

Sermon for Zion, May 31, 2020 – Pentecost Sunday

Hymns: 399 – Spirit of Gentleness; Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-6; 4:25-32

Sermon: Pentecost – A World Transformed

Ephesians 4:1-6 (NLT) 4:25-32 (NIV)

*I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all.*

*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry...*

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Maybe you saw the news conference last week, as Premier Dennis King and Director of Public Health Doctor Heather Morrison briefed the province on what is to come in the days ahead. And at the core of their message was an appeal for kindness. An appeal for patience. An appeal to put aside anger and mistrust and hurtful words, and to come together as an Island, as together we move forward in slowly opening up not only businesses and restaurants and, thank God, barbershops, but as we open our Island to cottagers from away. The last of those decisions had brought a lot of heat upon both the Premier and Dr. Morrison, who in her closing comments was very nearly reduced to tears.

Now, whether or not you happen to agree with the manner in which things are going forward, I hope you will agree that as we try to reconstruct our society in the face of the unknown, we need to do so with kindness and patience as primary components of how we get along, as Islanders and as good neighbours. And for help in this regard, I would like to turn for advice to what might seem an unlikely source. Not to the Premier. Not to the Director of Public Health, fine people though they are. For advice and direction of how to rebuild our lives together, I'd like to turn to a prisoner. To a prisoner named Paul. Or St. Paul, as he is perhaps better known.

Paul, as he writes the words we read earlier, is in prison. More of a house arrest, really, but he is able to receive visitors, as well as correspondence, and he's passing his days not only planning for the future, but consolidating the past. He is getting reports from the churches he established over his busy years of missionary work, and is sending representatives – and letters – to the good people he left behind. The representatives – in the case of our letter today, a fellow named Tychicus - are long dead, but the letters live on. Some of them are collected in the New Testament, and one of them is called “The Letter to the Church in Ephesus,” or “Ephesians,” for short.

You might ask why we are reading the Ephesians' mail. When Paul was writing these letters, in most cases he was writing them for a wider audience than just one church. For instance, in his letter we call “Colossians,” Paul writes (4:16), *“After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.”* The churches copied Paul's letters, and, as per his instructions, sent them on to other churches, and more copies were made, until this particular one finds its way to us – from the hand and heart of Paul in prison, to the backpack of tireless Tychicus, and from his hand to the hands of the Ephesians, the Laodiceans, the Colossians, from pulpit and pulpit and church to church, and all the way over time and miles to us here today. Amazing, when you think of it. A miracle. A gift of the Holy Spirit, to speak to our spirits this Pentecost Sunday morning.

And what is the message Paul would send? What did he see in the churches he founded, what does he see in the churches and communities of our day? He sees the need for love. He sees the need for peace. He sees the challenge of human beings getting along with other human beings, he sees how our imperfections so often tear us apart, and he sees - if we have the slightest hope of bringing the Good News of Jesus into our world - he sees the need for us to be together. For unity. That we might be one.

Where did Paul get this idea? From Jesus, who prayed this over us who were to come (John 17:20-21 NIV): *“My prayer is not for the disciples alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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.”*

Now it is one thing to pray for unity; it is another thing to bring it about. How do we achieve this unity, this level of togetherness? Jesus tells us that it will only come through the love we share with one another. Again, it is one thing to say we love one another; it is another thing to actually live it. Good thing for us that these churches passing around the very practical letters of Paul, were kind enough to pass one on to us.

Here is how unity through love happens, says Paul; this is how to *“Lead a life worthy of your calling...”*

- *Always be humble and gentle.*
- *Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.*
- *Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.*
- *Speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body.*
- *"In your anger do not sin"*
- *Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry...*
- *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*
- *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God - Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.*
- *Be kind and compassionate to one another*
- *Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

These principles are central to who we are, and who we strive to be as followers of Jesus. These principles, when applied to society at large, could revolutionise the way in which we interact with one another, and conduct ourselves in all spheres of life. So let's take a closer look, and as we do, imagine what our families, our churches, our communities, our country could look like if we put them into action. Imagine what our own lives would look like:

- *Always be humble and gentle.* Don't immediately assume you are right, and others are wrong. Address one another in a courteous manner.
- *Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.* Nobody's perfect. Not even you. Especially not you! And especially not me! Remember that, when considering the faults of another – or mine. Recognise your own shortcomings, and regard one another with kindness.
- *Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.* Unity is key, and doesn't come automatically, but requires real effort, and a willingness for the Holy Spirit to work in and through us, in promoting peace among us all. Peace in our interpersonal relationships, writes Paul here, is the glue which makes wider unity possible.
- *Speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body.* Truth, spoken in patience, gentleness, and love, is the language that brings healing and health to our relationships and to our church.

- *“In your anger do not sin”* Most things we regret doing or saying are “spur of the moment” responses, based on anger. And the things we regret doing or saying – words or actions designed to hurt, humiliate or demean – are nothing other than sin.
- *Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry...* Anger is corrosive, and cannot be allowed to take long-term root in our lives. Decide not to be angry. Decide to come to a reasonable position, and a peaceful solution.
- *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.* Is what you’re saying helpful, or hurtful? Does it build another up, or tear another down? Are you taking the needs of the other person into consideration? Before you speak, think: how is what I am about to say going to be helpful to this person? How will the manner in which I am going to say it, enable me to build that person up, and enable them to do better in the future?
- *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God - Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.* The Holy Spirit dwells within you, and within your brothers and sisters in the faith. When you interact or respond with bitterness, anger, or intent to wound, it is the Holy Spirit who receives your bitterness; it is the Holy Spirit that grieves. In the same way it hurts us to see someone we love acting destructively or maliciously, so it hurts the heart of God, who loves us.
- *Be kind and compassionate to one another.* The most basic rule. Kindness is a simple word, but a powerful action. Blended with compassion, it sums up the attitude with which Jesus touched so many lives.
- *Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* Our forgiveness for one another is based entirely upon the forgiveness we ourselves have received from God; more, the forgiveness we receive from God cannot take root in our lives unless we forgive those who have, as the old prayer says, trespassed against us. It is what we pray; it is what we believe. Is it what we practice?
- *Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.* Ultimately, we are here to respond to God’s love by following in the footsteps of Jesus, which is to do no other than to walk in the way of love; to love one another and our world as Christ loves us.

- *Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.* Unity cannot be taken for granted. Peace is a fragile thing. Both take a determined effort on our part, an effort which means sometimes thinking very hard about our interactions with others; our criticisms, our judgements, our complaints, our disappointments, even our righteous indignation: how are we communicating these feelings to others? They may be entirely legitimate, but are we conveying them with patience, “*making allowance for each other’s faults,*” with an intention to “*build others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen,*” or are we just mad, or impatient, or blowing off steam?

The good people of Ephesus needed to be reminded of these things. The good people of Colossae, of Laodicea, and of Philippi too. And they guarded these words and copied these words and passed these words, often at danger or cost of their lives, onto us. They thought we needed to be reminded of these things as well. Because they, like us, needed to consciously and continuously “*Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all.*”

We, as Christians, have a vitally important role to play as our society attempts to rebuild itself in the face of our new reality. We are in an unprecedented time, which brings with it an unprecedented opportunity to do something different in the way in which we relate to one another as citizens, neighbours, friends. And we, as believers in and followers of Jesus, can model a standard of behavior, a way of getting along, which can truly transform our communities, our Island, our world. If we take the words of the Apostle Paul to heart, and live as he encouraged us to live; if we can take the example of Jesus, and reflect that example both inside and outside our communities of faith, we can help our society come out of this pandemic better, and stronger, and kinder; a society which values and is marked by compassion, forgiveness, patience and encouragement; together, living in the love of our neighbour; together living in the love of God.

Let us, as the brothers and sisters of Jesus, with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, lead with love, and so show to all the world a better way. The only way. Together. Together. Amen.