

Gentleness and Peace
Eph 4:1-3, Phil 4:2-9

Well brothers and sisters, last week we celebrated Father's Day – and to be honest it's pretty easy to put a theological spin on Father's day – if only just by saying the Lord's Prayer.

It's a bit more tricky to do that for Mother's day without getting in to teaching pagan theology, and when we celebrated Mother's day this past May we were in the middle of Season 3 of the TALK Show so I didn't get much of a chance to speak about the theological slant on Mother's day.

But... this morning as we are listening to things that we need to hear about Gentleness and Peace, I thought this would be a good time to offer a belated tip of the hat to Mother's day since the characteristics of Gentleness and Peace seem to have a universal matriarchal appeal.

It's hard to imagine a mother being able to hold and care for their newborn baby without being gentle, or trying to rock them to sleep without being peaceful.

And as mothers look after energetic little children they need to be the calm center in the storm of activity with all the temper tantrums, scraped knees and elbows and disputes over who gets to play with what toy.

And as kids grow up and families get older, maybe you remember from your experience that your mother was the peacekeeper in the family. When tempers or tensions would flare up between siblings and spill over into harsh words and fighting, mother would be there with kind words and wisdom.

After all – mothers want to see their children getting along and at peace with each other.

And if we had crossed the line, and angered our father – then mother would step in to calm him down and ask us, more reasonably, to step back from that line.

And eventually we also learned to keep our mother's peace as well – because as we all found out sooner or later" if mamma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."

Because the truth is friends, that for all our vaunted memories of a mother's gentleness and peace, it had its limits as well.

And those limits are varied – because not all mothers have the same level of patience, not all mothers are equally equipped with relational skills, and some mothers carry extra personal baggage or have health issues...

So, that can make it more difficult to consistently and reliably exude that calm gentle peaceful character which is so essential to motherhood and a healthy family life.

Now brothers and sisters in Christ, gentleness and peace are also essential to a healthy church family life as well.

And as we look at what the apostle Paul has to say to us about gentleness and peace this morning from Philippians 4, what we need to hear is that his first concern is about how this plays out in God's family and how it affects our ability to witness.

Christ's command for us "to Go" in Matthew 28:19 to "*and make disciples of all nations*" also means "as you are going about your daily business – make disciples..."

And as we remember the impact which our mothers had or didn't have on our faith in Jesus Christ - we can certainly see that the Christian faith and making disciples is more "caught" in the day to day interactions we have with significant people, than it is "taught" in specific classes and bible studies.

So what we need to hear is a reminder to watch what people are catching from us as a Church as we work to make disciples of all nations – especially that part where Jesus says "*teaching them to obey all I have commanded you.*" (Matt 28:20) What are people catching from us?

Now the Apostle Paul knows all about this dynamic – and he not only reminded the Philippians about it in his letter to them, but the Ephesians as well – as we read this morning...

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (Eph 4:1-13)

So here we have that link again, between “the Calling” we have received to make disciples of all nations and how we live our lives, especially with regards to the unity of the church – and over the past month we’ve been looking at the ways in which trials and offense can break that unity - so this morning, this is where the gentleness and peace comes in.

Because friends, keeping the unity of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ is a critical part of our witness – *so that the world may know that God has sent Jesus Christ* (John 17:23)

And it’s also a critical part of the body functioning properly, with each one of us doing our respective job or task in the team-sport of disciple-making.

And we know that this unity is threatened by the parts of our character that have not been Christianized or sanctified yet, which lead to unhealthy and destructive conflict.

Those parts of ourselves that really want us to pursue our right, to be right; when we are right... do you know what I’m talking about?

Those times when a fellow Christian does wrong, or does us wrong - and we know that it’s wrong, and something in us just needs to stand up against that wrong. We’ve genuinely been offended, hurt, or insulted by another member’s words or deeds and it needs to be dealt with, it has to be responded to.

Brothers and sisters in Christ – we need to hear that a large part of the offense in these situations is the sense of betrayal that we feel about a fellow Christian wronging us in this way.

We expect better from them, we’ve probably seem better from them – but in this situation a side of them has come out which kind of unnerves us and perhaps makes us wonder what

they are really like? If they really are truly Christians who are saved?

It's sort of like the time we first saw our mom lose it - and she wasn't so patient and gentle with us or our siblings.

And we need to be aware of this friends, because this extra level of expectation around Christian character opens us up to an extra level of temptation to judge them.

So not only might we be right about our right to be right in regards to the offense, we're probably also correct that a follower of Christ should not do what has been done – at least we would never do something like that!!

So now we're tempted with judging their character and with self-righteousness. And you know what? We've never even considered that perhaps our fellow Christian's action or words towards us is in reaction to something that we did that offends them – and we might not even be aware of it!

So you see how important it is for an offended party to follow Matt 18! - but they didn't so now they've offended us, we've been wronged and we're tempted to judge their character and proclaim our own self-righteousness – and now we have to follow Matt 18 and respond somehow to what has happened with this fellow Christian.

But we're not really in the best place to engage in the sort of confrontation which Jesus recommends in Matt 18:15 where we go and point out to our fellow brother and sister how they have sinned against us.

In fact that conversation may only cause further offence because there's good chance they'll turn around and tell us what we did to offend them. And we'll both be further offended because we don't believe their reaction to our action should put them out like that.

And you have two people in the church who are both right about their right to be right about the things each other has done wrong – the unity and harmony of the church is now

threatened and the conflict risks becoming divisive and destructive – and that is a bad witness to guests and visitors.

Now a situation like this had developed in the Philippian church between two of the “church mothers” if you will.

Two influential matriarchs of the congregation, Euodia and Syntyche were at odds over some unresolved issue, and Paul was concerned for the unity and harmony of the Church.

And I think we instinctively know that we risk escalating things so most of the time we just quietly hold on to our right to be right and we just avoid the person who has offended us and keep them at arm’s length, but we risk carrying a grudge.

But this produces shallow, false community – because how can you have real relationships when you don’t want to risk being honest about how you’re feeling with other people? As we noted, that can often only make things worse.

So what do we do friends? Well we need to work on forging our character with gentleness and peace so that we are ready to respond to the times when - **not if, but when** - we come into conflict with each other.

So, let’s look at this scripture passage in Philippians 4 and as we do so – our prayer is that the Holy Spirit would use the Word to forge gentleness and peace into our Christian character to be used for the unity of the church towards our proclamation of the Gospel of Christ.

And sometimes – that’s all it takes... the reminder that it’s not all about us and our concerns, but that it’s about our mission together in making disciples, it’s about God’s Kingdom first; *“seek first the kingdom of God”* (Matt 6:33)

So Paul starts his appeal to Euodia and Syntyche and the rest of the believers who have taken sides with them by reminding them that they share the same mind of Christ, and asking them to remember how they have all worked together with

him as his side for the cause of the gospel, and that their names are all written in the book of life.

Now – friends, there are time when the enemy invades the church through an antagonist who masquerades as a Christian but he is not, and he needs to be called out as such.

But this is not one of those times, so right away Paul shuts the door on the temptation we encounter to start judging each other’s salvation when we are in conflict with each other.

He says *“their names are written in the book of life.”* Period. Full stop. Don’t even go there.

Which is cause for a pause – a reminder for whoever is involved in the conflict to reflect on how their names ended up written in the book of life, and we go back to that foundational humility and being forgiven sinners which we looked at last week, and taking that to heart as Paul does here, we must join him as he says; *“Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again rejoice”* (vs. 4)

We can’t help be reminded of our Lord’s words in Luke 10:20 where Jesus admonished his disciples saying, *“Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”*

Brothers and sisters, the Lord saved us while we were still sinners (Rom 5:8) and the truth is that we all have much about us that needs to still be sanctified – so rejoice that your inclusion the Kingdom of God is not dependent upon that, but because we are now in Christ and Christ is in us.

Now because Christ is in us and we are in Christ – the Lord is near... Paul continues on *“let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”* (vs. 5)

Brothers and sisters this is the key verse in this passage. If we get this... and take it to heart with the help of the Holy Spirit – conflict among us can be resolved honestly and without escalating.

But remember – our gentleness can be evident to all only because “the Lord is near.” We are in Christ and he is in us – and so we are characterized by the gentleness of Christ.

A better translation this verse is “let your gentle spirit be evident to all” because our spirit has been filled with the Holy Spirit which was poured out to unite us with Christ in salvation.

Now, not only is the Lord’s proximity to us through the Holy Spirit reason to know we have the empowerment to display gentle spirits – it’s also a reassurance that the Lord knows our situation too.

Remember Hebrews 4:15 that in Jesus Christ we have a high priest who *“has been tempted in every way, just as we are— yet he did not sin.”*

The importance of this is that Jesus knows what it is like to be right about your right to be right, and to worry that if you’re

not aggressive that you’re being passive and letting others take advantage of you.

But friends, the Lord is near! In the big scheme of things Jesus return is also near – it’s the only phase of God’s plan that is left to be completed.

When Jesus returns He will set everything right – He will bring justice. (Is 42:3) which means that you can trust Jesus with your right to be right about being right, and give it over to him to worry about and release yourself from that and it needn’t stand in the way of resolving conflict.

So, now that this is all clearly grounded in Jesus Christ – what does it mean to be “gentle?”

Well to continue with our motherhood example that we’ve been working with this morning, this biblical gentleness is best described as a “sweet reasonableness.”

A disposition where people know they can approach you to speak with you about anything, without fear of your reaction – sort of like how mothers should be right? Even if they know it will be upsetting or disappointing you know you can go and speak to them about it.

Now honestly brothers and sisters in Christ, if we are able to let our “sweet reasonableness” be known to all – then it becomes very easy to approach each other to work out any conflicts that will come up from time to time.

You see “sweet reasonableness” isn’t a pretense that nothing bothers us, it doesn’t mean that we always speak in soft melodic tones, and that we don’t express our hurt or frustration in appropriate honest ways...

Sweet reasonableness is being approachable and willing to take a stance of working out conflicts. And if you are in the position of having to go and speak to someone – your sweet reasonableness includes the awareness that you may have inadvertently done something to contribute to the conflict.

Sweet reasonableness is a commitment to seeing justice done in a way that does not injure other people in the process, giving up the desire we might have to see that process injure them because of how they may have injured us.

Let your gentle spirit be evident to all. The Lord is near....

Now – what do we do if that gentle spirit is not there in one or more of the parties involved in the conflict? Especially if we are the kind of people who might want to step in and make the parties involved “be gentle!” and resolve things.

Well friends Paul’s advice is not to meddle or triangulate or try to solve the conflict on behalf of the people involved. Instead he writes “*do not be anxious about anything* (that’s why we meddle in things) but in every situation, by prayer and petition present your requests to God”

So we are to pray and ask God to change people’s hearts and spirits so that they are gentle and freed up from the right to be right about being right. Plus we pray that the Holy Spirit

will convict them, show them how the unity of the body is at risk and thus the mission to make disciples is at risk - so they will be motivated to resolving the conflict.

And we are to pray this – with thanksgiving! Why? Because friends - conflict in the church and among Christians is not a bad thing. Conflicting views, opinions, misunderstandings etc... are all opportunities for us to move into closer and greater understanding of each other.

And it is how the Lord is working to bring things to the surface in our lives that need sanctification and help us see that – it is part of God’s plan.

Realizing this brings about the peace of God that will guard our hearts and our thoughts as we know that God is working through all things to make us more and more like Jesus Christ.

And lastly, as we wait for God to bring other people, or ourselves, to that place where we have a gentle spirit that is

evident to all – we need to co-operate with the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work.

So Paul instructs us to take into account whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, anything that is excellent or praiseworthy... (vs. 8)

Because as we take these things into account in other’s lives and in our own lives we are less likely to stay overly focused on that one particular issue or offense which is at the root of the conflict.

Additionally as we make ourselves intentionally take notice of these things we come to the realization that this is the evidence of the Holy Spirit is at work – and so we are encouraged that the Holy Spirit will eventually bring about that gentle spirit needed to resolve conflict and restore harmony and protect unity will come eventually as well.

So we can continue to pray for it and not become anxious.

This is what Paul did – and it’s why he tells the Philippians “whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice!”

In other words this is how we work towards bringing about a gentle spirit in the lives of people in the church so that we can remain united – this is what we must do friends.

And the irony in all of this brothers and sisters is that we can only truly test our Christian character - and whether or not we actually have gentle spirit - when there is genuine conflict and honest disagreement.

So friends, do not hear this message as a call to stifle conflict and disagreement among ourselves, but rather as the call to use such times as the opportunity to allow the Holy Spirit to forge gentleness and peace into our Christian character.

So as we wrap up this message, dealing with the last chapter of Philippians and how our character is so critical to our

mission – let us receive the encouragement from what the Apostle Paul wrote at the beginning of this letter...

That we can be *“confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”* (Phil 1:6)

Amen.