

Called to Wholeness
A Sermon on Ephesians 4:1-16 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ August 8, 2021

In July I attended the College for Congregational Development, along with three vestry members: Kira Dirghalli, Rebecca Livengood and Michael Mach. The College is a comprehensive program of leadership development for lay leaders and clergy. In order to complete the program, church leaders engage in two weeks of large and small group study, complete two large projects and read ten books from the required and optional reading list. All of this usually takes place in the course of 12 months.

I completed the program requirements at the end of this year's college program. Kira, Becky and Michael are just beginning; I hope you will be participating in some of their projects in the next several months. Today you have the opportunity to participate in a straw poll they have created. The straw poll question for today points to one of the great strengths of the program; the College for Congregational Development addresses the emotional, as well as practical needs of congregations and individuals.

A straw poll is different from a vote. When we vote the choice that receives the greatest number of votes wins. A vote usually gives us a simple answer: this person won the election or the resolution passed or failed. When we participate in a straw poll, we provide a practical answer to a question. We also become more connected to one another as we see how our responses fit into the pattern of responses in the congregation. There is an emotional component as we see ourselves as part of the group. There is an intellectual component as we examine the data that is collected.

In order to flourish and grow as whole persons, we engage with our emotions as well as with our thinking. In the baptism liturgy from the Book of Common Prayer we pray to grow into the *full stature of Christ*. As Christians, we practice being aware of our emotions without being ruled and driven by them. God creates us in God's image. We live in the fullness of God's image when we are self-aware, and cultivate our health in physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional terms.

God calls us, encourages us, to live in the fullness of life. God calls us to be whole persons. We need to see ourselves, and encourage our own development as whole persons.

As Christians, we embrace, and are curious about creation. The created world is God's creation. It is our responsibility to learn and care about the created world. Many of the great scientists pursued strong interests in religion and spirituality as well, including Hildegard of Bingen, Teilhard de Jardin, George Washington Carver and Charles Darwin.

From the world of science, we learn that there are three distinct parts of the human brain. The smallest, most ancient part is called the brain stem. Your brain stem regulates automatic process for your protection and survival. Your brain stem keeps your heart beating. Your brain stem impels you to stop immediately when your foot reaches the edge of a hole as you are walking through the woods. You can think of the brain stem as a sort of reptile or reactive brain. Your reptile brain reacts to immediate needs.

Mammals, like dogs and cats and people, have a more advanced part of the brain: it is the place of your emotions. Mammals experience emotions, like the feeling of belonging or affection. Most people have a strong tendency to feel one or two of the negative emotions, such as anger, shame, fear and anxiety. Even though we sometimes imagine that anger, shame, fear and anxiety are not significant factors in our lives, we are only deceiving ourselves. We have these strong negative feelings, whether we want to have them or not, just the way we have the automatic responses of the brain stem, whether we want to have them or not.

Humans have developed a much larger, third part of the brain, called a neocortex. Your neocortex is the part you are using if you are understanding the words of this sermon. You could call it the thinking part of your brain. Your neocortex is more than five times as large as the other two parts

put together. Your neocortex is more powerful than the most advanced computer. Your neocortex is what you use when you create something new or have a conversation or reflect on the meaning of life.

When we grow as whole persons, we use the thinking part of our brains to help us understand and manage the feeling parts and the reactive parts. For instance, we can use our thinking brains to help us understand the difference between fear and anxiety. Fear is focused. Fear has a precise concern. I am afraid of heights. Anxiety is not focused. When we are anxious, we cannot identify the precise concern. When we are anxious, we may try to identify specific concerns, but anxiety has the effect of reducing our ability to use the thinking part of the brain. This is also true of the other negative emotions: anger, shame, fear and sadness restrict our ability to make observations and to think clearly.

Science helps us understand these negative emotions are not bad for us; they are part of who we are. We cannot get rid of our negative emotions, and we really wouldn't want to, just as we wouldn't want to get rid of the automatic reactions that keep us safe when we are working around a hot stove, or driving a car. Fear and anxiety can be very helpful in alerting us to problems and threats in our lives. Fear and anger can help motivate us to make things better.

The problem comes for us when our reactions and emotions are determining our actions. The problem comes when we let the smaller, more primitive parts of our brains overrule the thinking part of the brain. That was what happened a few weeks ago in story of Bathsheba, David and Uriah. David's reactions and emotions guided his actions, which led to a series of tragedies, culminating in the story we just heard: the death of Absalom.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians is concerned about the right relationships between our emotions, our reactions and our actions. *Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.* Ephesians is exhorting us to be guided by good thinking, to discover and speak the truth to one another.

This passage acknowledges we will have many strong, negative feelings, but we are directed to work with them and manage them: *Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.* Ephesians acknowledges that our sins, that is, our mistakes, do not arise from our feelings. Our sins arise from our reactions to our feelings. We make mistakes when we react strongly, based on our feelings.

Ephesians tells us to focus on our actions: *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.* It is a problem for us to have evil thoughts, but the big problems come when we spread the bad feelings around through our words and actions.

The big problems come when we let our emotions and our reactions drive our words and actions. The big problems come when we don't think and reflect. The big problems come when we act as if the thinking part of our brains aren't even there.

God is calling us to be whole persons. God is calling us to make full use of our thinking and our emotions. God is calling us to be responsive to one another, not reactive. God is calling us to be connected with one another, not isolated or entangled. God is calling us to be whole.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.