

## Nurturing Spaces for Belonging: A Sermon on Ephesians 4

Back in December, the seeds of the worship series about “Practices that Build Hope in Times of Crisis” were first planted while I was reading portions of this book by Norman Wirzba called *Love’s Braided Dance: Hope in a Time of Crisis*. The title, “Love’s Braided Dance” takes a phrase from a poem of the American novelist and Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry. The poem reads as follows [read twice and slow]:

The way I go is  
marriage to this place,  
grace beyond chance  
love’s braided dance  
covering the world

-from “In Rain” collected poems (found in Norman Wirzba’s *Love’s Braided Dance*, p. 11)

While this poem is rich and layered with strands of meaning, the word that stands out for me especially is “braided.” This word, with Germanic and old English roots, refers to the act of weaving, knitting, or joining something together. One of the convictions that Norman Wirzba expresses in his book is that all creaturely reality is woven, knit, and joined together by love for the purposes of the mutual nurture and the flourishing of all: “Love’s braided dance / covering the world.” In this way of looking at things, we are most authentically human and most living into our identity as creatures of a loving creator, when we prioritize care for and devotion to each other and care for and devotion to the soil from which we are born and in which we grow up: “The way I go is / marriage to this place.” We are called to walk in the way of devotion to and a pledge towards the soil—literal or symbolic—that has been the precondition for our flourishing. It is not, after all, just by chance (or by sheer willpower) that we live and move and have our being, but by grace – it is by the gifts of God that we live and move and have our being: “Grace beyond chance / Love’s braided dance / covering the world.”

In Ephesians, Paul articulated similar sentiments as those found in this poem, I think, when he described the community of Jews and Gentiles that were brought together in Christ as “one body,” “joined and knit together” by love incarnate who bestowed *gifts* upon many. The people that Paul wrote his letter to came from different backgrounds, with different customs and traditions and in their social world, often those differences were the occasion for division and even worse, opposition and violence. The Spirit’s work through the life of Jesus came into that situation and “wove” together, “knit together” what had been opposed so that love could cover the world.<sup>1</sup> In this new community born of the Spirit’s rich gifts, everyone was to belong, and everyone was to contribute to the health of the whole – there was to be no body to speak of without the many parts that made it function – and no one part could be forgotten, trivialized, or instrumentalized, without the whole body suffering the consequences of ill health. The body of Christ in Ephesus, you might say, was the place where Paul testified that love’s braided dance had moved among them to create belonging and community where before there had been isolation and alienation.

The maintenance and ongoing viability of this new community created by the gifts of God were not a given, however. And so, Paul had to admonish the community to maintain its life together and keep its life together healthy and growing through expressions of mutual love and care: “Lead a life worthy of [your] calling” to be a humble, gentle, and patient community, says Paul (4:1-3). And, knowing that you will face challenges and differences along the way, “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit” that has made peace between you in Jesus (4:3). Expressions of spirit-empowered mutual love and care were to hold the community together, to

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<sup>1</sup> Here it is important to point out the tragic failure of this love to cover the world at many points throughout history, including, most profoundly, with the lack of love that Gentile Christians went on to show to Jews (a contingent of whom were the ones to have originally invited them to find a place within the covenant reality of God’s people) and many others.

testify to the hope of peace amid conflict, and to make the community a place of growth and belonging.

One of the chapters in Wirzba's book is called "Hope Grows in Places of Belonging." As we think about what practices we as a community of Jesus' disciples in Bloomingdale can take on in times of crisis to build hope here and in our world, we might especially think about this image of hope growing "in places of belonging." In the chapter, Wirzba emphasizes the importance of expressing mutual nurture in community. He says, "[e]xpressions of mutual nurture [are] the beating heart of places of belonging and lives of hope."<sup>2</sup> One of the persistent challenges we face in our world as well as in our church communities, however, is that we have struggled and continue to struggle with prioritizing mutual nurture. Wirzba notes that in our hypermodern age, we have tended to sacrifice nurturing practices of "attention" and "care" to the idols of "efficiency" and "productivity."<sup>3</sup> These idols of efficiency and productivity, however, undermine healthy growth in the body whose members are supposed to work together for the building up of all and, one could argue that these idols have led to many of the crises that we face in our world today. Acknowledging with honesty our devotion to the idols of efficiency and productivity, the church is called to the ongoing work of practicing "mutual nurture" so that we can grow into that community of faith described in Ephesians: the community of belonging and hope founded by Jesus, that place where "love's braided dance" can be seen at work covering the world.

While the challenges and crises we face ahead may be many, it is also important to emphasize that hope borne of practices of nurture, attention, and care, have never left the church. Thanks be to God for that! Closer to home, there are many examples within this community and

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<sup>2</sup> Wirzba, *Love's Braided Dance*, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Wirzba, *Love's Braided Dance*, 68-70.

the wider Mennonite community, that we can look to for inspiration as we consider practices of nurture that create places of belonging. One such practice is on display this morning – the concrete, tangible act of quilt making. Recently, Stephen Roy, MCC Ontario’s Church and Community Relations Associate reached out to me to express thanks to the many women (and I’m pretty sure some men, too, right Clare) at Bloomingdale who have over the years worked on and provided quilts for MCC. What a concrete testament of care and nurture, of love’s braided dance that literally “covers the world,” as those quilts cover the bodies of those around the world who use them in situations of conflict and war.

Stephen provided some statistics about the number and distribution of comforters from April 2023-March 2024 [slide]. MCC sent 53,601 comforters across the world, with a special focus on Ukraine. Comforters, along with school kits and other material resource items were also sent to Zambia, including to a Men’s correctional facility there. Commenting on the work of MCC after visiting Zambia, Linda Dickinson from MCC Alberta says this:

When Material Resource items reach recipients, it’s seen as a gift. The kits and comforters are meeting not only physical needs, but people’s heart needs as well. The items are reminders that they are seen, remembered, cared for, blessed, and loved by people here in North America. It’s a hands-on way to express God’s love and compassion for all, ‘In the Name of Christ.’<sup>4</sup>

Thanks be to God that Bloomingdale has a rich history of practices like quilt making and school kit packing that nurture others and create belonging beyond our walls! Of course, the quilts made by BMC have also nurtured and created belonging here as well. Indeed, as these special quilts on the front table illustrate, the church is at its best when it is a space that nurtures the belonging of its many members from the very beginning of their lives. And in just a little while we will have

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<sup>4</sup> <https://mcc.org/our-stories/comforters-corrections-and-compassion>

the privilege to practice that nurture as we have a parent-child dedication time for Nicole, Holden, and Charlotte.

There are of course many other ways that practices of nurture create spaces of belonging here at BMC. I think of the Sunday school program, of the Seniors Connect group, of the role our ushers play in welcoming and creating belonging through their service. I think of the BMC men's group who just the other week prepared and served a meal at Ray of Hope – a nurturing practice that creates belonging among the men serving together and belonging in the community through the concrete offering of a meal. What examples of practices of nurture come to mind for you when you think about the life and ministry of BMC? Also, how could we do better at practicing nurture? Let's share more about these examples during worship response. While we thank God for the presence of nurturing practices that create belonging here at BMC, there is plenty of room for hope to grow even more here at BMC as we seek to embody practices of mutual nurture.

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May the nurturing God who pours out gifts upon the church, continue to knit, to braid us together so that we might grow up in every way into Christ who is love incarnate, covering the world.

AMEN