

A PEST Control Problem in the Church

A Sermon Preached by

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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 says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people." **9** (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? **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.

- Earlier this week I was happily ensconced in my back patio in our little townhouse complex. I was stretched out on our comfortable patio furniture and umbrella (both a pandemic purchase), part way through a new book on missional theology, country music on Spotify playing on my speaker (being from the Prairies I believe country music is the soundtrack of heaven), and a . . . well let's say an adult beverage close

by to keep me cool in the heat when it happened. My wife shouted from inside – they're here, get up, the flying ants are back. Sure enough at least once a summer – flying ants emerge from various parts of our backyard – the patio steps, the window well, even the grass. One minute nothing. The next a huge pest control problem. They soar into the air like anti-aircraft guns roaring to life in some World War 2 movie over a European city. Setting down my book and nearly knocking over my beverage, I raced into the house to grab the can of Raid, prepared for my own version of a pest control air raid upon our backyard. The joys of a Vancouver staycation summer!

- Perhaps you too have had a similar pest problem in your backyard or condo balcony this summer. Well today's Scripture reading from Ephesians presents a pest problem of a different, more theological nature.
- Today's passage from Scripture is one of my favourites – although I must admit I have many favourites. At first glance this is yet another letter of the Apostle Paul to the house church in Ephesus. Ephesus – a place you can still visit today, especially popular with cruise ship passengers, is located in Turkey but in Paul's day it was part of the Roman Province of Asia Minor.
- It was the most important Roman city in the province, with a large harbour, thriving commerce and a tourist trap complete with souvenir shops in the temple of Diana (Artemis). Scholars have debated whether Paul actually wrote this letter for several reasons, including the lack of personal greeting, but if it is Paul he is writing from Rome while imprisoned around the year 60 AD. What Bible scholars seem to mostly agree on is that we have a circular letter here – in other words this letter was meant for more than one congregation – it has a story to tell that is for all those connected with the Christian movement.
- In a sense, a circular letter is much like a Christmas letter that we tuck inside an envelope and send to family and friends. Yes, we write at the top "Dear ____" and maybe add a little note at the bottom but whether you are Aunt Martha in Halifax or cousin Bill in Calgary you

get the same letter – with the same news – and the same adorable pictures of the kids, etc.

- So what news does Paul send the churches scattered across what we call Turkey today? In the first three chapters the letter stresses what God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ – God has chosen us in Christ, God has redeemed us in Christ, God has forgiven our sins in Christ, God has lavished wisdom and knowledge on us in Christ, God has made us alive as human beings in Christ, overcoming such differences as Jewish or Gentile identity – we are now one family in Christ.
- And then the letter rolls into Chapter 4 and our reading today. Here, the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ continues – but here we see the indicative mixing with the imperative. In other words, we have heard the “what” of the good news of the gospel, and now the letter begins to turn towards the “so what.” For all of those little house churches unfurling the scroll in their small group worship across Roman Asia – what is Paul suggesting they do in response to what God has done for them in Jesus? Chapter 4 is such an important passage as it holds the key to what Paul asks of Christians – to walk worthily of the calling we have received. The “so what” flows from the “what.”
- Three powerful themes emerge in these verses: Unity, diversity and maturity
- First, unity. Seven times- did you catch it? Seven times we are told to be one in this passage – one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. Paul uses the language of keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
- For anyone who has tried to be in community with others you know that unity is an illusive goal. Just this week we had a strata meeting in our townhouse complex, we met outdoors to go over a new draft of the bylaws. The lawyer we retained for the strata was there to walk us through the updated bylaws and he said, “Well, he said every strata I’ve worked with complains primarily about three P’s – pets, parking

and people. Let's start with the contentious issues. What followed, as you can imagine, was a couple of hours of people expressing very different opinions on everything from whether to allow dogs in the complex to making the strata entirely smoke-free to how to share the common garden space. Unity was illusive.

- So, it comes as no surprise that in the church, another gathering of human beings, being human unity is illusive. But Paul reminds us in the letter that the church is unified not in common property, aesthetic preferences or investments but in Christ. Our unity is in Jesus Christ who descended and ascended for our sake – incarnation, ministry, death, descent into hell, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit. This holy movement for the sake of our salvation and for the world. Unity in the church, wherever it is present is likely the very gift of God in Christ to us, as we seem to be unable to achieve unity on our own.
- But just as we are settling into that gift of unity, Paul flips the script and suggests that in addition to unity, we need diversity. The letter continues that Christ himself is the gift giver, filling the church with grace and providing a diverse skill set for Christian witness. Paul writes that it was Jesus who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers. In the world of missiology or mission studies where I live missiologists like Allan Hirsch in Australia and others have nicknamed this list of gifts APEST – apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd(pastor), teacher. Why these diverse gifts – the letter continues – to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. In order to build the unity of people God's people in Christ, we need a diversity of gifts to be shared to equip God's people. Makes sense. Sounds good. The only problem is that we have a pest problem in the church. Not quite like the flying aunts in my backyard, but a problem nonetheless.
- Think about that list of gifts that Christ has given the church – apostles – those who establish new ministries and forms of Christian community and witness. Prophets – those who discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in the world and who courageously speak up and speak out

against the spirit of the age. Evangelists – those who have gifts to read both gospel and culture and translate the good news into every possible and emerging context – not only different cultural contexts as in ethnicities and countries but all the various subcultures in every culture – as one with teenagers in the house I know something of subcultures that I do not relate to but hope someone is evangelizing! Next – shepherds or pastors – those who care for the community who embody Christ’s love and support those who are in need. The pastoral gifts present within our Christian communities are essential – and I don’t just mean the pastor but Elders, Deacons all those who are baptized and extend grace, care and love to others. Finally, teachers – those who are gifted at interpreting God’s Word, sharing with others the mysteries of the faith revealed in Jesus Christ and who can help people grow in their faith. Apostles. So, what’s the big deal, where’s a pest problem in all that?

- The short answer is nothing – at least when Paul was writing this circular letter. The problem comes later, after Constantine when the church is the established religion. Over the centuries these gifts from Christ identified in Ephesians 4 start to fall away. It is a little bit like my beloved Grandmother who I grew up with in Winnipeg. She was a great lady – born in 1912 – I used to remind her of fun facts like she was born the year the Titanic sunk and the Oreo Cookie was invented. She also came of age as a young woman during the depression in the 1930s and that experience marked her life. As a result, she was a chronic saver – whether it was money (what if the banks fail), food (what if the grocery stores run out) or gifts (better to save this for a rainy day than enjoy it right now). Come to think of it my grandmother was made for the restrictions of pandemic life – she would have had so much toilet paper stored up even in February 2020. Here’s the thing – I remember she loved candles. Many people would buy them as a gift for her but whenever she would open it, after suitably gushing about how wonderful the gift was, she would put it up on a shelf and save it for another day.
- Once the Christian Church became the established religion of the West, and people were born nominally Christian, baptized as a child, their

days regulated by the ringing of church bells, all the rites of passage being conducted through the church – the APE in APEST fell away.

- Take John Calvin for example. In his commentary on Ephesians 4 he represents the widely held viewpoint of Christians over the last many centuries, including those with Reformation heritage. Calvin writes regarding APEST:
- “It should be observed, also that, of the offices which Paul enumerates, only the last two are perpetual. For God adorned His Church with apostles, evangelists and prophets, only for a time, except that, where religion has broken down, he raises up evangelists apart from Church order to restore the pure doctrine to its lost position. But without pastors and teachers there can be no government of the church.”
- It’s fascinating for those of us as Protestants who make such a big deal about the Reformation that our ancestors were so thoroughly steeped in the Christendom culture that they never stopped to worry about whether people were Christian, rather they argued and fought for what kind of Christian a European might be.
- Most in the church in Canada today would acknowledge that Calvin’s language of “religion breaking down” has taken place, even in our lifetime and I would argue that it will take all three offices of apostle, prophet and evangelist to respond to this moment. It’s time to take that gift of a candle down off Grandma’s shelf and light it up!
- Examples of Apostle – church planting (Cyclical), Prophet (climate change, Black Lives Matters, Reconciliation with Indigenous Canadians), Evangelism (Evangelism network).
- But one might ask, “What is the best way to address a pest problem in the church today?” Well, Paul gives us the answer in the last part of the reading. He’s already stressed the unity that Christ gives us, he is addressing the diversity of gifts that Christ gives us, finally in addition to unity and diversity he adds a third – maturity.

- Now, and this is the most amazing gift of all, Paul suggests that this unity and diversity of the Christian body is for a purpose – that we might become like Jesus himself – attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. No longer tossed around in a world of competing ideas and false teaching, we will be mature, we will grow up and grow into a Christ-like presence in the world. And not just as individuals but knit together as the body of Christ we call the church.
- This process of maturing in Christ has a special name in the church, one we don't use that often but has growing traction in a culture context like ours where the wider culture no longer makes people nominally Christian – Catechesis.
- This fall I will be teaching a course I love very much again – Catechesis and Community in Post-Christendom. In most seminaries it is still called something like "Adult Education" but I've gone with the language of catechesis, recognizing that Catechesis, within the Christian community, educates and equips people for missionary discipleship and evangelistic witness by building up the Body of Christ in the world. As Dallas Willard once said, "Discipleship is for the world; the church is for discipleship." Catechesis, translated from the Greek "to echo the teaching," is an interactive process in which the Word of God speaks to and through the proclaimer, the one receiving the message, and the Holy Spirit. Catechesis is a life-long process of initial call and conversion, formation, and on-going conversion. Through Word, worship, service and community, Catechesis seeks to lead all God's people missionally to an ever-deepening relationship with God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Catechesis takes many forms and includes the initiation of adults, youth and children as well as the intentional and systematic effort to enable all to grow in faith and discipleship through sanctification.
- This maturing in Christ is a lifelong practice that early Church Father Irenaeus said involved "renewing people from their old habits into the newness of Christ. Alan Krieder in his masterful work "the patient ferment of the early church" suggests that this process of maturing included what Irenaeus argued, as well as avoiding idolatry, learning

the master narrative of the gospel, focusing on the teaching of Jesus, memorizing biblical passages, imitating role models of Christian faith in the community, and fostering a culture of peace.

- What are the ways in which this local church is helping people to practice the faith in a way that is leading to a maturity in Christ?
- The good news is that Christ the gift giver is still blessing his Church. By the power of the Holy Spirit new ministries are being established, prophetic stands are being taken in the name of God's justice, people are communicating the gospel through new technologies and mediums, Christian communities are extending Christ's care for all and disciples are being equipped through the teaching of the Word. As we move into a new era of Christian witness we may not have a pest problem anymore, what lies ahead involves partnering with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit who is actively at work in the world and in our lives once more calling, redeeming, forgiving, blessing and equipping... Amen.