

"Unity Does Not Equal Uniformity"

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Ephesians 4:1-16

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.

GRACE THAT IS GREATER THAN SIN

In the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul has been talking about the grace of God.

God's grace was for Jews,
and God's grace was for Gentiles.
In other words, God's grace was for the world, the whole world.

No one was beyond the reach of God's forgiveness.

Paul went on to say that without God's grace,
God's forgiveness,
we are prisoners of our past and our passions.

We are filled with regret about the wrongs we have done, the opportunities we have missed, and the people we have disappointed.

And the decisions we make are often determined by this sense of failure and alienation.

It's a vicious cycle that can continue throughout our life.

This is what it means to be dead in our sins. (Ephesians 2:1)

Paul reminds the Ephesians of how this was true for them.

They were captive to the ways of a dog eat dog world.
They were at the mercy of their own desires.

They were alienated from God's people and the truth.
They were, quite frankly, on the road to hell.
There was a great dividing wall between the Ephesians and the Lord. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

But, the grace of God changed all that.

Through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross,
those who had been far away from God now had come near to Him.
Those who were without hope now had peace.

In Jesus Christ, they were forgiven.

They were no longer prisoners of their past and their passions.
They were now a part of God's family.
Jews and Gentiles alike could come together under the umbrella of God's grace.

I believe those same promises apply to us.
We too are saved by grace through faith.
We too have become a part of God's family.

A LIFE WORTHY OF OUR CALLING

So what difference does it make?
How does grace change the way we live our lives?

That's what today's lesson is all about.
We learn that grace is free, but grace is not cheap.

We sometimes talk about salvation as freedom,
and it is.

We are freed from sin.
We are no longer prisoners to our past
and our passions.

But, as the saying goes,

"Freedom isn't free.

Freedom comes with responsibilities.”
That’s true when it comes to our country,
and that’s true when it comes to the grace of God.

Paradoxically, in order to be truly free we must first become a prisoner.

In our lesson, Paul said that he was a prisoner “in the Lord”.

That may mean that Paul was literally in prison when he wrote this letter to the Ephesians.

Paul often got into trouble with the authorities on account of the gospel. He wrote many of his letters from prison.

But, Paul was first and foremost a captive of Christ.
Grace had a claim on Paul.

And that’s true for us as well.
We are saved by grace through faith.
(Ephesians 2:8-9)

And that grace has a claim on us.

Grace will not allow us to live any old way.
Grace enables us to live what this passage calls:
“a life worthy of our calling”.

Today’s lesson paints a picture of this grace filled life. When we understand the depths of God’s grace, we adopt certain Christian virtues.

HUMILITY AND GENTLENESS

The first virtue according to Paul is virtue of humility and gentleness.

Now in the ancient world humility was not a virtue.
If a person was humble, it meant that they had no power or influence.

They were a nobody.

Paul had already stated that the Ephesians, by the grace of God, could now claim to be part of God’s family.

They were somebody because God had declared them to be somebody. They were God's children.

But, this grace also called them to voluntarily lower themselves. Instead of a life marked by pride and power, these royal children are charged to live in a different way.

A life worthy of the calling would be a life marked by humility and gentleness.

I think the best interpretation of what it means to be humble comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

He wrote that Jesus humbled himself in the incarnation.

He "did not regard equality with God something to be exploited but emptied himself" even to the point of dying on a cross.

So, this divine act of grace becomes a model for Christian living.

Just as Jesus lowered himself to lift humanity up, we should practice humility and gentleness in our relationships with others.

It's a primary way that we follow the lead of Christ.

Earlier in the letter to the Ephesians we learn that salvation is by grace through faith and not by works so that *no one can boast*. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In other words, a gracious life leaves no room for selfish ambition.

If our goal is to become more like Christ, we do it by restraining ourselves. We are gentle. We are more "laid back" in our relationships with others.

SAY IT SOFTLY

Contrast this gracious world view with what we see today.

Our world seems driven by ambition and harsh language. It's amplified by what people say on social media where there seems to be no restraint or boundaries.

And yet, in this world filled with over the top hate speech and a "take no prisoners attitude" ...
we are called to live a life marked by humility and gentleness.

Contrary to what the world believes,
humility and gentleness are not the traits of someone with a poor self image.

These are the actions of someone who has experienced and lives by the grace of God.

God in Christ has been gracious to us,
...so, out of gratitude, we can be gracious toward others.

That's a life worthy of our calling.

Now don't misunderstand.
Gentleness does not mean that we neglect speaking the truth.

Later in this passage we are encouraged to speak the truth so that others might not be tossed "to and fro...by every wind of doctrine".

It's important to confront beliefs that are wrong because those beliefs can lead to way of life that is self-destructive.

But, when we speak that hard truth, we "speak the truth in love". (15)
The famous preacher and social activist, William Sloan Coffin told of a freshman in college who once asked if he could give him some advice.

Coffin said, "Go ahead."

And the freshman said,
"Well, sir, when you say something that is both true and painful,

Say it softly."

BEARING WITH ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE

Paul tells the Ephesians that living a life worthy of our calling means “bearing with one another in love.”

In other words we are to practice restraint out of concern for the other person. We say it softly.

Love grows when we bear with one another.
Love grows when we stay with one another in good times and bad.

We tend to think of love in a romantic way
We believe that our true “soul mate” is out there somewhere.

Maybe.

But, on National Public Radio this past week I heard a different perspective.

In some cultures marriages are arranged.
The “aunties” get together and play the role of matchmakers.

Now, some of us might think that is terrible
We should have the freedom to choose our mate.
Right?

But, would it surprise you to learn that those arranged marriages, on the whole, last longer?

One lady who had been in an arranged marriage for 40 years was asked:

“On a scale from one to ten, how much did you love your husband on your wedding day?”

And she replied, “Zero. I didn’t know my husband on my wedding day!”

“And on a scale from one to ten how much do you love your husband now?”

And she replied, “Eleven. I couldn’t love him more.
Marriage is for the long haul and over time we have learned to love each other.”

In other words, this couple had learned to overcome obstacles during the tough times and rejoice together during the good times.

Love was not a feeling.
Love was a long term commitment that produced a feeling.

Now, by and large, we're not going to have arranged marriages in this country.

We can't change our culture.
Nor, would we want to.
It doesn't fit with who we are.

But, I do think these successful arranged marriages teach us something about the nature of love. Love grows when we accept each other warts and all, when go through struggles together, and when we rejoice together.

Love grows over the long haul.
Love grows when we bear with one another.

This is true not only when it comes to marriage.
It is also true in other areas of life as well.

It's true with our family.
It's true with our friendships.

And it's true of the church, body of Christ.
When we bear with one another out of love,
we embody the heart of the Christian faith.

We preach grace with our actions as well as with our words.

Many times in my life I have wanted to tell someone exactly what I thought in no uncertain terms. I have a deep groove in my tongue as a result of some of these encounters!

But, over the years I have found that bearing with people, holding my tongue and hanging in there with people has, by and large, been the most effective strategy.

It's not that I withhold what I think.
Eventually we all say what we really believe.

It's just that by bearing with people for a while tempers my speech and makes difficult conversations less difficult.

In fact, sometimes those difficult circumstances become a time of redemption instead of a time of destruction.

I haven't been perfect with this, not by a long shot.
But, over time I have come to see the wisdom of this way of life.

ONE GOD AND FATHER OF US ALL

Paul gives us a reason to bear with one another in love. We are all part of the same faith family.

He wrote that we should make every
"effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Why? Because "There is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

In other words, the grace of God brings us together.
And that grace is greater than those things that would divide us.

Some of us know what it means to stick with people because they are family.

Family members don't always do the right thing,
but they are still family.
And that means a lot.

Well, the same holds true in the Christian faith.

In that NPR program on arranged marriages, they brought up another factor that made those marriages so successful.

The families supported and encouraged the young couple in their life together. They worked to help them be successful in their marriage.

In the same way we have a responsibility to help each other be successful in our Christian discipleship.

We have a responsibility to maintain the unity of the church in the bond of peace.

We are family.

HELP US ACCEPT EACH OTHER

We actually have a hymn that spells all this out rather nicely.

And surprise, surprise, we're going to sing it today! "Help Us Accept Each Other".

I would invite you to pay particular attention to all the words of that hymn. But, there's one line that means a lot to me.

It goes:

"Teach us to care for people,
for all, not just for some,
to love them as we find them
or as they may become."

Officers of the Presbyterian Church take an oath to further the peace, unity and purity of the church.

But, suppose we strongly disagree on issues that we think are important? How can we maintain the peace and unity of the church when there are important issues of purity involved?

In this era of divisive political and religious speech, we can still love those that we think are dead wrong on important issues.

We can love them not as we find them but as they may become.

We don't avoid hard discussions.

We don't allow injustice to prevail.

But, we also refuse to close down our relationships with those on the other side.

After all, they are family.

And so we bear with them in love.

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

There is no litmus test for Christian love.
The love of God as revealed in Jesus is unconditional.
The love of God comes with no strings attached.

When Jesus forgave his tormentors on the cross, when he said Father, forgive them”.

He forgave them because they “didn’t know what they were doing”.

That’s true of all of us from time to time.
Often we don’t know what we are doing.

We don’t realize that some of our deeply held beliefs
may actually be in conflict with the heart of the Christian faith.

It’s tricky.

Jesus said that we can see the speck in other person’s eye.
It always seems plain to us when that other person doesn’t know what he
or she is doing.

But, we can’t see the log in our own eye.
When we don’t know what we’re doing, we’re blind. (Matthew 7:3)

But, if Jesus could even care for those who persecuted him, perhaps we
could at least bear with each other in love in times of controversy.

Sometimes we need to imagine people as they may become instead of
how they are today.

And by the same token, sometimes we need to imagine what we might be-
come in Christ instead of who we are today.

MATURITY

In this passage Paul talks about the fact that everyone is given a spiritual gift by the risen Christ. (vv. 7-11) But, all of those gifts are to be used for the same purpose,

“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 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.”
(12-13)

The key word is maturity.

The mature person develops stability and a sense of perspective through a lifetime of experience.

Through a lifetime of experience and service, Christians mature. Christians grow by learning to understand and accept people who have different gifts and different perspectives.

Unity in Christ does not mean a dull uniformity.

On the contrary, unity comes from ever increasing knowledge of what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

That perspective changes and grows over time.

We cannot be satisfied with an immature belief system. What we believed as a child or in high school or in college or even three years ago is not adequate for the challenges that we face today.

The gospel doesn't change.

But, our understanding of the gospel deepens and changes, if we have a faith that is healthy and growing.

THE CHURCH

According to Paul the mechanism for that growth is the community of faith, the church.

When we confront challenges together,
when we pool our resources and our gifts,
when we struggle to accept and understand each other,

We become stronger.
We are drawn together.

We mature.
We become more Christ like.

As the woman said of her successful arranged marriage,
“Leaning to love is a long journey. It’s a life long process.”

The same is true of the Christian faith.
Learning to love as Christ loved is a long journey.
It’s a life long process.

Many of us have been on this journey a long time.
Like those arranged marriages,
we’ve been thrown together with people that we wouldn’t have met other-
wise.

Sometimes we weren’t so sure about this Christian journey.
At times we thought that maybe it would have been better to have just
stayed at home with people who were just like us.

But, over time we have changed.
We’ve matured.

We’ve discovered that the call of Christ is a call to adventure, a call to know
and accept and love people in ways that we could not have imagined be-
fore.

Dividing walls are broken down,
and people come together in a Divine mosaic inspired by grace.

We call it the body of Christ.
We call it the church.

Won’t you join us on this journey toward the love of Christ?

We need you.
And you need us.
Amen.