

“THE BOND OF PEACE”

Ephesians 4:1-25

October 1, 2023

Rev. Jerry Duggins

“Breaking the peace.” On my cynical days, I feel like the world spends more time violating the peace than “making peace.” Even on good days, I can make a longer list of places where conflict is destroying lives than places where new agreements mend relationships and create a path for healing and restoration.

Paul, or someone very familiar with his theology, is a little concerned about the faith communities near the city of Ephesus. It’s not a matter of great concern, but he decides to be a little proactive and writes this letter.

This letter is not like the other letters of Paul. It lacks references to a personal connection. There is no prayer for the faith community. It reads more like a theological treatise than a letter. The first half of the book focuses on theology in fact, while the second half concerns itself with more practical moral and spiritual exhortation.

From the first half of the book, we know that the believers being addressed are primarily Gentile. They lack a Jewish background and seem to be ready to discard the ties that bound the followers of Jesus to Judaism. Paul argued with his Jewish colleagues that following Jesus did not break with Judaism, but in fact, opened the faith to begin including others. So the author, here, emphasizes for his Gentile converts, the importance of understanding the roots of their faith in Judaism.

He wants to preserve the “bond of peace” between Jewish and Gentile Christians. For reasons that go beyond what is happening in the region of Ephesus, the effort fails. Judaism and Christianity, probably very shortly after the writing of this letter, go their separate ways. As Christianity becomes more dominant in society, antisemitism grows and continues to “break the peace” around the world today.

The other thing to mention about these Gentile Christians is that they are not, for the most part, poor and marginalized. They fit in with mainstream Roman and Greek culture, benefitting from the economic system, participating in the religious rituals and communal activities.

In choosing to follow Jesus, they rejected certain values and practices of their culture. They have given up worshipping the Roman gods and going to feasts honoring those gods. They may have had to adjust their roles in the patronage system, a kind of “old boys’ network” that preserved the power of the elite and created many inequities. “You must no longer live as the Gentiles live,” he writes, “... darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God... lost all sensitivity... greedy to practice every kind of impurity. You were taught to put away your former way of life, corrupt and deluded by its lusts....”

They didn't see the harm that their manner of life had brought into the world. They couldn't hear the call of God to something better. Nothing wrong with trying to get ahead. Insensitive, greedy, corrupt, and delusional: they didn't see their lives this way until they learned to see with the eyes of Christ.

Remember how you learned Christ Jesus, he says. Don't slip back, he seems to be saying. Don't believe the lies of your culture. Greed doesn't divide any less just because you call it self-interest. Working hard doesn't bring the same benefit to everyone. Poverty isn't created by a lack of work ethic any more than wealth is the result of personal effort.

Paul wants the congregations near Ephesus to hold faith and life together. These Gentiles turned away from the values of their culture to embrace the life of Jesus. But the world doesn't change just because you love Jesus. It makes the same demands, rewarding those who play by its rules and punishing those who won't play the game. The temptation to divide your life between religion and the rest of the world is powerful.

Don't go back to the old, says Paul. Don't believe the lie that there is a part of our lives that God doesn't care about. God cares about our bodies, and gives us doctors, nurses, therapists, medicines and treatments to mend them when they hurt. And when they fail God gives us families, hospice workers, and chaplains to tend and comfort us in our last days. When healthcare fails us or is denied us, God shares our frustration or anger. God cares about the earth and grieves our abuse of it, even feels the poisons we pump into the air and dump in our landfills and pollute our waters with.

The earth is broken. Our lives, and the systems that govern them are broken. The peace is broken, broken mostly by the lies we tell each other. We have to stop lying. We have to open our eyes to the indignities suffered by people of color in a white supremacy world, to the inequities in a healthcare system that takes more seriously concerns of a white mother than black mother, of a criminal justice system that still incarcerates people of color more often and for longer terms than white people. We have to begin to see the truth, the whole truth of each other, and not the stereotypes and lies told.

But you know all this. Even on your good days, you can probably make a pretty long list of injustices. As much as we do need to keep learning about the subtle and not so subtle ways that racism and patriarchy continue to operate in our world, that's not where Paul's focus is in the fourth chapter of Ephesians.

He wants to remind them about the faith community they have joined and to tell them something about how to keep it strong. The life which Christ calls them to must be led, he says, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the bond of peace." You will never be able to make your way in the broken peace of the world, if you can't maintain the peace within the faith community. We are supposed to model in the church what we envision for the world.

So the first thing to notice is that peace is a kind of “bond.” It’s a relationship, a tie, something that holds the community together. Relationships require that we see each other as we are. Governed by humility, gentleness and patience, this relationship isn’t trying to find fault, isn’t expecting miracles. It almost sounds like Paul knows how easy it is to drift into judgment. Be gentle. Be patient. Speak from love.

Well, relationships aren’t easy. In wedding vows, the couple binds themselves to each other with promises. They do so, knowing the flaws of one another. Days will come when the faults loom large and they will have to recall the promise that they made to each other, to love one another, whatever may come.

If we want to preserve the bond of peace, we will need to practice forgiveness. Not the sort of forgiveness that overlooks the harm done, but acknowledges the truth, and engages in the challenging work of reconciliation.

On this World Communion Sunday, we recognize the diversity of the faith community. We celebrate our unity in Christ with Christians everywhere. We focus our thoughts on the bond of peace and those who make peace. Instead of the brokenness, we turn our efforts to the healing and restoration. We build bridges over the chasms that separate us. We talk to each other rather than about each other.

We come to the faith community from different places. We bring different experiences. We gather around a table to share in the gifts that Christ brings. The Lord’s Supper is a declaration of friendship between us and God, and between one another. Around this table, while acknowledging the brokenness, we make peace. Following Jesus, we make peace with one another, and we answer the call to make peace in the world. “Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors,” writes Paul, “for we are members of one another.”

We belong to one another. This is the truth we so easily forget. This is the truth that binds us together in peace. It’s the truth expressed when confession and forgiveness come together. It’s the truth expressed when grief is shared and consolation given. It’s the truth expressed when we stay in the room for difficult conversations. We belong to one another, because we all belong to God. It’s a truth that overcomes a broken peace. It’s a truth that binds us together in peace in more places and at more times than we can name. And it’s still true, whether we’re having a good or a bad day. Amen.