



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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One

Ephesians 4:1-10

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It's easy to forget the basics. A group of people gets together around a common cause or for a common purpose and after you've been together for a while it's easy to forget what that purpose was. When we lived in Bellingham I was a member the local stamp club. The club had been started years before by a group of people who were devoted the hobby of stamp collecting. A few years later I joined the Sons of the American Revolution. It's a group made up of people descended from those who fought for American independence and it's devoted to the ideals of the American Revolution and to promoting them in surrounding community. But the same thing happened to both groups. Over the years each dwindled down to a small group of mostly elderly people. The meetings of the stamp club had little to do with stamp collecting and the meetings of the Sons of the American Revolution had less and less to do with the ideals of the American Revolution. The meetings were taken up with the business of running the organisation and over time that business was taken up with the business of politics and disagreements within the group. And the members wondered why they couldn't attract newer and younger people. New people would come, but most would never come back. But that was because the new people were interested in stamps or they were interested in American history, but the group had become focused on other things. Both groups had lost sight of their reason for being. American history and genealogy had brought together a bunch of men in the Sons of the American Revolution, but in the few years I was a member our local group blew apart because of angry confrontations over things that had nothing to do with American history, ideals, or genealogy.

And, Brothers and Sisters, as I think we're all probably well aware, the same sort of thing can happen easily in the Church. We're brought together by Jesus to live

out and to proclaim the Good News, but we lose focus. The Church can easily become a social club for people of the same class or race or ideology to sit around and bicker about which Bible translation to read or what colour the new carpet should be or how to organise next year's budget. Or maybe it's not trivialities that side-track us. Sometimes even important things can cause us to forget who we are. Years ago I was in an online discussion forum where, one night, a number of us had a horrible, ugly, no-holds-barred Internet brawl over the nature of—get this—the love of God. There we were arguing over the love of God while being so unloving that some people were throwing down their keyboards in anger, never to return. Talk about forgetting first principles!

Our Epistle this morning is taken from Ephesians 4. This is where St. Paul launches into the second half of his letter. And if we read between the lines we can get a sense of the problems he was addressing in the Ephesian church. The big problem was a lack of unity. And as we saw in our lessons from Galatians this past month, in the early Church one of the chief causes for disunity was the divide between Jews and Gentiles. The first Christians were all Jews and part of being Jewish meant keeping apart from the Gentiles—the non-Jews. That was the centre, the core, the first principle of what it meant to be a Jew—it was to be set apart—and to *stay* apart! Circumcision, diet, Sabbath, these were the things that set Jews apart and drew a boundary: Jews on the inside and Gentiles on the outside. And then the Good News went out to the Gentiles and they started coming to the Church. And then Paul was called to actually go out as a missionary to the Gentiles and to bring them in. And the Jewish Christians didn't know what to do. Did Gentiles need to become Jewish converts before they could truly follow Jesus? Did they need to be circumcised and observe the Sabbath and Jewish dietary laws? This all became a *huge* source of division and disunity in the churches.

And so in Ephesians Paul takes these people back to first principles. He takes them back to basics and to what it means to be a Christian. In Chapter 1 he reminds them that Jesus is their hope. He's the Messiah and he tells them, "When you heard the Good News, when you believed in Jesus, he sealed you—all of you—with

the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is Jesus' guarantee to you of the inheritance he has promised." And Paul also stresses what that inheritance is: It's their redemption as God's own people—again, all of them, not just the Jews, but the Gentile believers too. When they read that they must have remembered the stories of Pentecost—maybe some of them had even been there—and remembered how the Spirit brought together people from every corner of the world and overcame their different languages to forge them into *one* church.

At the end of Chapter one, just a few verses later, Paul stresses the kingship of Jesus. Jesus died and God raised him from the dead and gave him a throne—a throne and a dominion and a name above every earthly power. Jesus is the world's true King and the Church is his body, called to declare his death and resurrection and called to proclaim the Good News that he is Lord until every enemy has been put under his feet. We brought death into the world when we sinned and rebelled against God, but in Jesus he has unleashed life. Jesus has begun the work of recreation and setting Creation to rights and part of that setting to rights is manifested visibly in the unity of the Church—in the unity that was so dramatically seen at Pentecost and in the unity that *should have been so* dramatically seen in churches like the one at Ephesus, as Jews and Gentiles came together as one people, as the true Israel of God. In 2:14 Paul reminds them that Jesus is their—and our—peace. In his flesh he's made those who were near—that's the Jews—and those who were far—that's the Gentiles—one in himself. Through his cross he's put to death the hostility that once kept the two apart. Through Jesus we all have access to the Father in the one Spirit. We're one household, he writes—and the house is God's. We are his temple, each one of us brought from our particular background, each of us with our unique stories to tell, but brought together by the Spirit, made holy, and made a dwelling place for God. Brothers and Sisters, that what the Church is to be.

And now in our Epistle today from Chapter 4 Paul sums things up for the Christians in Ephesus with three basic points. First and foremost, they've been called to follow the King; second, that they've been given and equipped with God's amazing grace so that each has a part to play, a role to fill in the serving the

King as the Church; and finally, he stresses the unity they have in Jesus. It's a wonderful reminder that unity isn't something we create; it's something Christians naturally have in Jesus. Our duty is to guard that God-given unity. Numbers two and three, the grace and the unity, tend to take care of themselves when we remember number one—when we remember that we've been called to follow the King.

Look at Ephesians 4:1-3.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord [Paul is writing to them from prison], **urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

This is something that Paul stresses over and over in his epistles. We've been called to follow Jesus and that means walking—living with each other and bearing with each other—humbly, gently, and patiently in love. Friends, that's how God has dealt with us. He created all things good. He provided everything human beings need to live. And we made a mess of it. We're the ones who doubted his goodness. We're the ones who disobeyed his commands. We're the ones who corrupted his Creation. And yet the almighty Creator of the universe who is perfectly good and perfectly holy has been *patient* with us. We stand condemned to death before him, but he came as one of us, humbling himself, taking up our flesh and dying the death that we deserve so that we might be forgiven and restored to his fellowship. As Jesus said, he came to those condemned, not to heap more condemnation on us, but to redeem us.

If that is how the Lord has dealt with us, shouldn't we deal humbly, patiently, and lovingly with each other? It's a struggle. It's not easy. Christians can gossip just as well as non-Christians. We rub each other the wrong way. We do things that offend. We make mistakes. And, yes, we're called to correct each other, but we don't correct each other by gossiping to others. We don't correct each other by ignoring them or putting them out of our lives. We correct in love and with the hope of restoration—just as God has corrected us. Friends, when something happens

between you and someone else in the Church, is your first thought to take offense, to get upset, to assert your rights—or is it to maintain the unity Jesus has given us? Is it to keep the bonds of peace the Spirit has forged? We struggle to be patient, humble, and loving because we haven't kept Jesus before us, because we've forgotten that this is how he's dealt with us, because we have a tendency to take grace for granted.

Brothers and Sisters, remember our calling. Look at verses 4-6:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

One, one, one, one, one. One body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and he's Father of all—and this is our one call. The call of the Church at one point reached each of us. At some point each of us, through a parent, a friend, someone, heard the proclamation that Jesus died and rose again, that he is Lord and the world's true King. At some point each of us heard that. It was a call to repentance, a call to turn away from everything that is not Jesus and to find our hope, our security, our calling, our *life* in him. At some point each of us believed. We affirmed that Jesus is Lord—not Caesar, not money, not sex, not power, not recognition. Jesus is Lord and we gave him our eternal allegiance. At some point the call reached us and because we have believed we've now been called to carry that Good News to the world.

Remember what the word “gospel” meant in the Old Testament. It was the proclamation of good news carried by messengers. It was the good news that the army had won a great victory against the enemy. It was the good news that a people in exile could return to their homes. And remember what the word “gospel” meant in the Greco-Roman world. It was the news spread by imperial heralds that a new king had taken the throne to rule the empire. And “gospel” for the first Christians rolled all of that together. Good News, they proclaimed! Jesus has won the victory over sin and death! Good News! Jesus is Lord! Jesus is the world's true King! Brothers and

Sisters, the Gospel is not good advice. What we proclaim isn't a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. We're not going out to tell people that Jesus is another viable option on a religious smorgasbord. It's Good News. We are heralds of the news that Jesus has risen from the dead, that his kingdom is breaking in, that it is unleashing life into the world, and he is King and no other. The Good News is a call to the world to repent, to turn aside from everything that is not Jesus and to take hold of him in faith lest we be handed forever over to death.

Paul says that there is *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of *all* and to proclaim that message the *one* Spirit has created *one* body, one Church to act as the herald of the kingdom. In Ephesus the division between Jew and Gentile was threatening that unity, but Paul reminds them that Jesus has created a new family. This is what so much of Chapter 2 was about, but it's a theme that runs through the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. God doesn't have two families or two peoples. Jesus came in fulfilment of the prophecies given by God as far back as Abraham. Through Abraham's family he would restore a knowledge of himself to a world that had forgotten him. Through Abraham's family he would bring blessing to the world and set his Creation to rights. Israel failed, but Jesus came, Abraham's son, and he did what Israel had failed to do. He gathered a new Israel around himself, starting with his twelve disciples, and opened to Jew and Gentile alike. At Pentecost he gave his law, not written on stone tablets this time, but written on the very hearts of his people by the Spirit. We, the body of Christ, represent God's future and so we must guard our unity from whatever might drive us apart. Paul writes about guarding our Jesus-centred unity the way soldiers guard a city from an enemy.

It's hard for us to grasp just how important unity is in Paul's teaching and in his vision of the Church. We've become so used to the idea of division. We've got the Orthodox and the Romans and the Protestants and within our own Protestant tradition we've got thousands of smaller divisions. Even our own Anglican tradition is in the midst of a realignment. Sometimes the divisions have allowed us to grow so far apart and our languages and

practices are so different that it can even be hard to recognize fellow Christians.

Some divisions take place over serious issues. Those of you who started our own church left where you were because Jesus was no longer being preached by your leadership and because sin was being promoted as virtue. We've had other division in our local community because there are churches that have bought into popular teaching that undermines the divinity of Jesus. One of my friends was telling me this week about the new liturgy his bishop is pushing. It's a liturgy that redefines God himself and that incorporates elements from pagan religions. These are issues that create division and they undermine our unity in Jesus. He is our centre and if you preach a different Jesus and if you preach a different message as the Good News you've separated yourself from the body Jesus created. As important as unity is, Paul also stresses many times that we are to have nothing to do with those who preach a different gospel.

But what Paul is specifically addressing here are the unnecessary divisions in the body. The Ephesians all believed in the same Jesus and the same Good News. The reasons their division were sinful was because they were over things that should not divide the body of Christ. The differences between Jew and Gentile should not divide. The differences of socio-economic class or of race or language should never divide. Our personalities, our priorities, even the wrongs we do each other should never divide. Instead we need to be patient, humble, and gentle with each other as we guard the unity we have by virtue of our shared life in Jesus.

Finally, in verses 7-11 Paul writes about the different gifts Jesus has given through the Spirit.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Paul's about to launch into a list of some of the many gifts the Spirit gives to equip the Church for our calling to proclaim Jesus and his kingdom, but before he does that he quotes from Psalm 68:

Therefore it says,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”

(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

The psalm is about Moses. In the Exodus the Lord defeated the Egyptians and led Israel out of her bondage to them. When the people had camped at Mt. Sinai Moses ascended up the mountain and when he came down he had the law written on stone tablets. And Paul sees Jesus doing something similar. Moses points to Jesus. The Old Covenant points to a new and better one. In his death and resurrection Jesus has led us in a new exodus from our bondage to sin and death. After he rose from the dead Jesus ascended to take his throne and to rule from heaven until every enemy has been put under his feet. But instead of coming down as Moses did with the law, Jesus returned in the person of the Holy Spirit. When Moses came down the mountain with the law God created a people for himself and just so, but on an even grander scale, Jesus has created a new people for himself in his ascension and his sending of the Spirit. We are the people of whom the old Israel was a type and a shadow. In our baptism Jesus plunges us into the Spirit, he frees us from our bondage to sin and death, he gives us life, he unites us in that one Spirit, and he gives us grace and equips us both for our life together as his people and for our mission as his people to proclaim his kingdom.

Brothers and Sisters, do you remember the illustration of the Spirit I gave a few years ago to the children? They gathered around the baptismal font. The water there symbolises the Spirit, poured into us in our Baptism to wash away our sin and to unite us to the life of Jesus. I poured that water into the hands of the children and then they all took each other's hands and then they spread out and pretty soon we were all holding wet hands to remind us that we share in one baptism, one faith, one Lord, and one Spirit who binds us together. That's what Paul is writing about here. But it's not just the Font. It's not just our baptism. Each Sunday we come to the Lord's Table. In Baptism we

reach out to Jesus in faith and are united with him by the Spirit for the first time, but each week we gather and in the Lord's Supper we celebrate the Sacrament of our *continuing* life in Jesus by the Spirit. Here we come and as Jesus feeds us we eat of the *one* bread and drink of the *one* cup, again reminding us that as individuals we are united: one faith, one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father of all.

Think on that as you come to the Lord's Table this morning. We share in the one bread and the one cup because we share in one Baptism into Jesus by the Spirit. Despite all of our differences, we are *one* and we're one because we share a common life in the Lord Jesus. Dear friends, let the Lord's call to his Table this morning be a reminder to guard the unity Jesus has given, let it be a reminder to walk in a manner worthy of his call—to bear with each other patiently, humbly, lovingly, graciously as Jesus borne with us.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we asked in the Collect we ask again: may your grace always go before us and follow after us. May we be so enveloped by the grace you have shown us in Jesus that we can't help but share that grace with each other and with the world. Give us grace to guard the unity we have in Jesus. Give us grace to remember that we are one in him. And strengthen us with your grace to proclaim to the world the truth that has brought us together: Jesus died and rose again. He is Lord and life. Amen.