

Arden Pastoral Charge

August 1, 2021, Sermon and Scripture

Prayer of Approach and Confession: Loving Father, we come together this morning to worship you, trusting in your love and mercy. Help us to receive each of our days as a gift from you. Forgive us when we wish we were someone else or somewhere else. Give us grace to trust you for our needs and remind us to thank you for all your goodness. In Jesus' name, Amen

Scripture: Ephesians 4: 1-16

4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. **2** Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. **3** Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. **4** There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. **8** This is why it^[a] says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people."^[b]

9 (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions^[c]? **10** He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) **11** So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12** to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. **15** Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is,

Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Sermon: What Makes a Church Grow?

My comments will be, I hope, short and to the point. Arden Pastoral Charge is at another turning point. Next week, we will welcome Kaitlyn Ostrander, our new intern, to our pulpits and our communities. I trust that the next two years will be a learning time for all of us; it seems that we, as a pastoral charge, have found a mission within the United Church to nurture and then to send on new candidates, fully ordained and ready to take on new challenges. I think that our last two experiences as a Supervised Ministry Site have been positive for all concerned, and I believe that we will be blessed by Kaitlyn's ministry, and that she will be blessed by her experiences here.

Do take some time to reflect on what you can do to welcome Kaitlyn and to assist in her internship. My suggestions for myself – and each of you – include praying for her often, giving honest but loving feedback, sharing concerns and needs so that she can learn to lead and support and minister – so that together we can grow as a church.

We talk a lot about the need for growth in our churches, but this might be a good time to reflect on exactly what we mean by that word. After all, people grow in many ways – starting as infants, we all grow larger, then reach a point where we begin to grow smaller again. We grow older and hopefully wiser; sometimes we grow richer, but sometimes poorer. We encourage our children to “grow up,” and then lament when they grow too rapidly and make their own ways in life.

When we consider church growth, we usually mean increasing in numbers of members and adherents – and, incidentally, increasing in financial stability. We think of new programs offered, new outreach to more people, and full pews on more than Christmas Eve. All these are desirable, but I notice that they are not what Paul emphasizes when he writes to the church in Ephesus about his desires for growth.

Instead, Paul is concerned that the church “grow up” – in verses 14 and 15, he warns the church not to be “tossed to and fro” by every wandering preacher who

comes through town. In our day, that might translate to not getting carried away by every new enthusiasm that appears on our facebook feeds or not being swept away by the teachings of the latest popular tv preacher – or even the latest pronouncements of our own United Church head office. Instead, “speaking the truth in love.... grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. “

In other words, real Christian growth is to become more like Jesus. I’m not saying we shouldn’t look at new ideas or study the teachings of wise spiritual leaders, or develop new programs to encourage more people to come to church. BUT - for Paul, how we treat each other day to day is the real measure of our church growth.

Look back at the beginning of today’s scripture reading:

“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

It’s not always easy to “keep the unity of the Spirit.” As Paul notes, we all have different gifts, and we experience the grace of God in different ways, and it’s always tempting to think that our way is the best way. We need to remember that our gifts are from God, and each gift is meant for the good of all, and is equally important to the goal of reaching that unity that lets us together experience the “fullness of Christ” – the rich and grace-filled life that Jesus promises.

Back to where we are this week, as we prepare to welcome Kaitlyn. We cannot do better than to take Paul’s words to heart, to be loving and patient, with each other and with our new minister. And at those inevitable moments when we are irritated by each other or discouraged with ourselves and our situations, let us take courage, remembering that we have all been called by God, who is willing and able to get us where we should be.

I receive the daily meditations from University Hill United Church in Vancouver, and UHill member Janice Love wrote this a few days ago:

Ephesians 4:1-3

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Write Paul’s words here onto a banner and put it up in your home, put it up in your church, engrave it on your memory’s heart. It is a summary of our calling and our life together, for the sake of the world. It starts with our captivity in Christ, in the same way love of another enthrals us. That captivity then leads to a life, and a life together, of humility, gentleness, patience, bearing in love, and peaceful unity in the Spirit. This brings joy to God and is balm for a broken world.

May it be so. Amen