

Psalm 131

Ephesians 4: 20-25, 5: 1-2

Raw clay goes through profound changes before it becomes a finished piece of ceramics. First, the clay is shaped by the potter, either by hand or on a potter's wheel. At this stage, the clay is extremely plastic, very easy to manipulate, and mistakes are easily repaired. Once the potter has formed the clay into the desired shape, the piece is left to dry completely. No trace of water can be left in the clay body or the piece could explode during the first firing. The clay is extremely fragile during this stage, and a break could be catastrophic. Once the clay is bone-dry, it's placed in a kiln for its first firing, known as a bisque firing. During bisque firing, the chemical and physical properties of the clay undergo irreversible changes. The clay body vitrifies, a process by which the clay shrinks and hardens as the particles within the clay fuse together and form a strong crystalline structure. After the bisque firing, the potter can either choose to add glaze to the piece or leave the clay bare, and then it's fired one last time. In this final, hotter firing, the clay fully vitrifies, shrinking and hardening even further. The final product is the strongest the clay will ever be, but even the most well-made ceramics can shatter into hundreds of pieces. But is such a break beyond repair?

Today's text comes from the letter to the Ephesians, which was purportedly written by the Apostle Paul to the early church in Ephesus. However, most modern scholars now believe that the letter was neither written by Paul nor written specifically to the church in Ephesus. Unlike Paul's undisputed letters, Ephesians lacks references or greetings to specific people, as well as references to any particular issues that may have been plaguing the church in Ephesus. There are a number of other reasons it likely wasn't written by Paul that I won't get into, but most likely, Ephesians was written by a disciple or follower of Paul who used his name to give the letter authority. Furthermore, although it's addressed to the church "in Ephesus," the content of the letter is universal enough to have been widely circulated among the early churches. Of course, none of this invalidates Ephesians. Whether it was written by Paul and written to the church in Ephesus or not, it remains part of the Christian canon, part of the texts that we hold sacred, and so we must consider its messages with the same attention and care as we would those from any other book of the Bible.

Ephesians is a relatively short book, and its overarching theme is one of unity. In chapter two, the author describes Christ as a unifying force for the Jews and the Gentiles, saying: "He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross" (2:15-16a, NRSV). In chapter four, just a few verses before today's text, the author further emphasizes this unity in Jesus Christ in language that is very familiar to us: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of

your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (4:4-6, NRSV). This “oneness” - this unity - is central to our theology. The very first creedal statement of the church, the Nicene Creed, proclaims a belief in “one God...one Lord...of one Being with the Father...one holy catholic and apostolic Church...one baptism” (Book of Confessions, 1.1-1.3). The Book of Order lays out in the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity unity as the first mark of the church and quotes Ephesians. The Nicene Creed and the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity are the very first entries in the two documents that make up the Constitution of the PC(USA).

This unity is so central to our theology because we were once dead, living in sin, hampered by our desires and held captive by the ways of the world. But then God extended us grace and gave us new life in Jesus Christ. As today’s text says, we were taught how to live in the example of Jesus Christ, taught how to put away our former selves, our former ways of life, taught how to open ourselves to God’s transformative power which renews us “from the inside and [works] itself into [our] conduct as God accurately reproduces God’s character in [us]” (4:24, The Message). And just in case we’ve forgotten what Jesus taught us, the author of Ephesians spends the remainder of the letter telling us exactly how to live. Unity should be no problem for us, right? Thanks be to God, and amen!

If only it were that simple.

Today’s text is a beautiful expression of how to live as followers of Jesus Christ, yet it serves as the preamble to one of the most oppressive passages of scripture in the entire Christian canon. The Household Codes, which appear in Colossians and here in Ephesians 5:22-6:9, instruct Christians how to govern their households. All members of a household were legally the property of the oldest male, known as the *pater familias*. By law, he held the power of life and death over every single member of his household, which included his wife, his children, and his slaves. The household was considered to be a microcosm of the Roman imperial order - which was the ideal model of how society should and did function - and if the *pater familias* couldn’t govern his household, he wasn’t considered fit to govern anything else. He wasn’t even considered to be a man. So, the Household Codes instruct children to obey their parents, and women to submit to their husbands, and slaves to obey their masters. Yes, these instructions were written long ago in a much different time, but New Testament scholars Amy-Jill Levine and Warren Carter point out that the Household Codes give “divine sanction to slavery...The sanctioning and indeed sanctification of slavery by making the slave’s work a service to the Lord presents submission as a sacred duty” (*The New Testament: Methods and Meanings*, 192-3).

These texts and countless others in our canon have been used throughout history as tools of oppression masquerading as unity and peace. American slaveholders, many of whom were Presbyterian, used these texts to justify slavery and to uphold white supremacy. Christians the world over have used these texts to oppress women both in their own marriages and as leaders in the church, oppression which continues to this day. There were women in seminary, my friends and classmates, who told me that their former husbands had used these texts to justify their emotional and physical violence and abuse. I know women who grew up in denominations that didn’t recognize their callings or their gifts, simply because they were women. Today’s text is indeed beautiful and good, but the beauty and good in the text is not so great as to outweigh the bad, nor can we only take the good and ignore or dismiss the rot lurking just out of sight. As Levine and Carter rightly say, “By taking over the patriarchal household structure, Ephesians does not live up to its own vision of a new way of life” (*The New Testament*, 194). Unity for unity’s sake is not unity. Unity that reinforces patriarchy and requires

submission is not a new way of life. Unity whose bounds are dictated by those with the most power and privilege is not unity, but oppression.

There's a profound tension in these texts between unity and oppression. This tension bends and bows our spirits, spawning tiny fractures all across our lives. This tension between unity and oppression has existed for millennia, even before Christ, and we can clearly follow the stress fractures that spider web through the narrative of our faith. But there, in the midst of that tension, is exactly where the Christ event takes place. The incarnation of Jesus Christ was a violent in breaking of God into the structure of our lives to disrupt and reorient the trajectory of our faith, to break once and for all the tension between unity and oppression and to show us the explosive power of relentless, radical love. For God so loved the world that God broke the world. In Jesus Christ, God broke into the very fabric of our reality, shattering everything about us and everything we thought we knew. The teachings of Jesus Christ were radical and intended to break everyone who had not already been broken and abused by the powers of the world, and if we are not broken by the teachings of Jesus, then we are not paying attention. Jesus didn't just teach us to love our neighbors as ourselves; Jesus taught us to enter into right relationship with the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the outcast. Jesus taught us to sell everything we own, give it to the poor, and follow him. Jesus taught us to love extravagantly and sacrificially. The author of Ephesians is right: Jesus taught us everything we need to know about how to live into this new life we've been given, and yet we continue to act like the rich young man, grieving the sacrifice required of us and resisting the transformative, fracturing love of Christ. I believe Jesus' teachings are meant to break us, but I also believe his love is meant to repair us. *Kintsugi* is a Japanese art form in which broken ceramics are repaired using lacquer and gold. As a philosophy, it honors the history of an object by emphasizing and highlighting the breakage instead of concealing or minimizing it. *Kintsugi* is translated as "golden joinery," and even if a piece of the object is missing, *kintsugi* practitioners are able to fill the void, the empty space, with gold, thus repairing even the worst breaks. *Kintsugi* practitioners understand that even if something is catastrophically broken, it doesn't have to be discarded. The broken, former life of the object doesn't invalidate its beauty; in fact, when rightly repaired, it enhances and transforms it.

Multi-layered and intersecting systems of oppression have been eating away at our lives for far too long. The rot of racism and white supremacy has set in. Sexism, transphobia, and classism spread their corrupt roots near and far. There are too many problems to name, and it seems like it would be best to just throw everything out and start over from scratch. But I don't believe our lives are rotten through and through. I don't believe everything has to go. I believe that we have to allow Jesus to break us, to shatter our former way of life into hundreds of pieces. But once that happens, we can't just get glue and gold paint and stick the pieces back together. We have to learn from Jesus by entering into right relationship with the marginalized and the oppressed, but before we can do that, we have to be in right relationship with ourselves. We have to first learn

which pieces of our former lives can be saved and which can't, and we can't rush the process. We can't try to conceal our history of oppression. We can't sweep our brokenness under the rug. We have to highlight it and emphasize it and transform it. We can't trust ourselves to determine which pieces are good and which are rotten, so we have to look to Christ. It's going to take a long time, but we can learn by watching what God does, and then doing that. We have to take on and commit to this new way of life and allow God to renew and repair us from the inside out.

In a recent New Yorker article, Bill McKibben wrote about returning to church for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began. He remarked how deeply familiar and comforting it was to be worshiping again, despite the strangeness of masks and social distancing, but he reminded himself and us that "...the point of church is not just comfort or familiarity," or unity. "It is, or should be," he writes, "coming to grips with the relentless radicalism of Jesus—with the gospel demand that we love our neighbors in effective ways."¹ Relentless radicalism. Effective love. New beginnings. As painful as it is, I'm grateful for the ways Christ's teachings have broken me. I'm grateful that I have a teacher who shows me how to sift through the rotten detritus of my former life and to hold onto the pieces that are good and viable. I'm grateful for the chance to share my brokenness with others, and I'm grateful that my brokenness is honored and transformed by God. As Bill McKibben writes, this pandemic has offered "...us the chance to examine our lives and our institutions. And now, if we want it, we have a chance to rearrange them."² We learned Christ! So let's watch what God does with gratitude, and then do it. Let's gather up the pieces of ourselves and rearrange them to reflect our sacred duty: not submission, not even unity, but relentless, radical, effective love. Let's rearrange ourselves so that the golden joinery of Christ's love may transform our broken, shattered lives into a beautiful, fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. May it be so. Amen.

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¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/back-to-church-but-not-lets-hope-back-to-normal>

² Ibid