

The news has been dire in recent weeks, on television and radio, in the newspaper and in magazines and on websites. There is increased violence in our cities, even in the normally placid Seattle. War, terrorism and saber rattling seems to touch nearly every region on our planet, from the sectarian violence in Iraq, the banditry in Afghanistan and the resumed battles in Lebanon to the escalation of tensions in North Korea, the seemingly incessant civil wars and insurgencies in at least 11 African nations and the twin dangers of drug wars and populist uprisings across South and Central America.

Even in places where men and women are not actively bearing arms against each other, the mood is hardly one of peace. The idea of fellowship overcoming disagreement, of a loyal opposition, seems to have been relegated to the scrapheap. Democrats call Republicans evil. Conservatives call liberals Godless. Even those who at least agree that they worship the same God find unity and peace an elusive butterfly. Members are expelled and pastors fired from churches because of their politics. Congregations break away from the denominations that have nurtured them for decades. The religious press predicts the breakup of the Anglican Communion. Vatican spokesmen decry the actions of Protestant bodies as detrimental to the unity of the Church.

In the midst of all this divisiveness and hatred, comes today's lectionary passage from the epistle to the Ephesians: Paul's plea for unity, peace and love. It is not a command, not a dictate; there is no implied threat – "live this way or else!" Paul moves from reminding the Ephesians how much God through Christ has done for them to writing about how they should respond in the same spirit of humility he exhibits. "I, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to live a life worthy of your high calling," he writes. Traditionally, it has been thought that Paul wrote Ephesians while under house arrest in Rome. He was able, as Luke tells us in Acts, to preach the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ "quite openly and unhindered" but house arrest is still arrest; Paul was chained to prevent escape and knew that his life could be forfeit at any moment to the whims of Caesar, as indeed it ultimately was. Paul does not emphasize his status as an apostle, as he so often does in his letters, but allows his own humble circumstances to stand as an exemplar of the attitude he hopes the Christians in Ephesus will adopt.

Humility was not considered to be a virtue in the Greco-Roman world but was associated, as Andrew Lincoln comments, "with contemptible servility." I think it's safe to say that humility is held in equally low regard in 21st century America, where rampant individual consumerism and ostentatious displays of wealth are as much approved as a swaggering foreign policy as the sole remaining superpower. But Paul is mindful that Jesus, the creator of the world who had every reason to be imperious, said that he had come to serve, not to be served. Likewise, Paul sees gentleness as both an attribute of Christ and as a fruit of the Spirit. In Matthew 11:29, we read Jesus' words, "Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart." I wonder what the world would be like if more political and business leaders were to truly embrace a gentleness that seeks the common good first?

Paul also associates living a life worthy of our calling with patience. The J.B. Phillips translation says, "(make) allowances for each other because you love each other." Throughout this letter, Paul has referred again and again to the transformative power of love. Chapter one: "God destined us in love to be God's children through Jesus Christ." Chapter two: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but... members of the family of God." Chapter three: "that you,

being rooted and grounded in love, may have power... to know the love of Christ.” Andrew Lincoln writes, “It is only the love that is the power of the new age, supplied by the Spirit of that age, that can enable one to bear with others without expectations of reward so that their concerns weigh more heavily than one’s own desires for personal fulfillment and peace of mind.” It is a reminder that the Christian life is a communal life; an idea that pervades the rest of the epistle as Paul lovingly advises his readers how to live with each other as Christ would have them do.

For Paul, living the worthy life means working to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. As J.B. Phillips puts it, “Make it your aim to be at one in the Spirit, and you will inevitably be at peace with one another.” Paul cannot help but wax eloquent about the great unity to be found in Christ. Again, from the Phillips translation, “You all belong to one body, of which there is one Spirit, just as you all experienced one calling to one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, one Father of us all, who is the one over all, the one working through all and the one living in all.” This celebration of the unity of God, the unity towards which we, the Body of Christ, now strive, reaches all the way back to the great affirmation of the Hebrew Bible in Deuteronomy 6: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thy house, and upon thy gates.” And, that same ancient affirmation, along with Paul’s admonition to bear with each other, can be heard in the music of the current era’s most popular rock and roll band: “One love, One blood, One life, You got to do what you should. One life With each other, Sisters, Brothers. One life But we're not the same; We get to Carry each other, Carry each other...”

We, the Body of Christ on earth, have not yet attained that unity. It is another example of that paradox of completion, the eschatological tension between now and not yet. We are one body and yet we allow differences to divide us. Paul affirms one faith and one baptism and yet the Universal Church is fragmented on questions of faith and baptism. Still, the kernel of unity exists. It is said that the original creed of the primitive church was “Jesus is Lord.” That simple statement was all that was required to confirm one’s status as a believer in the Way. Only after more complicated creeds were developed did the trouble start, which is perhaps the reason our Baptist forebears declared themselves a non-creedal people who needed only the Bible and the Spirit to guide their faith. Good Baptist though I am, I find a good deal of wisdom in many of the historical creeds, but I gladly enter into fellowship with anyone who will claim Jesus as Lord.

Likewise, my Baptist upbringing and my subsequent examination of what it meant and whether or not I still believed it, has led me to adhere to the notion of believer’s baptism by immersion. But I’ve also learned over the years that the form of baptism, while theologically significant, isn’t nearly as important as its spirit. For those who take their baptism seriously, the time of their life when it occurred and how much water was involved matter far less than the idea that it marked them as belonging to Jesus and that it began their lifelong journey to live in communion with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For those who don’t take their baptism seriously, timing and form aren’t going to make a difference, either.

For all that he sees the unity inherent in the Church, Paul recognizes that there is also an important element of diversity. Here's Phillips' translation again: "Naturally there are different gifts and functions; individually grace is given to us in different ways out of the rich diversity of Christ's giving." We shouldn't expect that all of us would have exactly the same job in the Kingdom of God. That would be foolish. And, just as some are called to do one thing and some another, so some will be gifted with one understanding of some aspect of our infinite God and some another. To make one last reference to our Baptist heritage, this is to me the genius of the Baptist movement: that each one's relationship to and understanding of God will be as individual as our bodies and souls. We are individuals who join together voluntarily in our pursuit of relationship with the Living God. More on that in a moment.

But first, a parenthesis in the scripture. If your Bible doesn't have a parenthesis around verses 9 and 10 of Ephesians 4, it ought to. They are Paul's comment on verse 8; a reference to Psalm 68:18, which he apparently realized, was obscure even for his original audience. The verse refers to Yahweh's triumphant ascent of Mount Zion after delivering Israel from danger. It had also been understood at the time of Jesus and Paul as being about Moses going up Mount Sinai and bringing down the tablets of the law. Over the centuries of Christian interpretation, this parenthetic of Paul's has been interpreted variously to be Paul's reference to the tradition of Christ's harrowing of Hell, that is, descending to give an opportunity to those who lived before his incarnation to accept his gift of grace and ascending with those who did so; or to be Paul's proclamation of the pre-existence of the descending Christ who later re-ascended to heaven; or to be Paul's linkage of Jesus' ascension with the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost with gifts for believers, affirming again that the Holy Spirit of power was one person with Christ. This last makes most sense to me. I also read this week of the theory of GV Smith, who, according to Bryan Findlayson, "suggests that Paul has in mind God's action of taking and receiving the Levites as a gift, then giving them back to his people in order to minister to the congregation. If Smith is correct, Paul expounds the verse in terms of captive believers ascending with Christ and then being given back to the church to minister." That seems a little far-fetched to me, but it makes a great segue to Paul's next point, so let's go with it for a moment.

That list of gifts, which Paul says Christ gave, is hardly exhaustive. And while I would love to stand up here and expound upon the importance of pastors and the rest, I hardly think that is the point. Again, I think J.B. Phillips strikes the right note: "His gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service, that the whole body might be built up until the time comes when, in the unity of the common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity - that measure of development which is meant by the "fullness of Christ"." I've known of or been affiliated with some congregations in the past which, in addition to listing their ministerial staff and key volunteers on their worship bulletins and newsletters, include the credit, "Ministers – All Members." It's a good, everyday sort of reminder of that idea of the priesthood of all believers, that all of us are called to exercise a ministerial function to each other, bearing up one another in love, as Paul might say. It is only by working together and helping each other that we will come to realize the fullness of Christ that is our God-planned destiny.

In working together and helping each other, we can also escape the danger Paul writes of in verse 14: “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” Now, as then, there is no shortage of bad teaching in the air around us. Theologically dubious pop culture disguised as religion is an ongoing problem, whether it’s the periodic outbreaks of “end of the world” predictions that have dogged the Church since early days, the identification of Britain or America as the destination of the Ten Lost Tribes that was popular in the 19th Century, the consumer-centered “Prayer of Jabez,” or the recrudescence of Gnosticism represented by Scientology, “The DaVinci Code,” and the Gospel of Judas. Paul provides the key to puncturing all this pseudo-theology. It is a return to his overarching theme. If we speak the truth in love, he writes, then we will grow in our faith, becoming more and more like Christ. The fallacious teachings I mentioned before, and surely the ones Paul had in mind, too, are pretty consistently about gathering advantage for oneself or, most generously, one’s tribe. Paul’s focus in this passage and in all of Ephesians has been to remind the reader that the love of Christ erases all human-made barriers between groups and shows us the way of selflessness; being humble, gentle, patient, and making allowance for each other.

“But we are meant to hold firmly to the truth in love, and to grow up in every way into Christ, the head. For it is from the head that the whole body, as a harmonious structure knit together by the joints with which it is provided, grows by the proper functioning of individual parts to its full maturity in love.” In the last verses of our passage, Paul emphasizes not only truth and love as the way for the body to grow into Christ, but also the necessity of the whole body being involved, each individual member doing its part to contribute to the whole. Again, the Body of Christ is composed of individuals who join together voluntarily in pursuit of relationship with the Living God. When one of us fails to grow in Christ, not only is that member damaged but the whole Body is held back. The South African theologian, Lawrence Moore calls into question that more and more common stance that faith can be exercised individually, away from communion with a church body. Moore writes, “Unless we take an active part in the life of the Christian body of which we are a part, we are amputating part of the body and failing others. Similarly, unless we are part of the body – of the flow of the life-blood of the Spirit – we will remain stunted in our own growth. The image of a body growing by means of the grace given through gifts stands as a strong critical counter to the excessive individualism of our present age.” The strong bonds of love that bind this church family together are an unceasing inspiration to me and, I hope, to you. Let’s make sure that life’s busy-ness and accidents of circumstance don’t weaken that bond and remove any of our number from that flow of the life-blood of the Spirit.

Of course, to talk on the first Sunday of the month about the communion between us and between us and God automatically leads us to the act we call Communion, our celebration of the last supper Jesus shared with his friends before his crucifixion. On the day after that supper, Christ’s body was broken, just as he predicted. What his disciples couldn’t understand at supper, or in the horror of the following day, was that his human body was broken so that his eternal Body, the Church, could come together, be healed, and grow into the fullness of life with God. We are still on that journey, still broken in some ways, but growing every day into Christ, our head. We are one Body, here and throughout the world, partaking of one bread. May our unity, our humility, patience and gentleness, and our love for each other stand as a sign to the rest of

the world that the time for violence and hatred is past and that our loving Creator beckons all of us to join the feast.