

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Ephesians 4:1-16 (NRSV)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, [2] with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [3] making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. [4] There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, [5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

[7] But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. [8] Therefore it is said,

"When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people."

[9] (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? [10] He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) [11] The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, [13] until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. [14] We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. [15] But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16] from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

BEAR WITH ME

“Bear with me on this one.” Has anyone ever said that to you? What were they asking you to do? There are several possibilities.

They may have been asking you to put up with their faults and shortcomings a little bit longer. They could have been asking you to withhold judgment until all the facts were in. Or perhaps they were asking you to “keep your cool” and be patient.

“Bear with me this morning as I develop this theme.”

In our lesson for today, the apostle Paul asks the Ephesians to do the same thing with each other. He wrote that they should bear “with one another in love.”

Indeed, according to our lesson for today, bearing with one another in love is the essence of what we are called to do as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is at the heart of the gospel. It is our vocation.

When we bear with our brothers and sisters, we live a life worthy of our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. To put it another way, God in Christ has been gracious toward us. Therefore, we should be gracious toward others.

FOR ME OR AGAINST ME

It’s just that simple, and it’s just that difficult. Quite often Christians can be polarizing in their approach to problems. They frame issues in such a way that you’re either for them or against them, but they’re sure not going to let you sit on the fence.

Quite often I’m accosted by people who are not sure about me. And so they will interrogate me carefully about my beliefs. So you’re a Presbyterian minister? I’ve never heard of those Presbyterians before. What do you think about this issue pastor?

And I know that they are ready to pounce if my answer doesn’t fit their definition of orthodox.

This past week I met a man for the first time. Immediately he began to tell me all that was wrong with his denomination and especially some of the preachers in his denomination. It soon became obvious that he wasn’t going to tolerate anyone who disagreed with him in the least. He was on a mission to eliminate heresy from his church and society. He was committed to the truth as he saw it.

Now there's something to be said for a man like that. What's that old saying, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything?" But, quite often our desire for righteousness soon morphs into self-righteousness, and before we know it there is no sense of grace in our faith or in our relationships.

TELLING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

And grace is what the Christian life is all about. We are called to tell the truth, but we must always (as Paul put it) tell the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:15)

What does that mean to tell the truth in love? It means that we convey God's message not only in what we say but also in how we say it.

It means to communicate in the style of Christ who told the truth not to destroy his enemies but to redeem them. Jesus wanted to embrace people and call them to a way of life that would set them free from their self-centered ways.

We are called to proclaim the same kind of freedom in word and deed. And as Christ sacrificed his life on the cross, so we are called to sacrifice our life for the gospel.

A PRISONER OF THE GOSPEL

Paradoxically, in order to be free, we must first be a "prisoner," a prisoner of a way of life that is (as our Scripture puts it) "worthy of the gospel."

Did you notice how Paul described himself in the first verse of our lesson for today? He described himself as a "prisoner in the Lord." Now that may mean that he was literally in prison when he wrote this letter to the Ephesians. Paul often found himself in trouble with the authorities on account of the gospel.

But, those captivities were just a consequence of a greater captivity. Paul was first and foremost a captive of Christ. Paul had limitations placed on his life because he was a disciple of Jesus.

WARRIORS FOR THE FAITH

Do you remember the story? Paul was persecuting those who followed Christ. He was taking the disciples of Christ captive. It was Paul who held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen; the first Christian martyr.

Why did Paul persecute the church so zealously? He persecuted them for religious reasons. The people who followed the way of Christ were not orthodox. They did not follow the law as Paul understood it, and thus in Paul's mind they were enemies of God. And so Paul was quite willing to be a warrior for the faith.

There are so many today that are intolerant of others. Persecution in the name of God is greater today than ever before. There was a television show on the National Geographic Channel about how Muslims and Christians were clashing violently in Africa. It is sad to see such terrible things done in the name of religion.

And yet, there are those even in that difficult situation who know that true faith can never be belligerent in its approach to others. Tolerance, bearing with another in the spirit of love is at the heart of the Christian faith.

In the midst of all that violence in Africa, there were some signs of hope.

A church had been burned in the rioting that took place between the Christians and Muslims. A charred painting of a cross remained on the wall in front of the building.

The Christians continued to worship even though their building was nothing but a shell, and above that charred cross words had been freshly painted, "Father forgive them."

A minister who had his hand chopped off by a rioting Muslim crowd joined with a Muslim Imam who had at one time been anti-Christian in an effort to promote peace and understanding.

A Muslim man told of how his Christian neighbors took him in and saved him from a mob of people intent of taking his life.

Even in a place of terrible persecution there were signs of hope. God can still change the hearts of people, and that makes all the difference.

A DAMASCUS ROAD EXPERIENCE

That's what happened to Paul. One day his life took a decisive turn in a different direction on the road to Damascus. Paul came face to face with the glory of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The risen Christ asked Paul why he was persecuting him, and the future apostle came face to face with a horrible fact. He thought that he was doing God's will, but in fact he was persecuting God's people.

I wonder. Could there be a time when we think that we are doing God's will and yet we are in fact persecuting God's people? Now you might say, "I don't persecute anyone." But, don't answer so quickly. Think about it.

Are there groups of people that you dislike? Are you unwilling to take the ideas of some seriously because you sincerely think that they are wrong?

All of us are not as tolerant as we should be. Could our ungracious ways signal that we have a ways to go when it comes to following the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ? Could our intolerance indicate that we need a Damascus road experience so that we too might be overcome by the truth and grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ?

PUP

At this past General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church there was a report from a committee that was charged to promote the peace, unity and purity of the church. They called it the PUP report. But, this PUP has proved to be (for some people) a wolf in sheep's clothing.

In essence the report says what Paul says in our lesson for today. We need to be more tolerant with our brothers and sisters who disagree with us. We need

to allow room for disagreement trusting that one day what is unclear to us will become clear. We need to bear with one another in love.

That sounds simple enough, but there are those who have even threatened to leave the church because this report seems to leave too many “loopholes” for the unorthodox.

I consider myself to be an orthodox theologian, but my orthodoxy requires me to be tolerant. My orthodoxy requires me to continue to be in relationship with those with whom I might disagree. Loving ones’ adversaries is not an optional extra when it comes to the Christian faith. It is at the heart of the Christian faith.

WE MIGHT BE WRONG

And I think we always need to consider what Paul didn’t consider until he was blinded on the Damascus road. We might be sincere, but we might be sincerely wrong! We might be the ones who need to hear a hard truth.

Christ revealed the truth to Paul on the road to Damascus long ago. He didn’t blind him with the truth in order to destroy him. He revealed the truth to him so that he could redeem him.

Paul had been captured by the love of Christ. Paul had been blinded so that he might see. And from that day forward his life was not his own. The risen Christ took him prisoner on that day, and for the first time in his life Paul became truly free.

In being captured by Christ Paul was freed from his allegiance to lesser gods. He no longer served the self-righteous god of legalism. Instead, he became the great prophet and proponent of the gospel of grace.

And that gospel of grace made a difference in how he lived.

A LIFE WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

And if we understand grace, if we have been captured by Christ, our lives should be changed as well. We too should (as our Scripture for today puts it) live a life worthy of our calling. Exactly what does that mean?

Paul lists three attributes of a person who has been captured by Christ and called to live in a new way. Paul says that bearing with one another in love involves humility, gentleness and patience.

When we think of humility we sometimes think of someone who is weak, someone who does not have the gumption to stand up for their rights. But, when we think of humility as defined by Jesus, it is not a weak word but a strong word. It's not about a lack of courage to stand up for one's rights. It is about the courage to give up what is rightfully ours as a way of doing God's will.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians (2:5-8)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
[6] who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
[7] but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
[8] he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

To put it another way, the incarnation and the cross are not just theoretical statements about how God brought us salvation in Jesus. They are examples for us to follow. Paul said that we should have the "same mind" that was "in Christ Jesus." We need to crucify the old way of life and the old way of thinking. Sometimes we need to give up what we hold most dear so that we can embrace the new thing that God gives us.

If Christ died for us that we might be saved, is it too much to ask us to "bear with one another in love?" If Christ left the glory of heaven to become a

human being and share the love of God with humanity, is it too much to ask that we be gentle with weaker brothers and sisters?

That word translated “gentle” in our lesson for today means “non-judging and accepting.” As Jesus became a part of our world, so we are called to become a part of the world of others. We are called to walk a mile in the other person’s shoes so that we might understand things from their perspective.

Let me give you an image of what it means to be gentle. Imagine a young toddler who is on the floor playing. And now imagine an adult getting down on their level and sharing their toys and learning to play their games.

This is a picture of what it means to be gentle, and it is that attitude that we should have toward others.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, bearing with others means having patience. The word can also be defined as “longsuffering.”

If you think about it, patience is another way to talk about forgiveness. God has been patient and forgiving toward us, so we should be patient and forgiving toward others.

MAINTAINING UNITY

Someone in our church paid us a very big compliment. She said that she really loves coming to our church because we are so accepting.

She said that even though we have different backgrounds and different ideas on social and moral issues, we accept each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. And she feels accepted when she comes to worship here.

I pray that we can continue to live up to her perception. Unity does not happen automatically in the church. Paul told the church at Ephesus that they needed to make every effort to maintain the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3)

Peace and unity require maintenance. Just as we need to take our car in for routine maintenance, so we need to routinely remind ourselves that unity in

Christ is not an option. It is a necessity if we are to be an authentic expression of the Christian faith.

In the gospel of John Jesus prays for his disciples before he leaves them. And the one thing that he wanted for them more than anything else was that they might be one. Jesus prayed,

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, [21] that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

John 17:20-21 (NRSV)

If the world is to believe the message, they must see the message in us. We cannot talk about humility and gentleness and patience unless it is a part of who we are as a people. Unless we bear with one another in love, unless we live a life worthy of the gospel, speaking the gospel will be to no avail.

We are different. We have different ideas about morality, politics and you name it. But, despite our differences we have something in common that helps us maintain the unity of the spirit.

Paul wrote in our lesson for today that there is "one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all." And then Paul lists all the leaders and officers of the church and says that they have one main function, "building up the body of Christ, helping everyone grow up into unity."

That's true church growth, becoming united in the one hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. And in order to do that all of us have to do a lot less talking and a lot more praying and listening. We have to learn to value the contributions and opinions of each person, especially when their contribution or opinion might be different from ours.

We are the body of Christ and each one of us is a part of that Body. Each one of us is important, but none of us are self-sufficient.

BRING YOUR LIGHT

There is a little chapel in Yorkshire, England where at the end of each pew there is a tall candlestick. Each family, when it comes to church for vespers, brings its own candle, lights it and sits under its mellow glow during the evening service.

If a family is absent from church, its pew goes unlighted, and to that extent the light of the entire church is diminished. As the candles shed their soft light across the church, the darkness is pushed back. Each family feels that his light is necessary, and so the members of the little church vie with one another to be faithful in attendance, remembering always to bring their candles.

There is a long shadow across our world today which is not going to be dispelled unless Christians bring their lights from far and near and set them to shining together. Only then will groping people and nations be able to find their way back to God and peace.

GROWN UP CHRISTIANS

Paul tells us in our lesson for today that there comes a time when we have to grow up as Christians. We have to act our spiritual age and no longer be (as Paul put it in our lesson for today) blown this way and that by every new spiritual fad. (Ephesians 4:14) Instead, we are called to speak the truth and live the truth. We are called to truly embody the mind and ministry of Christ. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

And that involves practicing forgiveness and tolerance. It involves working for unity instead of planning for division.

The thing that really got people's attention in the early church was the love that they had for one another. We used to sing a song at camp, "They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. They'll know we are Christians by our love."

Will they? Will others see Jesus in us? Today's lesson teaches us that love begins with tolerance.

Bear with me on this. And I'll bear with you.
You never can tell what God can do when we bear with one another in love!

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN