



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Scott E. Schul
12th Sunday after Pentecost: August 12, 2018
Sermon Title: "The Manual"
Gospel Text: John 6:35, 41-51
Sermon Text: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

It'll soon be that time here in State College and on university campuses across the nation when frazzled parents move their children into dorms and apartments in preparation for the upcoming semester. As part of that annual ritual, those moms and dads will be given the unenviable task of assembling furniture. I know this first hand, because my newly minted college senior has already assigned me the project of assembling a futon bed. My initial response to my daughter was to ask if she had an assembly manual. She looked at me as if I'd sprouted wings and a third eye. "A manual? Are you kidding? Of course not. Just put it together. It'll be easy!" I pray she's right. I'd *prefer* to have a manual. I *always* want to see the manual.

Maybe it's a generational thing; maybe it's just me. I'm the guy who opens the furniture box from IKEA or the new piece of technology and actually reads the manual. I realize this automatically qualifies me for dinosaur status. Manuals are becoming a thing of the past. I've especially noticed this with cell phones. They don't even include a manual because they know people will just push buttons until they figure it out.

But despite our cultural aversion to manuals and instruction booklets, I've found that when it comes to matters of faith, people are desperately searching for guidance. The religion shelves at Barnes and Noble are crammed with books that purport to contain "Ten Keys to Getting to Heaven" or "Five Things to Experience the Best Christian Life." Frankly, I haven't found many that are worth reading. But the presence of those books confirms what I also hear from folks who are new or returning to the faith: they are looking for a manual. They need help sorting out what it means to *be* a Christian and to *live* as a Christian.

This isn't a new phenomenon. The Book of Ephesians was a letter written to first century churches whose members were newly baptized Gentiles and who desperately desired instruction concerning their new identity and new life in Jesus Christ. Ephesians though is *not* a manual about how to *earn* God's love. We can't earn God's love; God freely gives it to us. Instead, Ephesians clarifies how God's love transforms the way we see ourselves and others, which then changes the way we live. But what does that mean? We might frame the question like this: *Now that you know how loved you are by God, what do you do next?*

Let's try to answer that question about our journey of faith by gleaning some guidance from the ancient wisdom offered by today's lesson from Ephesians. Let's begin with this: our lesson tells us that *we are members of one another*. What does that mean for a Christian? The answer becomes clearer if we retranslate the phrase to more literally match the original Greek: *Together, we are parts of the same body*.

Members of the early church lived in times similar to ours, with all of the conflict and divisions. If you aren't part of my team, my tribe, and my group, then probably you're my enemy. But Ephesians calls *all* Christians to a new and often challenging way of viewing ourselves and our neighbors. *We are all parts of the same body.* My left hand is not at war with my right hand. My right lung does not hate my left eye. It's neither normal nor healthy for a body to attack itself. The same is true of a Christian. As I said in last week's sermon, *we need each other.* We are at our best when we are all striving together, supporting one another, speaking truth, living in kindness, and building one another up. To people outside the Church, *this* is what should distinguish us as Christians and draw others to this way of life. Jesus has forgiven us and transformed our hearts so that we can begin to see the world as he sees it – as beloved, interconnected, and interdependent. *We are parts of the same body.*

Another beautiful piece of wisdom from Ephesians is this: *Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal.* The key here is the word "seal." That word is used in Ephesians to refer to baptism. Even today, as part of our baptismal liturgy, the pastor draws a cross on the forehead of the baptized person and says, "Child of God, you have been *sealed* by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." And so this counsel from Ephesians intends to drive us back to our baptism, that singular, public moment when Jesus reaches down from heaven at our most vulnerable and helpless stage of life and says, "I love you, I claim you, and I will *never* let you go!" It's pure, unearned, unmerited grace. To grieve the Holy Spirit then is to cease to believe that you are *loved* by Jesus or *forgiven* by Jesus. *No one* is ever beyond the bounds of Christ's love and forgiveness. *Nothing* can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus!

Friends, we are all imperfect, we all make mistakes, and we regularly fall on our faces in the midst of our Christian walk. But when we cling to our baptism and the astonishing promises of love, mercy, and grace in Christ that baptism contains, *we can get back up again.* That knowledge should fill every Christian with hope and courage. You are loved. *Always.* Please don't *ever* forget that. But what's true for you is likewise true for your neighbor. Please remember that your neighbor— even in his or her imperfections – is equally beloved by Jesus. By God's grace, can *we* learn to see our neighbor as *Jesus* sees our neighbor? *As beloved?*

Here's just one more nugget from the new Christian manual we call the Book of Ephesians. "*Live in love, as Christ loved us.*" This proclaims that *Jesus is our model.* He poured himself out in love for us, and he calls us to do the same for others. It's a sacrificial love – a love offered with no expectation of return. It's a love rooted in tenderhearted kindness, generosity, and forgiveness. And it's a love we offer to those we *like*, as well as those we *dislike.* Look, there's only *one* Jesus Christ. He is *perfect*, while we are all "works in progress." But we've got to start somewhere, right? So view this call to live as Christ as a *goal* – one we can only begin to approach with the grace and assistance of Jesus himself.

So you see the Ephesians "manual" for being a Christian is centered on the amazing reality that Jesus loves *you.* And so in the light of that love, if you want to experience the Christian life in its fullness, start with the fundamentals from today's lesson from Ephesians: (1) remember that we are all parts of the same body; (2) cling to your baptism and the unshakeable

promise that you are forgiven and eternally loved; and (3) strive by God's grace to live a life of sacrificial love, just as Jesus did – a life marked by kindness, generosity, and forgiveness.

One last thing while we're talking about the Christian life... I've been overwhelmed by the kindness of the many people who've asked how they can help me while we're temporarily short-staffed. I have two simple answers. *First*, I'd be grateful if you'd pray for me. I'll be praying for you as well. *Second*, please give generously and consistently so that we meet 100% of our budgeted giving and our monthly mortgage payment. This will enable us to continue to do *all* the ministry God has called us to do, and will free me to devote my time to caring for our sick and homebound members, and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. If you can do those two things, you'll help me greatly, and nothing will be able to hold us back here at Grace Lutheran.

Friends, what an honor it is to be your pastor. We are *so* blessed. In response, *let's go bless the world!* Amen.