



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity Ephesians 4:1-6

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The world is not as it should be. We know it in our bones. Broken relationships, frail health, wars abroad, pandemics, and the simply daily struggle to get by—we all know the pain and the sorrow and the tears. The Israelites knew this as well as anyone ever has. They were slaves in Egypt. They suffered under the bondage and tyranny of Pharaoh. They knew pain and suffering and tears the likes of which you I can only imagine. And, the biblical story tells us, they cried out to the living God and he heard their cries. And because he is also the loving God, he delivered them from Egypt. He dramatically defeated the God's of Pharaoh and then he defeated Pharaoh himself and drowned the world's greatest army in the Red Sea. And the Lord promised to set things to rights for his people. He promised to lead them to a land of milk and honey and he promised to live in their midst. It was—in a limited and imperfect way—a restoration of humanity's original state: of Adam and Eve in the garden, living in the presence of God. It gave the people hope that, despite the pains and troubles of life, God has a plan to set right what our sin and rebellion has broken.

But what was there to keep Israel from becoming just like the Egyptians? If we're honest, we all know that problem too. The world is in the mess it's in not only because others sin against us, but because we sin against them. That's where Israel's sojourn in wilderness enters the great story. In today's reading from his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, St. Paul quotes a bit of Psalm 68. "When he went up

on high, he led bondage itself into bondage, and he gave gifts to the people." It's a reference to the Lord meeting his people at Mt. Sinai in the wilderness. He called Moses up the mountain, and then sent him back down to the people with the *torah*, with his law. On that day the Lord made a covenant with his people: I will be your God and you will be my people and his law set them apart from the peoples and nations of the earth. The Lord gave them the law to ensure that they wouldn't end up another Egypt—a land of oppression and idolatry—and in doing that he made Israel a community, a family, a covenant people so that, in them, the world would have a foretaste of the day when God restores sinful humanity to himself, sets his broken creation to rights, and wipes away our tears.

This is the background, this is the story that gives shape to what St. Paul writes in today's Epistle. What the Lord had once done for Israel when he rescued the people from slavery and made them his own, he has done again—but on even grander scale, through the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Messiah. This time he didn't just rescue a people from Pharaoh's bondage. In Jesus, he's rescued us all from our greatest enemies, from sin and death themselves. In the church he's made a new people, a new humanity, a new *temple* in which he dwells—a people meant to lift the veil on God's new creation, a people who live God's future here in the present—to show the nations his glory and his grace.

Brothers and Sisters, the church is the continuation of Jesus' healing and reconciling ministry. We're a people filled with God's Spirit and entrusted with his gospel, with his good news. We don't just *pray* those words of Jesus, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We're called by God and enabled by Jesus and the Spirit to *live* that prayer out—to bring God's reconciling message (the gospel) and his presence

(the Holy Spirit) to a broken world in desperate need of forgiveness and grace and healing.

But what happens when the church stumbles, when the church falters in this calling and mission? Most of Paul's letters to those first churches were written because they were doing just that. They were a people rescued from sin and death to be heaven-on-earth people, but they were failing. Paul wrote to the Ephesians because their unity was in danger. Earlier in the letter he addressed the division that was happening between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jesus had given his people a new law—the law of the Spirit, but the old law of Moses, the law given at Sinai had so defined what it meant to be God's people for so long, that it threatened to create this chasm between the Jewish and Gentile believers. And so Paul stresses, as he does so often, that it is faith in Jesus, faith in his forgiving and reconciling death and faith in his life-giving resurrection, faith in the gospel, that unites them.

But that wasn't all. Because even when the gospel bridges the divide between Jew and Gentile, even when it makes us one, there's still an endless list of things that threaten to drive wedges between us. The same things that have made such a mess of the world, the same things that destroy our relationships—they're still with us. Any time you bring a group of people together, there's going to be friction. We don't all see things the same way. Toes get stepped on—sometimes inadvertently, but sometimes on purpose. We're prone to jealousy and selfishness and competition. We're often set in our ways and don't like change. We often hold too tightly to things and don't want to give them up. We too often think of our wants and needs without thinking of the wants and needs of others. It's the way of the world and it shouldn't be the way of the church, but the fact is that sanctification, the process of God making us holy, it's just that: a process. The work of God's word and

God's Spirit takes time—sometimes it seems, a dreadfully long time—and so none of us is perfect. Jesus has made us new, he's given us the life of heaven, but if Israel could end up just like Egypt, so we can end up just like the broken world from which we've been delivered.

The blinding light of the gospel, of Jesus crucified and risen for us, of God's great loving and gracious generosity outshines everything else, but we let our guard down and pride creeps in and, Brothers and Sisters, pride is the great cloud that blots out the sun of God's generosity. And this is what was happening in Ephesus. So Paul writes to them, if you're following along, in Chapter 4 of Ephesians: "So then, this is my appeal to you..." And then Paul pauses to say, "I, a prisoner of the Lord." He reminds them that he's writing to them from prison. He's been imprisoned for the sake of the good news about Jesus. And he reminds them at this point to stress just how important all this is. They've been called to be a gospel people, not just for their own sake, but for the sake of the world, but they're not taking it seriously. So Paul's saying, "This is serious business—so serious that I'm in prison because of it—because Caesar and the powers of the present evil age can't stand to be challenged by the good news that it's Jesus who is the world's true Lord and because they can't stand to be challenged by the good news that a new order, that his kingdom is breaking in." Brothers and Sisters, think on that, because we often don't take this seriously enough either. Our Saturday breakfast group has been reading through Rod Dreher's *Live Not By Lies* this year. It tells the stories of Christians who knew what serious business the gospel is and who faced the wrath of the Soviet authorities for standing firm for the gospel—men and women who were imprisoned and many who were martyred for their faith. Because they knew what serious business the gospel is—that the world depends on it if it's

ever to be set to rights. You and I live in a place of such ease that we too easily take the gospel for granted. We need to be reminded what serious business it is—that Jesus gave his life for this.

So Paul goes on and writes, "You've *got* to live up to the calling you received." It's imperative. If they fail to live up to their calling, they fail to be the church. He says, "Bear with one another in love; be humble, meek, and patient in every way with one another. Make every effort to guard the unity the Spirit gives, with your lives bound together in peace."

Bear with one another. Again, there are going to be points of friction. We're human and we're not perfect...not yet, anyway. That's especially true with a community like the church. Most communities draw together people who are similar, but the church is for everyone. Jesus is our centre and he calls and draws in people from every tribe and tongue, rich and poor, slave and free, Liberal and Conservative, Ford and Chevy, Canucks and...well, I don't know because I don't follow hockey...but Jesus unites us all together into one people, because we've all known the redeeming love of God in Jesus. Because the sun of God's gospel grace outshines all the differences that would otherwise make us rivals and drive us apart.

We've rebelled against our Creator. We've sinned. We've broken his good creation. We've worshiped other gods and we've worshiped ourselves. And yet God has never ceased to be patient with us. And he still loves us so much, he still so desires to reconcile us to himself, that he—the Creator of the cosmos—humbled himself to take on our flesh in Jesus, to be born one of us, and then to die an excruciating and humiliating death he didn't deserve, in order to set us and his creation to rights. And if we have grasped even a bit of the patient and humble and gracious lovingkindness

of God made manifest in Jesus and the cross, Brothers and Sisters, we ought to be overcome by that same love, humility, and patience. We ought to see each other—not to mention everyone still lost in the world's darkness—we ought to see them through that same loving, humble, and patient lens and desire for them to know the reconciling love of God as we have. If God can love us, who have made such a mess of his creation and who worship idols, if he can love us so much that he will die to heal the breach between us, how can we ever let the frictions between us destroy the unity he's given? In light of the sun of his love, every one of our differences—Jew or Gentile, man or woman, slave or free, Ford or Chevy—ought to pale in comparison. His love doesn't just save us from our bondage to sin and death, it makes—or it ought to make—us his new creation: a people who are light in the darkness, life in the midst of death, a people of love and grace, of mercy and peace, of humility and patience in the midst of hate and strife and selfishness and division. A people who—even if imperfectly—lifts the veil and gives the world a glimpse of God's future for the world.

In verse 7 Paul goes on. He writes, "There is one body and one Spirit. You were, after all, called to one hope which goes with your call. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all."

Let's walk through that. There is *one* body. Jesus didn't create a bunch of different churches. He didn't create an Anglican church and a Baptist church and a Roman church and a Pentecostal church. He created *the* church. We've fractured and divide because of our failings and these fractures have become so common and so entrenched that we take them for granted, we think they're the norm—we even sometimes think they're good and right. In some cases, we've grown so far apart and developed our

own ecclesiastical cultures and languages that it can be hard to even recognise the gospel when others preach it. I was listening to a sermon by an Orthodox priest in Croatia this week. And on the one hand the gospel was so obvious and clear, but at on the other hand, I had to stop several times and re-listen to what he's said, because his way of talking about it is so dramatically different than ours. And, at this point, there isn't really anything the average Christian can do to restore the unity. But we can as individuals and we can as the local church do everything in our power to maintain fellowship with those who proclaim the same gospel that we do: Jesus the Messiah, crucified, risen, ascended, and Lord. That's what Paul's getting at here. There's one body. There's one Holy Spirit whom God has poured out on all of us. There is one Lord Jesus. There is one faith. There is one baptism. There is ultimately one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all. And that is our one, unifying hope. The hope of every believer is the hope proclaimed by the prophets: that one day the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea; that the reconciling love of Jesus at the cross, that the power of his life-giving resurrection will bring us back to the Father and open the world's eyes to his glory.

And note: we don't create this unity. Jesus and the Spirit have created it already. Paul's point is that it is our duty—so far as we are able—to maintain it. And at the most fundamental level, we do that as we bear with each other. As we forgive the sins of others just as we have been forgiven. As we love each other, just as we have been loved. As he live humbly with each other and seek reconciliation with each other, just as God has humbled himself to die in order to reconcile us to himself.

Being overwhelmed by the brightness of the sun of God's love—you'd think—would be enough to drive away the pettiness and the selfishness

and the pride, but still we need God's help. And so Paul goes on in verse 7—I want to go a few verses past the end of our Epistle so we can let Paul finish his thought. He writes: “But *grace* was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah's gift.”

God has poured out his grace—his unmerited favour—on us, and not just poured it out, but poured it out in abundance so that it overflows, so that we can't help but give, share, and pour out that grace on everyone around us. It's that grace that builds us up and that binds us together. Specifically, in the next paragraph, Paul's going to go on to talk about how, through the Spirit, God has given the people of his church a diversity of gifts, not just to build each other up, but to accomplish the gospel mission we've been given, but I think here we can understand God's grace more generally. This is where Paul quotes Psalm 68:18: “When he went up on high, he led bondage itself into bondage, and he gave gifts to his people.” Again, the Psalm is about Moses going up on Mt. Sinai and coming down shining with the glory of God and with the *torah*—with a new way of life that would set this people apart and make them a witness to his light and life in the midst of a dark and pagan world. And Paul quotes this to say that Jesus has now done this, but on a larger and grander scale. Look at verse 9: “When it says here that ‘he went up,’ what this means is that he also came down into the lower places—that is, the earth. The one who came down is the one who also ‘went up’ far above the heavens, so that he might fill all things.”

As Moses went up Mt. Sinai to meet the Lord, Jesus has ascended to heaven to take his throne, but he hasn't left us to fend for ourselves. As God sent Moses down the mountain with the law, so Jesus has sent God's Spirit to indwell and to transform and to empower his people—to fill all things. Brothers and Sisters, that's

temple language. Moses came down the mountain with a plan for the tabernacle—for a temple where God's presence would be enthroned in the midst of his people. But in the Holy Spirit, God has come down and made his people themselves—he's made us—his temple. Jesus has washed us clean from sin by his blood shed at the cross, he's made us holy, and God's own Spirit has come to live in us.

And that takes us back—or it ought to—to the very beginning of the story: to Adam and Eve, to humanity, placed by God in his garden temple to be its stewards, to live in his presence, to be fruitful and to multiply, and in so doing to spread his temple and his presence to the ends of the earth. Brothers and Sisters, in Jesus and the Spirit, God has begun the work of restoring us to that original vocation. He has made us his temple, he has made us stewards of his good news, he has empowered us with his grace—he has not left us alone to be and to do this in our own strength. He has entrusted us with *his* good news, he has shown us what *his* new creation is like, he has empowered us with *his* Spirit, and he has filled us with *his* grace. And now he sends us out not just to proclaim the good news of Jesus and his new creation, but to actually be that new creation for the sake of the world. To live and especially to live *together* in such a way that the world around us will see the bright light of Jesus in us; to make them constructively curious, wanting to know that light for themselves; so that one day the whole earth will give glory to our Father in heaven.

Let's pray again our Collect: Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*