

Scripture passage: Ephesians 4:1-16
Working together
Delivered August 2, 2009

Before I came to this area, when I was living in Northern Virginia, I was a member of a clergy group called the McLean Clergy Association. The MCA was composed of members from various faith traditions—we had among us Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian clergy, but also Jewish and Bahai Clergy. From time to time we even had a Muslim join with us, but her presence was kind of off again on again. We met once a month, mainly just for lunch and fellowship; but that is not to say that we had no real purpose. Our purpose was to model in our various religious communities, religious tolerance through dialogue and fellowship. I was proud to be among them, and I'm still proud that I participated in that group.

Anyway, six months or so after Nine Eleven, an article appeared in the Washington Post. Now remember, anti-Muslim sentiment was running especially high at that time. The article concerned an Islamic School in Northern Virginia. That school presumably encouraged hate of Americans, and particularly Christian and Jewish Americans. It was a disturbing article. The one thing I still remember this many years after reading the article is that according to the journalist, the youth at that school wore uniforms and they “marched” to their classes. As probably other readers of that article, I had a clear image of Muslim youth in military dress led by terrorists posing as teachers, marching lock-step to and from their classes.

The McLean Clergy Association discussed the article at our once-a-month clergy group. Besides being upset by what we had read, several of us were curious-- curious enough to want to see for ourselves what was really up with that school. Alas, for some reason which I forget now, I couldn't make the visit. It was arranged by a colleague. He simply phoned the school and spoke with the principal. She was **delighted** to have the opportunity to rebut the Washington Post article. According to my colleague, who reported back to me after his visit, there was no brainwashing to speak of, at least as far as he could tell. My colleague could see for himself that there was no “marching” in the hallways, but only youth walking in clusters, laughing and talking on their way to class—and not in military uniform, either. The boys wore long dark pants and short sleeve white shirts, the girls wore plaid skirts with pleats and white blouses. In fact, it could have been a scene in any American private school. His conclusion--the article was horrifically slanted. Sad to say, though, that article had an effect. The school was eventually forced to move. Folks in the school's neighborhood played the NIMBY card. The school has relocated to the Saudi Arabian Embassy.

I don't want to talk about religious or political or educational tolerance today, however. I want to talk about this concept of unity. There's unity and then there's unity. When you get a bunch of people all thinking, and talking and acting alike—and marching together lock step, and under the command of someone who has absolute control, that's unity. But it's **threatening** unity. That was one thing that was so disturbing about that article. The newspaper journalist raised the suspicion that there was a powerful group of

brainwashed youth marching on a clearly marked path to, I don't know, to take down Northern Virginia, maybe. I doubt many folks were too worried about the lives of those young people—irrational fear had taken over—but had they been thinking more clearly, they probably also would have worried about the mental health of the young people in that school. Brainwashing destroys individuality. The article suggested that those children's personalities and creativity had been lost to the dark side.

And now we turn to our passage for today. The author of Ephesians, who most scholars believe is not Paul, but a follower of Paul, is writing to the church in Ephesus sometime in the late first century. This author has done a marvelous balancing act—telling the folks in Ephesus—“Now mind you, not so much unity that you lose your individuality—which is what we feared that school was up to—but also not so much individuality, that you lose the sense of working together toward one goal.” As the writer of Ephesians says, “ You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly....⁷⁻¹³That doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift.” You see the balance?

But of course, as the author of Ephesians knows and as we also know, in order for there to be a unity of purpose and a clearly set direction, you need leadership. Without proper leadership, you get chaos. Ephesians makes leadership sound easy. The church has one leader, who is God and God will keep us on a straight path. The reality is different. Unfortunately, God must work through church leaders and there's the rub.

So for example, again, while I was a member of the Mclean Clergy Association, one of our number, who represented an African American Baptist Church, lost his mother to cancer. I was elected to represent the Association at the funeral service. That meant that I got to sit on the dais along with three or four other clergy members, and I had a small role to play during the service. I mention this, because probably the folks sitting in the pews thought I was in a leadership position—that I was “in the know.”

The funeral was on a week-day and although I was glad to show my respect for a fellow clergy member by participating in the service, I needed to scoot out pretty quickly. I had a meeting to make. As soon as the benediction was said, and the postlude begun, I made a dash for my car. That was my mistake. The family had arranged for a funeral cortege to the grave site which was way on the other side of town . As I left the parking lot, somehow or other I managed to end up right at the front of the line of cars—behind the limo that was behind the hearse. How could I extricate myself from that lineup? The answer of course, was, I couldn't. I dutifully followed the limo in front of me through several neighborhoods and on to the Beltway.

Now if you've ever been on the DC Beltway, you know it is heavily trafficked. I soon lost sight of the limo and the hearse, too. On top of that, I had no idea where the cemetery was. I looked in my rearview mirror and there was a line a cars—who knew how many of those cars were part of the cortege? And presumably those cars were following the pastor with the tell-tale soulwmm license plate. It was terrible. After

frantically scanning the Beltway's horizon and still seeing no sign of the limo or hearse, I exited the beltway—with several cars in the cortege following behind. And then I did an unpardonable thing. I am embarrassed to admit this, but I made a few quick turns until, you've got it, I lost my followers, and headed back to McLean. That, my friends, is a metaphor for very bad church leadership. But... it probably accurately reflects how some churches operate. You know you have a group of people who are chosen to lead, as Session members or vestry members, or council members, and maybe these good meaning leaders haven't really committed themselves to a goal. Still they keep plugging away, occasionally looking in their rearview mirror to make sure the rest of the congregation is following along. And then, at some point, maybe after a really long time, the congregation realizes that the leading body hasn't a clue where the church is headed.

And that brings us to the end of this sermon and a commercial. Our Session is in need of some goal setting. It has done a fine job of leading us thus far—painting the church, celebrating the 240th birthday of the congregation and the 200th birthday of this building, and making inroads at the preschool—and these have been accomplished through your input starting with goal setting and of course on carrying out the work. Now, it's time to reassess. What is God calling Cove church to be and do in this community and in the world as we head into the second decade of this second millennium? We hope to make some inroads into answering this question at Cove's congregational retreat. The date is Saturday, September 26th. We will meet at the First Baptist Church of Covesville, where we had our last retreat. We will have some fun together, share a meal together and we will also spend some time in reflection and dialogue.

As the author of Ephesians says, "We are called to travel the same road." And as the author of Ephesians also says, "God has handed out gifts to us." This is your time to make sure that we are all on the same path, that your gifts are being used to their fullest in service to God, and that we are all headed in the right direction and not aimlessly circling the Beltway.

Let us move rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son. May it be so for you as for me in this community of faith, Cove Church. Amen