

A letter to the congregation (Reign of Christ A; Ephesians 1:15-23)

Ephesians could be a template for a sermon in the style of a pastoral letter.

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In the first days and weeks of the pandemic, the job of church professionals was to go higher tech: to become more accessible to their congregations via platforms like YouTube and Facebook.

I soon learned that gathering in person had been an equalizer among churchgoers who all had means of transportation and the time and will to worship at a common time in a building together. But where I live there are people who do not want anything to do with the internet or social media and refuse to use it. There are people who simply cannot afford it and others who live in areas where broadband and cell towers do not reach.

So right after we all went higher tech, for the sake of the small but important handfuls of people without internet, we asked a different question: how to go *lower* tech. Radio, recorded messages, and snail mail made a resurgence in our communications strategies. Pastors revived the art of a good, old-fashioned pastoral letter to send to each household.

The first chapter of Ephesians is an introduction to one of those pastoral letters. What strikes me about this letter is how nonspecific it is to a place or situation. The letter addresses issues that are never timebound, like unity in Christ, reconciliation, the cosmic battle of evil and good, and living a mature Christian life in which we

subject ourselves to one another for the good of others. So I wonder if the entire letter might be a template for a sermon in the style of a pastoral letter to our congregations today.

Consider writing/preaching this letter in these days following a horribly divisive election in the United States. The purpose of the letter is to build up the church and to provoke people to be their better and best selves. Start by saying thank you, notice what is good, and get specific about your hopes for your community and congregation. Remind them of the immense love that holds us together and empowers us to live in the world now.

Do not focus on the pettier things, like wrangling over face masks and building use. Instead, give airtime to the weightier, timeless matters that are of eternal concern to God and to the people of Jesus: loving and caring for others more than ourselves, economic and racial justice, exhortations to unity in Christ, and being people of peace and reconciliation in a world hellbent on war and violence.

With an Ephesians-style pastoral letter we have a great opportunity to communicate a larger vision that is consistent with God, the one who saw us when we were far off and brought us near through the blood of Christ. I guarantee it will be a good time to say, "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32).

High tech, low tech, or no tech, we need to hear it.