

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
June 21, 2020; 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING

Ephesians 4:1-16

¹ I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

⁷ But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

⁸ Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."

⁹ (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. 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. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴ "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵ it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

²⁶ "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³² "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and whoever does not take

up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

SERMON

Life after Surgery

Rev. Martin McGeachy

I can't tell you how many movies I've seen where two friends decide they need to make a pact, and they take out a pocketknife and, in what seems to me a very Hollywood moment, run the blade over their palms so they can mingle their blood with a handshake, very unsound medically—and actors always wince, and then they're fine. And I think, NO! I love you man, but I am not slicing my hand open, and if I did, I wouldn't wince, I would scream like a banshee! I've cut myself in the kitchen, and that stuff hurts! I spoke with a parishioner this week who had surgery, and was free of pain, thank God—that's not always what I hear from folks—and I was reminded of something another minister told me once: "You know the definition of minor surgery, don't you? Surgery done to someone else."

Surgery is serious business, and you'd better have a skilled surgeon. I want my doctor to be the best, and inspired by the Holy Spirit with the hands of healing. How fortunate that Christ, the great healer, is the surgeon we've been assigned for some needed care. And what brings us to the doctor, other than our insurance company's mandated annual exam? Frequently, it's the pain we're in, and as you know, that can be a gift. Often, when we have no pain, we don't realize we're sick until it's too late for the surgeon to fix the problem.

That's why I'm glad there's protesting in the streets right now for racial equity—I'm not glad about rioting or looting; you sometimes hear people refer to "the riots & protests" as a single item, but as one commentator I heard said, "Rioters riot. Protesters protest." I have hundreds of friends who are protesting, and not one is in favor of torching a Wendy's. But this is why I'm glad that voices of anger and frustration are shouting out; because they are bringing to light a pain that needs healing. The pandemic of racism has been growing like a tumor for hundreds of years in this country, and thank God for the pain that may bring us to the doctor. It's time.

And by the way, I'm sorry to preach on this for the third week in a row; I know you're sick of it. I have to laugh—I was determined not to preach another sermon about speaking out for justice, and then I saw the Scripture reading that rotated up today from the Lectionary. ³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matthew 10:34) He says He will set family members against one another. Community members, friends. Jesus says clearly to us, speak out the truth of the love of God, the justice and the salvation, and don't fear upsetting people, because Christ isn't here to bring comfort and peace when there's something wrong, but to bring that wrong to light. I do not want a doctor to look at my chart, see that I have cancer, and chemo could treat it, but because he doesn't want me to be upset, says, "Oh, you're fine. You have a little thing, but it's getting better on its own. In time it will go away."

Yes, this passage speaks to the current need of our time. The Bible does that. But it isn't just about one need. The Word of God reaches into our entire lives. The need to address our pain to move into healing is absolutely about social change and community discourse, but also about how we argue with our spouse, our children, our parents. I know that Hallmark says Father's Day is about dad having a beer and getting to watch the game undisturbed, but can we acknowledge that many folks have issues with their dads? Because dads are—gasp—human, and very imperfect, like us. Maybe today the best way you could celebrate Father's Day would be a conversation with him about your relationship, what you need and how you're hurting. Or maybe, Dad, you need to have that talk with your child today. I can't promise it will end with a healing hug. But I can promise that if you never have it, the healing will never come. Today I only have good feelings about the memory of my father, because we had a lot of difficult talks over the years, and I truly felt that when he died, we had left nothing unsaid. (Which doesn't mean he wasn't a huge nut-job; it just means I can laugh at that now.)

But Father's Day aside, today's news does continue to show that the family issue we need to talk about with our siblings is with our brothers and sisters who look or believe differently from us about racial issues. Time has shown that racism isn't going away. The cancer spreads under the surface when untreated. What will treat it? Bringing the love of Christ to it. Which means speaking the truth to it—to each other. And listening. Honestly to one another, not defensively, but with an eye and ear to trying to hear another's position with empathy. We won't always agree, but if we can argue without animosity, we can find new solutions. In conflict mediation training, we teach, "If you want to have less conflict, have more of it." Don't be so afraid of the discomfort and pain. Move through to get beyond.

I heard from colleagues recently about how their congregations are saying that they don't want to address social justice issues because they don't want people upset. No one likes to upset people. Well, I guess some people do. We all know people who love to get drama going. I don't. That's why I've done conflict mediation training; because no one needs it more than me! Ten years ago, José Ojeda and I went skydiving, and I did a tandem jump with a professional instructor. The professional wore the parachute, and was strapped to my back, and I knew he would be fine—but I was terrified. And when they opened the door to the plane and I saw how high we were, I really didn't want to jump out into the abyss. But curiously, I was somehow even more afraid of announcing to everyone on the plane that I wasn't going to do it. So we jumped. And what did I learn? That I would literally rather die than make a scene.

In some cases, White people are afraid they will do or say the wrong thing and upset Black friends. Some people are afraid that speaking up for police reform means we're against the police. NO! We support the police; we're very grateful for them. My church in Little Rock had a burglar alarm that sometimes went off at night for a variety of reasons, like bugs crawling across the motion detectors, so I occasionally had to drive out there at in the middle of the night to turn it off, and I would walk the perimeter of the building, and if everything looked ok on the outside, I'd go inside and reset it. And one night at 3am I saw a back door was open. When the police arrived, I said something to

the effect of, “So, you guys go into that dark church while I hide here in the parking lot. Thanks!” Turned out to be nothing; I’m really appreciative of those guys going into the darkness for me, metaphorically and literally.

But I am for police reform. I’m also for church reform, Presbyterian reform—our denominational motto is Reformed, Reforming, which means we sprang out of a need to reform the one Catholic church in the 16th century, and acknowledgement that we will never be through growing into our faith. I’m for USA reform. On patriotic Sundays, at Gilead we sing, “America, America, God shed Thy grace on Thee,” and we usually sing the other verses, too. Verse 2, “America, America, God mend thine every flaw,” and verse 3, “May God thy gold refine”—and no one thinks of “America the Beautiful” as critical, yet it prays for critical, God-blessed reform. I’m for Gilead reform (that’s why I’m preaching this for us, that together we may change) and I’m for Martin reform. I’m basically preaching to me, every week, and I’m grateful for the prayers of confession each week, that we have a constant opportunity to look at our need for change, and a time to promise God that we will try to be better.

Speaking up is not speaking against. The ability to admit one’s need for change isn’t weakness; it’s strength, for the denial of weakness stems from fear of vulnerability. And the truly brave is willing to actually make the change. Years ago, when I was the touring director of a children’s theatre troupe, I completely underestimated how long it would take for us to get the school where we were performing, and by the time we made it, a gym full of restless kids and anxious teachers was waiting impatiently, and watched us as we rushed to get set up. After the performance, an irate principal stormed backstage, shouting, “Who’s in charge here?” Everyone looked at me, and in a rare moment completely free from fear, I said, “I am. I’m so sorry about what happened. It was entirely my fault. I know it upset you and your children. From now on, I’m going to make sure I plan our travel time differently so we don’t put another school in this position.” And she sputtered, with nothing to say, because I’d affirmed just what she wanted to yell at me. Her anger faded. It was an important lesson for me.

A vital part of being willing to speak out is remembering to listen, too. Demand for change MUST begin with me. I am the system that needs to be changed. Gilead’s Session just adopted a corporate statement in support of the Black Lives Matter justice movement, and you can see its emphasis on what we at Gilead need to do, rather than entirely point at others:

Gilead stands in support of Black lives and the lives of all who suffer from discrimination and abuse. Jesus tells us, “Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40). When we remain silent in the face of racism, in the face of any “ism” that allows for the mistreatment of any person based on our differences, we break the commandment to love our neighbors with all our hearts.

We as Gilead Presbyterian acknowledge our need to bear witness and to speak out for justice. We vow to educate ourselves and help tear down the structures that separate us, working to embody true “liberty and justice for all.”

Ephesians 4:15 famously tells us to speak the truth in love, which is a tough thing to do. Interestingly, chapter 4 is all about unity in the community of Christ, and it acknowledges that among the faith family, divisions do arise, and they have to be addressed. “Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Did you catch that? We have to grow into Him. We are always growing, changing, reforming. The need to honestly look at ourselves and attempt to be better never goes away. I hope when I’m a hundred and one, I’m still praying a prayer of confession in church, and not just a prayer for everybody else to get their act together. Ephesians goes on... “we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.” It may feel like the body that is our culture is tearing itself apart right now, but it’s simply a matter of seeking to make sure each part is working properly, in order to build itself up in love. Let’s try not to be afraid of it.

Have you ever had a really angry person just lay into you: “You dirty rat so-and-so!!” and then said to them, “I can tell you’re really upset about this. Can you tell me more about why you’re feeling so angry?” Most clergy have had an experience like that. Sometimes that can calm a situation, and sometimes it will make that person even angrier. But while we would always pray for de-escalation and reduction of conflict, we can’t ultimately control others; we can only try to control ourselves—that’s hard enough! So today’s call to speak out for change is from you to you. Time for reform. God, defund my frightened ego!

It’s a lot easier to let go of our ego when we’re confident of how much we are valued by God (the Assurance of Pardon ALWAYS follows our Prayer of Confession, because God’s grace precedes it). Earlier, I read these words from Jesus: ²⁸ “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Now, what did you hear there? That you should fear God who might send you to hell if you’re not good enough? No, listen in context. The message is, “I know you’re afraid, but you don’t need to be. Why would you be afraid of a human being? Turn that toward God, who loves you like a Father, and who can even redeem and restore the fear of death. Daddy loves you more than you can imagine; will protect every hair on your head. Daddy loves and cares for the most common birds of the air, and loves you so much more, you will fly with angels.” Happy Father’s Day!

Just remember that our neighbor, with whom we completely disagree, is loved and valued by God that much, too, and calls us to love them with value and care while we work through our stuff.

The sword of the Lord is not a weapon used to smite God’s enemies. No, never, not from the God our father, who is as dear to us as a Daddy in a bear hug. The sword of the Lord is a surgical scalpel, designed to cut out tumors and leave the body whole.

The Lord never leaves us with mortal wounds, but immortal healing. Even if the worst befalls us, and we lose your life, for that's what we're called to risk ("Those who lose their life for my sake will find it" v.39), all will be made whole, redeemed. Dr. Jesus has said that after the surgery, when we get through rehab, there's new life. That's a promise.

Amen.