year.

Beyond this, we've seen commitments to accessibility and hospitality, outfitting our building so that we can become more inclusive in ministry than ever before. And we've come to a place where much more is happening at this church than just Sunday morning gatherings, particularly as we've developed new and vibrant outreach ministries like Highlander Lutherans and Across the Spectrum. Each of

these continue to grow both in terms of numbers reached and positive reputations in the community. A few years ago, we didn't know what sort of future CLC had, or even whether we could continue to operate as a congregation, and now we are actually living in the early stages of that future, excited at the new world of possibilities we see. We're in the infancy of our new life together in Christ as Christ Lutheran Church.

Part of our unity, then, is unity in the mission of God that we've already seen. We can identify these places of growth, where we've come together across our differences and joined together in the common mission of making Christ known in worship, in hospitality, and in outreach. Perhaps most significant is that we are experiencing unity here. Once wrapped up in divisions and downsizing, as a congregation we have found commonality in Christ Jesus, a unity that has set us into new ministry together and helped

to create a healthy place for others to join in the work God is doing in our midst. That's something for which I give thanks every day.

But our unity can't simply be about our progress in the past. Our unity comes from Christ, who not only shaped the progress of our past and present, but casts a vision and invites us into a mission for the future. In the words of Ephesians, our one Lord gives us this core purpose, "to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ."

With the progress we've already seen, we also know that there's a larger future in store, one where we continue to serve and build up the body of Christ. We're at a turning point, with a chance to even more deeply root ourselves in the love of Christ and the mission of God in the world. How can we do that? There are some clear commitments we

can make as a church together to make this kind of progress.

This fall we're going to have our first stewardship campaign in over six years. This will help us to assess the resources that God has given us for ministry and to assess how we will live into the new mission statement. This includes not just money, but about time, about willingness to take a more active role in outreach and in discipleship with one another. Something to focus on in this stewardship development phase will be the development of ministry coordinators who will help to spearhead our other ministries just as Bridgette has so giftedly coordinated the ministry of Across the Spectrum. We need people to have gifts and passions for campus ministry, education, fellowship, outreach, property, and all sorts of ministries not yet known to embrace this ministry coordinator role to help our church more fully actualize the mission God's placed before us. In

other words, this is a chance for discipleship and leadership development, an opportunity to become more deeply involved in the work of Christ, and through that, to become more Christ-like in word and in deed.

There's a number of opportunities for us this fall to actualize our outward mission as a congregation together. First, September 26th is a big day for us. Two outreach opportunities for the Radford Community, Operation Inasmuch and the Highlander Festival, each occur that day. For Operation Inasmuch, we need people to provide all sorts of service, whether visiting homebound members, building a food pantry for students at RU, or providing a free carwash for all comers at the Central Square Plaza. Sign ups for each of these opportunities are by each entrance. For the Highlander Festival, we need people willing to help sit at our table at the event and help publicize Across the

Spectrum and Highlander Lutherans. If you're interested in this, let me know personally or contact the church office.

Second, Clyde and I have been working together to develop a sort of Appalachian Poetry Project to help showcase the God-given gifts of poets from our region. Our first reading will be from Charles Swanson on October 16th. I just met with him yesterday to record some promotional material for this event, and this soft-spoken man weaves words and phrases into an incredibly touching tapestry. This is a great way to invite friends from the community to come and see how God is at work in the creations of our community, helping to highlight the beauty of all sorts of art. This can help to showcase the Appalachian heritage and artistic talents of the community God calls us to love and serve.

Yet, even as we broaden our ministries to reach out to our community, we also need to reach in and develop our

relationships with God, one another, and ourselves more deeply. How do we do this? Through prayer, Bible study, and relationships of accountability with one another. In other words, through discipleship relationships. So, I'd love to start a new discipleship group that meets regularly just for these purposes. To pray together. To read scripture together. To live life together and to help one another live life to the full. If this is something you're interested in, please let me know and we'll get started on this inward development.

Finally, as we continue to show signs of growth, we need to prepare for that growth, so we should begin to consider the addition of a new worship service that helps us to accommodate and embrace the new people interested in being a part of CLC. Think about it this way. When you combine our Sunday morning service with twenty to thirty people in it each week with Across the Spectrum on Sunday

afternoons and Highlander Lutherans during the week, we have as many as sixty people in one of our weekly gatherings. If we want to maximize on this potential, we've got to begin to plan for this kind of community expansion.

Now, this is a lot to consider. God's given us unity in the past and has a great future of unity in store for us. But how do we wrap our minds around it? What language can we use to help simplify this discussion? Together, we need to focus on relationships Up, In, and Out. Our Up relationship is with God. Our In relationships are those with ourselves personally and within our congregation. Our Out relationships are those with the community of the New River Valley, with people and organizations God calls us to love and serve and partner with to help our community thrive. This kind of phrasing helps to give us tangible places to focus on when we consider our unity together as a church. We can't only focus on worship, an Up relationship, without

also focusing on outreach, an Out relationship, and fellowship, an In relationship. A key part of being unified together is focusing on the health of our relationships, so that we can discern together how to move forward together.

As we come to the communion table, we should hear the words of Christ in our ears: "I am the bread of life." The unified life we lead is based in this unified meal we share. The Body of Christ lives together only insofar as we share together the Bread of Life. The state of our union is found in the the body and blood of Christ. Once broken, we are bound Up in a holy meal, sent Out for holy work, and joined In to become holy as Christ makes us holy. Amen.