

Imagine you are an ant, not just any ant, but a fire ant in South America. Suddenly it begins to rain, which is very common in that part of the world, and the flood waters begin to pour into your ant colony. What do you do?

You could try and save yourself and swim off to safety alone, but since you somehow know that you cannot survive as a single ant in a pool of water. There has to be a better solution than swimming off by yourself to drown.

How about letting other ants grab onto you, possibly pushing you under the water? How does that sound as a solution? ... Well, that's exactly the plan that will save you—along with everyone else.

Scientists have observed that a single fire ant dropped into water will not survive, but a teaspoon full of ants dropped into water will join together to form an interlocking life raft. Even those ants who find themselves at the bottom of the heap and under water will still survive since the ants somehow create pockets of air in the raft for those underneath to

breathe. In nature, thousands of fire ants can join together in flooded conditions to form these rafts that can sometimes float many months at a time until they drift to safety.¹ In the lab, even when the ant raft is pushed on from above, the ants bond together so tightly that they cannot be pushed under the water.²

I doubt whether the writer of the letter to the church in Ephesus ever saw fire ants surviving together in the water, but he had a similar idea in mind when he wrote his letter. Instead of writing about floating on the water bound together in a tangled raft, he had in mind the floods that often fill our lives and how the church can help us survive. Rather than an ant raft, he referred to the unity of the Spirit—what we could call a Spirit raft—held together in the bond of not ants, but peace. This bond is formed through gentleness and patience, and as he writes, “bearing one another in love.”

Then the author does an interesting thing in quoting from Psalm 68, which is a song that celebrates God's care for the poor and oppressed and

how God saves the people. In the particular verse that the writer to the Ephesians quotes from this song, the psalm speaks of God ascending a mountain and receiving gifts from the people. But in the letter to the Ephesians, the writer modifies the verse to say that God *gave* gifts to the people rather than *receiving* them.

Why this change? It could be that the author of the letter got mixed up and misquoted the psalm. Has that ever happened to you? You begin by saying, “It says in the Bible...” but then your mind goes blank and you can’t remember the exact phrase. Maybe that happened with this writer as he tried to quote from the book of the Psalms.

Or maybe the author was trying to make a point by slightly changing the words. Whereas the psalm celebrated what people gave God, this letter to the church in Ephesus wanted to emphasize the gifts God had given them: God inspired some to be apostles and evangelists—to take the good news of Jesus out into the world. Some had the gift of being a prophet—

those who remind us how to treat one another fairly. Some had the gift of being pastors and teachers to help build up the church.

Together all these gifts help form—not an ant raft—but a Spirit raft of oneness. This unity prevents us, as the writer expresses, from being “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind.”

How many times have you felt tossed to and fro, as though you may be blown over with the next wind that upsets your day? Maybe you’ve found yourself wishing you had the roots of a giant redwood tree to hold you in place, but even those tall trees need help from one another.

Coastal redwoods are the tallest living species on Earth. They can exceed 300 feet in height, and may be 18-20 feet in diameter, nearly 12 feet above the ground. ... The tallest coast redwood anywhere at 367.8 feet...in Redwood National Park and is 44 feet around at its base.

The roots of a coast redwood are very shallow, growing only four to six feet deep, but spread out

from the tree as far as 125 feet. This isn't much support for a tall, heavy tree—floodwaters can erode top layers of soil, exposing the roots and weakening a tree's support system. Heavy rains and strong winds can bring even the biggest giant crashing to the ground.

But the roots of individual redwoods frequently grow intertwined with those of their neighbors. By "holding hands" underground, the roots form a network that allows the trees to withstand even great storms.³

If the writer of the letter to the Ephesians had been able to visit the redwood forest, he might have used the imagery of these trees to talk about the church—how we have to join together to keep from blowing over in the storms of life. From the giant redwood trees to the tiny fire ants, we need one another to survive the storms of life—what the letter writer called the body of Christ, and today we call the church.

One of the ways we work together as the church is through our Global Mission Partners, one of whom will be coming to speak with us a week from Wednesday. Lizzy Beach describes her ministry in this way:

They say 'home is where the heart is', and my heart is most definitely here in Swaziland! I have grown in my understanding and love for the diversity in the human family...It is common for a home to house 15 people, it is also common that only one person is employed, two if they are a lucky family. If there is a man in the family, he will often go to stay where the work is, and come home once a month to see his family and bring home his paycheck. [The family may include] a grandmother, a mother/wife possibly, maybe a father/husband, some adult children..., often a baby or two of the adult children, and some younger school age children—then there are the adopted children (of aunts, uncles or sisters who have died from AIDS), who are now incorporated into the family. They are not treated differently;

they are simply called daughter or son. No one gets a free ride and laziness is not an option when food must be found to feed so many. Everyone is expected to contribute to the household through work, to bring home some income, or by doing household chores.

Kukhany'okusha Zion Church (KZC), our Global Ministries mission partner in Swaziland, is responding at this point of deepest need—knowing that prayer isn't enough to cure HIV, bring parents back from the grave, or make food magically appear on the table. [The people] have a long, and strong tradition of helping the needy, even though most of them are needy themselves. These people of faith do not waiver. They pray and pray and pray—and sing—for hours! And they work very hard to help others. They know—while a new church building would be nice—church is in the heart of the people.⁴

As part of being the church—what we could call our ant raft of faith—we work together in all parts of

the world, such as in Swaziland. But being on an ant raft also means we have something to learn from them. They can remind us about the vitality of faith, that even though we get caught up with all the details of running a church, they help us remember that the church is in the heart of the people. Lizzy reminds us that we are all in the ant raft of the church together when she wrote: “Pray that our faith may be as vital, lively and giving as the church of Swaziland, and that they will sense the hope and care we send to them through our prayers.”

Think of yourself as part of an ant raft of faith, or part of a network of redwood tree roots that tie us together. We all make up the church, interconnected to God and one another.

¹ Catherine Meyers, Fire Ants Surf Floods on Rafts of Their Own Bodies, April 25, 2011, <http://news.sciencemag.org/sciencenow/2011/04/fire-ants-surf-floods-on-rafts.html>

² See video at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/26/fire-ant-raft-video_n_853872.html

³ Email sent to *Homiletics* from Mark Hughes.

⁴ <http://globalministries.org/bulletin/en/may-2012-what-is-church.html>