

WOVEN FOR UNITY AND PEACE

Rev. Mary Scifres
Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-13

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Community Church, Congregational

We had a fire earlier this summer in Laguna Beach. We have small brush fires almost every summer, but this summer was the first major fire we'd had since 1993, when fire destroyed more than 400 homes. This time the winds were in our favor, but fire fighters weren't taking any chances. Nobody wanted another 1993 fire. They began evacuating all of us who lived on top of the hill above the canyon where the fire raged. From all over southern California, firefighters came together to work side by side to contain that fire. It was like a beautiful dance atop our hill, despite the frightening clouds of smoke that were billowing up from the valley: Residents gathering pets and belongings, as police officers directed traffic and slowly closed off neighborhoods; fire trucks from all over the county coming up the hill as we residents drove down the hill; helicopter pilots assessing the situation to advise the fire chief on strategy; airplane pilots dropping fire retardant; fire truck teams driving into our neighborhoods to create a perimeter of access to water around the canyon; and ground teams hiking into the canyon to fight the fires head on. As we listened in on radio reports from the fire teams and our local radio station, I couldn't help but notice how calm and collegial everyone was. Our fire chief gladly taking advice from his former boss in Long Beach and other fire chiefs from up north who last autumn had fought those tragic forest fires; our Laguna team working seamlessly with teams from Garden Grove and Newport Beach; ground teams and air teams coordinating so everyone was safe when retardant was dropped.

As you can imagine, these are big men and women, with big egos and strong opinions. They work out every day, they are always lifting weights and handling huge loads of equipment;

they work hard and play just as hard, loving to win whether they are competing on the basketball court or racing for a best time on a distance run. And southern California has its own competitive streak: Each community has its own ideas about what makes its fire department better than another's, and each has its own bias about which fire chiefs are best. Some departments think Laguna is too wealthy, full of snobby police officers and entitled firefighters. Laguna firefighters are proud that they all have Master's degrees and are part of a demanding department. But that weekend, those differences fell away. There was no false pride, no one upmanship, no internal politics getting in the way of what they were called to do. They were working together as one body, the Body of Protection, woven together with one purpose: to contain that fire and keep our community peaceful and safe. It no longer mattered who was the metermaid or who was the Laguna fireman, because they needed each other equally as the meter maids handled the evacuation and the firemen set the perimeter. And in our little town where the firefighters are all actually men, and the parking cops are actually all women, this was saying something.

Likewise, it no longer mattered who was the Laguna firefighter or who was the Garden Grove firefighter, for they needed each other to survive their dangerous work. There was no longer any division – only unity, as they allowed their common purpose to weave them together in strength and service.

This is the peace we can create – in any community and most especially in the church - when we live into our common purpose, each of us playing whatever small part we have to play and allowing others to do the same. We all have different parts to play, and different ways of playing our parts. We are each created differently, with different spiritual types, different ways of naturally relating to God and growing in our faith, different personality types with different

ways of relating to one another, and different learning styles with different ways of studying scripture and learning about God and God's purpose for our lives. Those differences, particularly in spiritual types, were the focus of our learning last weekend at the all-church retreat. B. J. helped us understand that some of us relate to God most easily through our hearts and others related to God most easily through our minds; some of us understand God best by relating to others and seeing images and tangible evidence of God's presence; others of understand God best in silence and solitude, and find images and explanations get in the way more than they help. Similarly, God has gifted each of us with unique spiritual gifts and abilities and even purpose. Each spiritual type is needed to make our church strong and to help us grow and stretch in our faith walks; no one spiritual type or method of worship or study or prayer is better than another – just different. Similarly, each of our gifts is needed, each of us is needed, and each part we have to play is essential. No one gift is better or more important or even more essential – just different.

When we can bring our authentic spiritual selves to worship and prayer and study and conversation, we build an authentic church community. When we focus on being ourselves, using our unique gifts, and doing whatever part we are called to do, we build a strong church, one which God can weave together as one unified Body of Christ. In this unity, we discover a new peace in working together, despite our differences, because we are working toward a common purpose, allowing others to do their part however different their part may be from ours.

It's a bit like singing in a choir. When we're focused on learning our part and giving our best effort to whatever music is set before us, we don't have time to cause division. Krista is focused on figuring out the soprano line, while Dorothy concentrates

on her alto part: Rodger is focused on the directing and accompanying, while Alan focuses on the bass line. No matter how hard Rodger tries, he cannot pull off a choral anthem all by myself. He needs a choir - altos, tenors, basses, and sopranos singing together. Otherwise, he's just a soloist – not really the same thing. But when each musician does his or her part by practicing the music, showing up for rehearsal, and giving their best efforts to each rehearsal and performance, they bring an anthem to bless all of us in worship.

Ministry and the church are a lot like music and the choir. It's better together. When we focus on whatever part we are supposed to play in serving God's world as part of our church family, being part of church is a lot more fun and has a much bigger impact. Our work together as the church can bring beauty and inspiration, just like an anthem well rehearsed brings beauty and inspiration. I think churches could learn a lot from choirs, and perhaps we all could learn from firefighters who bond together with absolute focus and precision because lives depend on them to do so. My friends, the spiritual lives of people around us, depend on us just as much as the physical lives depended on those firefighters last summer. When we are focused on doing our part as the children of God, and working together with others who are trying to do their part, we are better able to do the work we are called to do, and to live into the unity and peace God is weaving for us.

Does this mean we will get along all the time? No. Does this mean that we'll always be perfectly happy with one another? No. I'm pretty sure the Garden Grove firefighters are not all that happy that the Laguna guys earn more money, and I'm sure the fire chiefs had plenty of debates off-line about how best to handle things when the fire jumped one of their fire retardant lines. But regardless of all that, they worked together for hours upon hours and days upon days, to live lives worthy of their calling to be firefighters, bearing with one another to create and maintain a unity of spirit as they worked side by side to save property, homes, and lives. Just like in a choir when you can't always get the solo, we are still called to work together to make beautiful music. Life will hand us many situations where we are called to serve beside people, regardless of whether we're getting exactly what we want or enjoying every single person we're working beside. Still, we are called to serve together in unity and peace

But it's a lot easier to do that when we are focused on a **common purpose**. So figure out your life's purpose and where you fit in as you live out that purpose. This is not just the job of teenagers who are trying to figure out where to go to school, or young adults who are trying to figure out what to do with their lives. We are all called to figure out what to do with our lives, what God wants to do with you lives. So pray about, listen for God's guidance, talk with your friends and family, and discern your call for this season of life in whatever you place you are planted. It's so much easier to serve together when we know what our purpose is. If you want to know more about that, you will want to be in worship on October 7, when Bob O'Neill brings a message and story about finding his purpose and some guidance about how we can also do so.

But even if you aren't exactly sure what your individual call and purpose is, we all share one common purpose in Christ Jesus: to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and

to love neighbor as self. So even if you're not exactly certain what your focus or specific purpose might be, you can begin by living into the purpose we all share: to love God, neighbor, and self. That's why Jesus labels these the "greatest" commandments, the phrase that summarizes all commands, the purpose that defines all purposes. We can focus our gifts, our call, our talents, our treasures, and our purpose in this world on that highest purpose of all: to love. Then our focus gets clear. Then God can weave us together in unity and purpose, and we will find a peace that is beautiful and inspirational indeed – a peace that arises because we are using our gifts and talents in whatever way we are meant to do and allowing others to do the same.

So, the sopranos get to sing the melody line and the descant, and the basses get to give us our grounding while the altos and tenors have fun with the tricky harmonies that make an anthem so unique. And then if we really want to mix it up, we'll give the tenors the melody line and let sopranos sing harmony. Just like the firefighter who found himself unloading our neighbor's car full of peat moss so the neighbor could get her dogs and cats into the car and the meter maid who had to become the hard core police officer to keep gawkers out of the evacuation zone and the rock and roller d. j. of our local radio station who became the news anchor to keep us all informed, we can juggle our different roles and live into unexpected ways of serving with unity and peace as long as we are focused on that common purpose: fighting fires for the leaders of my little town last June, or for us this week and all weeks: to love God and God's world. Just love. Love. And see just how beautifully God can weave us together in unity and peace.

Will you pray with me:

Weaver God, bind us together. Intertwine the threads of our lives into one beautiful tapestry. Weave our differences into a magnificent piece of art that connects musicians with

teachers, thinkers with dreamers, and children with senior citizens. Help us to see our differences as works of your beautiful creative imagination, so that we can celebrate our oneness in you, and collaborate as your people on this earth. In unity and love, we offer this prayer in the name of your son Christ Jesus who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed by the name.
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.