

In the name of God, Source of all Being, Incarnate Word, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Most of us know what it's like to be in the middle of a conflict.

At first, we might be in a little bit of denial about the whole thing. We say, "Meh, it's no big deal." We go for a walk, get a snack, maybe take a nap, and wake up feeling right as rain.

But sometimes, that's not enough. We wake up and we're still feeling mad about it. This is a good thing because anger, even though it doesn't feel pleasant, is our brain's way of telling us that something is important to us. For example, it's easy to just let it go when some hothead cuts you off in traffic, but harder when your teenager tells you they want to drop out of high school. Anger is a healthy thing when it reminds us about what's important, but not so healthy when it festers so long that it turns into resentment and contempt.

In order to stop that from happening, we need to sit down and have those difficult conversations about what really matters. We have to listen to each other's point of view and try to negotiate a compromise. If that works, great! If not, it can leave us feeling pretty

hopeless. We throw our hands up and go, “Ugh! I guess that’s it. The yogurt has hit the fan and we’re all headed for Hades in a handbasket. Whaddyagunna do?”

And that, I think, is a very interesting question, if we ask it honestly. What are you going to do? That question, when asked honestly, leads us past the surface level of conflict, opens us up to new possibilities, and reminds us of what is most important: The mystery of who we really are and the reality that binds us together at the deepest level of our existence.

That mystery, that reality, is what the author of the epistle to the Ephesians is talking about in the Scripture reading we just heard.

At the end of the first century, the Church in Ephesus was in a pretty rough place. Only a few decades after its founding, it was already engulfed in a controversy that threatened to tear the community apart from the inside. The controversial issue, in that time and place, was the question of whether a person could really be a Christian without first becoming Jewish. It helps to remember that, at that point in history, Judaism and Christianity were not yet

separate religions. Christianity started as a renewal movement within Judaism and only later took on a separate identity of its own.

On one side, conservatives were saying, “Listen! Jesus was Jewish. All of his apostles were Jewish. The Bible clearly states that the Jews are God’s chosen people. Therefore, if a person really wants to be a follower of the way of Jesus, they first have to convert to Judaism and follow the ways of the Torah.”

On the other side, the liberals were saying, “No way! Jesus was an enlightened being. He had no patience for your backward traditions. Therefore, we are going to purge the Church of all that superstitious nonsense and have a truly progressive spirituality.”

(By the way, does any of this sound familiar to anyone who has watched the news lately? It should. Two thousand years later, and we are still having the same fight.)

Enter the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians. This person, writing in the name of their mentor St. Paul, is trying to help the Christians in Ephesus figure out how to be the Church for the long haul. In the first generation after Jesus’ earthly ministry, it seemed to

the Church like the end of days was imminent, so they didn't put much thought into creating an institution that would help people follow Jesus for thousands of years to come. They sincerely believed, at that time, that sustainability was a non-issue. As time wore on, however, it slowly dawned on these Christians that they were going to have to hunker down and figure out a way to live as the people of Jesus in a world that wanted nothing to do with him. So, for the first time, these Christians are asking questions about how to live together as people from different social classes, ethnic groups, languages, ages, and genders. And all of this was happening at the same time as Christians everywhere were being excommunicated from traditional Jewish communities and actively persecuted by the Roman government. Needless to say, it was a very contentious and complicated time to be a Christian. (Much like today.)

In the moment of this letter, the author of Ephesians writes to that Church in the midst of apparent hopelessness, appealing to the deeper truth of who they really are and what really binds them together. The author tells them that they have an "inheritance," a "destiny," and "hope" that come from their faith in God. According to the passage we read tonight, the same divine energy that raised Christ

from death to new life is now at work in the hearts, minds, and bodies of those who follow the way of Jesus.

In some mysterious way that transcends rational understanding, the very lifeblood of Jesus now flows in our veins and we have become his hands and feet on this Earth. We are, all of us, essentially one person, and that person is not you or me, but Jesus Christ himself. Later in the epistle to the Ephesians, the author writes, concerning the controversy that was tearing their Church apart, “[Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” (Eph 2:14 NRSV)

Jesus Christ is who we are. All other identifying factors are secondary to that one truth.

The modern theologian who expressed this truth more beautifully than anyone was a French Jesuit priest named Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Fr. Teilhard, writing in the early twentieth century, lived his faith in a time that was every bit as fraught and contentious as the

first century. He was a stretcher-bearer on the front lines of World War I. He was, in addition to his vocation as a priest, a paleontologist in a time when the Roman Catholic Church wasn't yet sure what to think about the writings of Charles Darwin.

For Teilhard, there was no conflict between faith and science. He saw the whole history of the cosmos, from the Big Bang to the formation of stars and planets, from the evolution of life to the emergence of human beings, all 13.8 billion years of cosmic history, as a single story of God's creation and salvation.

Teilhard's hope and vision was that, one day, all things would be part of the Body of Christ. By "all things," he really did mean ALL THINGS. When Teilhard imagined the Body of Christ, he wasn't just thinking about all Christians, all humans, or all of planet Earth. He was thinking about the entire universe as the Body of Christ.

The Vatican of that time wasn't quite ready for a cosmic vision as big as Teilhard's. They censured his work and forbade him from teaching theology. Teilhard, as a good Jesuit, obeyed the order but continued to write in private. He entrusted his papers to a friend, who published them after his death.

Writing in his private journal, Teilhard struggled with the Vatican's resistance to his ideas. He looked to God for assurance and prayed, "O God, if in my life I have not been wrong, allow me to die on Easter Sunday." Shortly after writing that prayer, Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin passed away on April 10, 1955... Easter Sunday.

I think Fr. Teilhard was right, and I think the author of the epistle to the Ephesians would agree with me. God is in the business of reconciliation, but not assimilation. God seeks unification, but without uniformity. We are one, not because of any shared ethnicity, nationality, party, class, or gender, but because God has made us one in Christ. The very lifeblood of the risen Christ flows in our veins, just as it has in all the saints of history, and still does in the atoms of the most distant galaxy. That is the faith that will give us the wisdom and the strength to navigate the many conflicts of our time as faithfully as the Ephesian Christians did in theirs. That is the truth about who we really are and the glue that will bind us together, both now and forevermore.

Amen.