What binds us together?

What is the social or spiritual glue that holds us together?
What is it that gathers us in and keeps us together?

We’re young and old, professors and pipe-fitters, Trump voters and Never-Trumpers.
We’re rural, suburban, and city dwellers. We come from 45 minutes in all directions.
We’re public school and private school, gay and straight, seekers and settled, confident and riddled with doubt. What is it that binds us together?

A lovely young couple wandered into Hope. They were new to area, looking for a church, and gave Hope a try. They placed one child in children’s worship and navigated the nursery with the other. After the service Hope’s earnest-and-socially-awkward pastor tracked them down and over the deafening din of Fellowship Hall they exchanged introductions.

Things seemed to be going along swimmingly until the young man asked, “So what are Reformed churches and why are there a bunch of them around here?” And before he could help himself, the pastor began talking about Dutch-Americans, changing neighborhoods, and flight out of Chicago.

“And that guy over there, his grandpa built this subdivision and donated this corner lot for a church.” Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah…

Haven’t seen the young couple since.

Truth be told there is some ethnic glue. There’s a good chance that you could reach out right now and touch someone with a Dutch-American heritage. While that leaves me out, it is part of our tradition. The reformation of the sixteenth century was theological and geographic. Northern Europeans were Lutheran; the middle of Europe, Calvinist; and southern Europe stuck with the Pope. Thus, Dutch-Reformed churches on the southwest side of Chicago?

And, there is probably something theological that holds us together. We drive past all makes and models of churches on our way to Hope. There are essential commitments, confessions and catechisms, and ways of reading scripture that keep us together.

And there must be some aesthetic. We sing hymns out of hymnals, follow a liturgical tradition, include all voices leadership, and have certain expectations for preaching. We have a peculiar niche; we are an odd acquired taste….

But is that enough?

In a world often divided by identity politics, special interests, and tribalism what holds us together? What is it that binds us together?

Paul writes that he’s “bound” in Christ. Our translation has it as “prisoner.” A better more literal translation might read,

*I, therefore, the bound one in the Lord, beg you…*
Now. It could be that Paul is simply reminding his readers that he’s in prison in Rome. Or, it could be a little rhetorical splash to spice up his writing ~ an exclamation to mark the urgency of his appeal. But, I’d suggest that this little line is a window into what binds us together.

Consider….

When Erin started this sermon series in Ephesians she said that the first few chapters were deep, dense, and theological. For three chapters Paul writes tightly packed sentences about the nature of Christ, the cosmic work of Christ, the love of God in Christ, all of which crescendos in a breathless doxology at the end of chapter three.

And then there’s a “therefore.”

_I, therefore, the bound one in the Lord, beg you...._

The opening verses of this morning’s text are the hinge of the whole of the letter. It all swings on “therefore.”

  Because you are chosen in Christ, therefore….
  Because all things are gathered-in in Christ, therefore….
  Because you’ve been reconciled with God, therefore….
  Because of the love of God, therefore….

  The first three chapters are in the indicative mood; the next three chapters are imperative. The first three chapters makes claims about reality; the last three chapters are the inextricably linked practical implications of those claims.

So, part of what binds us together is a love that is beyond our full knowing.

  As you are loved by God in Christ, without condition or qualification, “therefore live a life worthy of the calling that you have received.”

Or, to go back to two weeks ago…

  As you have been reconciled to God in Christ, the dividing wall has been demolished, and you are being built into a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit, “therefore… be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

The point being that whatever it is that binds us together, whatever call there is to be bound together, the roots are found in the first three chapters.

In Acts it reads that Paul staying in Ephesus for two years.

  You’d think in two years you’d make a few friends, connect with a couple families, and find some point of personal contact. You’d think that if you lived in a small community for two years while carving out a new faith in an oppressive empire that when you write back you’d write something personal. You’d think, like most of Paul’s letter, there would be something in Ephesians that links it to real people living in Ephesus.

You think that, but you’d be wrong.
Ephesians doesn’t include any personal greetings or localized references. There is nothing in Ephesians that makes it particular to Ephesus.

Therefore, some scholars think it was written by a follower of Paul ~ someone who knew the thinking but didn’t know the people. Others think that Ephesians was a circular letter meant for all sorts of churches. It opens, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to God’s holy people in Ephesus….” But the line, “to God’s holy people” would have been followed by a blank. Fill in the blank wherever it is read. “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to God’s holy people in Oak Forest….”

I like that reading because wherever people live in community there’s bound to be divisions.

There’s bound to be clicks and squads.
There’s going to be backbiting and gossip.
There’s are old wounds and held grudges.
There will be divisions.

Paul can write this letter to, “fill in the blank,” because it’s universal. Paul proclaims and pleads for unity throughout this letter because division is endemic to the human condition.

What is it that binds us together?

In a beautiful sentence Paul strings together 7 images of unity.

There is one body, and one Spirit..... one hope,... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

You can think of those seven phrases as cords that bind us together.
You can think of those seven phrases as the spiritual realities in which we dwell.
You can think of those seven phrases as foreshadowing how the cosmos is finally consummated.

But, even while “one” gets repeated seven times (think: fullness) it doesn’t suggest unity as uniformity. The work of one biblical scholar/friend, that I found helpful, suggests that there can be one church only because one Spirit, one Lord and one Father are three persons who together are one God.

And that is to say that what binds us together isn’t that we all believe the same things, or worship in the same ways, or are monotone in our practices. Just as there is diversity in the triune God so there is diversity in the church. We are bound together in unity because God is bound together in unity.

My first Sunday at Hope was the first Sunday of August 2002. This morning marks 16 years. If you figure in Sundays off that works out to be almost 800 sermons. You’d think that I’ve have this preaching thing figured out by now. As it turns out, not so much….

But, most of those sermons were mostly written while sitting in a black leather chair next to a floor-to-ceiling window in our living room. Endless hours have been spent looking out that window watching, wondering and waiting for some word to come.

But sometimes, when the slant is just right, I’ve seen light hit a drop of water or an ice crystal on that window and refract into a rainbow of color. There’s one light that opens up into all the colors of the world….
Dear friends, without condition or qualification, we are bound together in the love of God. Without uniformity of experience or interpretation we are bound together in the love of God. Even as the light refracts, catches different angles, and opens up in a diversity of colors we are bound together in the love of God.

There is one Light and one Love.
There is a diversity of expressions.
Thanks be to God.

And, with that in mind, listen again to Paul’s exhortation:

Therefore, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received....to each of us grace has been given... to equip God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...

Dr. Rachel Naomi Reden is a Jewish doctor/director of a cancer clinic/hospice and a cancer patient herself. She writes:

The capacity to bless life is in everybody. The power of our blessing is not diminished by illness or age. On the contrary, our blessings become even more powerful as we grow older. They have survived the buffeting of our experience. We may have traveled a long, hard road to the place where we can remember once again who we are. That we have traveled and remembered gives hope to those whom we bless. Perhaps in time they too can remember this place beyond competition and struggle, this place where we can belong to one another.

We are bound together in love and we are bound together by the capacity to bless others. Our unity in Christ is expressed by a diversity of gifts all meant to serve others and serve the world. We are bound together in the love of God expressed in Christ that we might be a blessing to the world. Again, our unity is expressed in the refracting of light into a diversity of gifts....

All are bound together. All are gifted. At every age and stage you have a gift to offer. That all might grow up into the one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord....

I hope that young couple lands under Hope’s big tent. I hope they find their way through the weeds of ethnic identity and quirky preaching. I hope that they find some binding together in love. For, as G. Porter Taylor puts it:

The church is called to be a new community based not on social divisions inherent in the existing order but on the new humanity in Christ. The social hierarchy has been replaced by the body of Christ. In this new order, all members are essential, and all members are connected. Love, therefore, is neither theoretical nor abstract but is the glue of the community; it is what knits the body together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.