



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

The Seventeenth Sunday after

Trinity: One

Ephesians 4:1-10

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This week I updated the operating system on my computer. It didn't take long to discover that one of the most important applications I use—my Bible software—wasn't compatible with the new operating system, so I had to upgrade that too. Now, I've had that software installed for more than twenty years. I read the manual for it way back then, got everything configured just the way I wanted it, and I haven't messed with any of it since. It just always does what I need it to do. Then I had to reinstall it and after I'd done that I realised that I had absolutely no memory how it worked—not to mention that things had changed a lot in the new version I had to instal, so I had to take a trip back to the user's manual so that I could get it set up and working the way I needed it to. And as I was reading through the user's manual—actually, in the intervening twenty-something years, it's gone from a single document to an online library—I kept finding myself saying over and over, “Oh, yeah! I forgot this software could do that!” It's really very sophisticated, but years ago I sort of figured out the basic features I needed, set it up for that, and then forgot about everything else. Every once in a while I'd get a reminder. I'd see someone blogging about how they use the software or I'd watch a YouTube video about it and it would occur to me that I've got a Ferrari, but I'm driving in the slow lane, but most of the time that's all I really needed.

How often do we do that with Jesus and the Spirit and the gospel? We hear the gospel and some particular

aspect really speaks to us or really addresses the place we're in at the time, but then we get a sort of tunnel vision and we can go for years focused almost entirely on that one narrow aspect of the gospel. Or we hear the gospel and we realise just how big and how powerful it is, but maybe—a bit like me and my Bible software—we're just not quite ready yet to explore those other things, so we settle down with the familiar and all but forget that there's more to this great story. Maybe we become narrowly focused on the gospel's theme of forgiveness and forget all about the hope of new creation. Or we become narrowly focused on its theme of justice, but we forget about mercy. Or, vice versa, we focus so much on mercy that we forget about justice. Sometimes we get so focused on the individual—the me-centred—parts of the gospel that we forget the corporate parts of it. This seems to be why St. Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Ephesus. It's hard to say if the problems Paul addresses were actually present in Ephesus or if he wrote this pre-emptively, knowing how other churches struggled with these things. Either way, Paul takes them back to the basics of the gospel. He doesn't want them to forget.

In Ephesians Paul takes these people right back 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 says that God has done this that he might be glorified.

Paul also 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. And that's Paul's main point here. Again, we don't know if things were actually falling apart in Ephesus, but Paul *had* seen things fall apart—in the churches of Galatia, in Rome—particularly as the churches struggled with the old divide between Jews and gentiles.

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's 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 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 cultivate and 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. His creation was perfect. 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. To set his creation to rights, he is fully within his own rights to simply wipe us from its face. But, instead, he entered his creation 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. So that we might be set to rights and have a share in his new creation. As Jesus said, he came to those condemned, not to heap more condemnation on us, but to redeem us.

Now, 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. Forgiveness can be hard. 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 and we struggle because we have taken the grace of God for granted, because we've forgotten that God has been patient and humble and loving with us. This is why we're reminded each Sunday as we come to his Table, that what he has done for us in Jesus and the cross—the vertical element of the gospel—always needs to work out in how we live with each other—the horizontal element of the gospel.

Paul goes on in 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 gospel 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 self. 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 live out and to carry that gospel, that good news to the world. As Adam was called to steward the

Lord's creation, so we, through Jesus and the Spirit, have been made new to steward God's new creation and to be its heralds, calling the people around us to hear the good news, to believe, and to join us.

Remember what the word “gospel” meant in the Old Testament. It was the proclamation of good news. 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! Good news! The long exile is over. God is making all things new and summoning us to live in his presence again. 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 option on the 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 the early Church, the divide between Jew and Gentile was threatening that unity, but Paul reminds the Ephesians that Jesus has created a new family. This is what so much of Chapter 2 is 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 Jesus the Messiah, 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, I think, 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. Drive through even a small town and you see church signs representing our fragmentation: Baptist, Lutheran, Anglican, Pentecostal, Roman, Presbyterian and so on. Even our own Anglican tradition is fragmented. Sometimes the divisions have allowed us to grow so far apart and our languages and practices have become so different that it can even be hard to recognize fellow Christians.

Some divisions take place over serious, gospel-compromising issues. Those of you who started this church know that well. The Anglican Church of Canada had compromised the gospel. It was promoting sin as virtue. Real Christians, real gospel people can't remain in a church that has ceased to be a church. Paul stressed many times that we are to have nothing to do with those who preach a different gospel. In a situation like

that, gospel unity has already been lost.

But what Paul is addressing here in Ephesians are the *unnecessary* divisions in the body. The Ephesians all believed in the same Jesus and the same gospel. The reasons their division were sinful was because they were over things that should not divide the body of Jesus. 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. This is what it means to be a gospel-centred people. This is what it looks like to be stewards of God's new creation in the midst of the old.

Our Epistle ends with verse 6, but let's keep going just a little further. 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 Pharaoh. 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 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 gave his people the gift of God's own 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. We are heralds of God's new creation, given the task of calling the world into this new life in Jesus and the Spirit, as we make our way into God's new world.

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, God himself, who gave his life for our sake. 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 has 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.