



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## *A Taste of Heaven*

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ AUGUST 14, 2022

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### **Introduction**

It is one of our family traditions. Perhaps it's one of yours as well! Imagine with me that it's a hot, humid, summer day in Southwest Florida. On summer days, there is nothing better than being close to the water. Though we do not take advantage of it as often as we should, given our proximity, our family loves to visit the beach. We typically spend just a few hours there, just about enough time that we have to apply sunscreen once. Then, the time comes to pack up all the beach gear, load up in the car, and begin our trek back east on Bonita Beach Road. So routine is this experience, that our van knows almost instinctively—the blinker goes on nearly automatically—to turn right on Vanderbilt Drive. Why? Because there is nothing better after being out in the heat than partaking in some ice cream. When the blinker goes on there are wild cheers from the back seat.

If you are a frequent flyer of Royal Scoop—like our family is—then you know there is a great selection of tasty flavors displayed on the wall. It can be almost overwhelming. Here's the great part of an ice cream shop and how it relates to our message for today: If you aren't quite sure how to narrow down the options, you can sample flavors to "try before you buy." For example, you can just say, "I'd like to try the Imperial River of Fudge." And the person behind the counter will locate a tiny spoon to give you just a taste of what you will soon enjoy. The purpose of the sample is to make the sale! They know that just a taste will make you long for more. So the sale is made; and the contrast between the heat of summer and the refreshing cool treat in

your belly is the stuff that dreams are made of. Keep this image in your mind, because now that I've created a longing for ice cream, your job is to still pay attention to the message!

### **Scripture Reading**

Scripture contains this powerful declaration by God about His Word:

“As the rain and the snow  
    come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it  
    without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
    so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
    It will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire  
    and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

Isaiah 55:10-11, NIV

So it is with confidence that we turn to God's eternal and unchanging, living and active Word this morning; specifically, to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4. This passage marks a transition in the letter. In the first three chapters, Paul has been articulating that God's intention for humanity is harmony, not disharmony; peace, not hostility; unity, not division. Then, by tracing the redemptive arc of God from the beginning of creation to the climax of history—Christ's Death and Resurrection—Paul proclaims God's intention to restore the unity and peace that God purposed for creation, which He declares Christ has made through His death and resurrection. Paul has written:

God made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ... to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Ephesians 1:9-10, NIV

He goes on to declare that in Christ, God has torn down the walls of hostility that have long separated humanity one from another (and we will look at just a few of them in a minute). Paul continues:

His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.

Ephesians 2:15-16, NIV

This is the mystery that was revealed in Christ to us, the church. The church, then, according to Ephesians, is intended to be the embodiment of this new reality, conveying with our very presence and by the power of the Holy Spirit, God's peace to a fragmented and fractured world. In other words, we are like a sample of ice cream on a hot day: a foretaste of heaven. In contrast to a divided and hostile world scourged by sin, the united church gives a glimpse of God's intentions.

To this hope Paul has been pointing, and the passage for today is the hinge upon which the letter turns, from unpacking the significance of Christ's activity and the hope of unity therein to the practical implications for the church. Paul turns from theology and the vision for God's future to how Christians are to live in the present. It is likely Paul wrote these words from a prison in Rome, as he neared the end of his life. Hear, now, the Word of the Lord:

**A**s 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. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6, NIV

These words of unity and peace could not demonstrate a more dramatic contrast to what we commonly observe today.

### **The Modern Dividing Walls of Hostility**

Have you noticed that our world seems to be becoming even more divided? One does not have to look far to find examples of “modern dividing walls of hostility.” On the global scale, since the end of February younger generations have been witnessing the atrocities of war unfolding in Eastern Europe as Russia has challenged Ukraine’s right to statehood and invaded its neighbor. Death and destruction continue to be a devastating daily reality as the Ukrainians urgently defend their liberty against their aggressors. It is always dangerous to forecast the future (just ask a weather person), but when nation goes to war against nation like this, it frequently results in hostilities that last generations. I expect that this will be true for Ukrainians and Russians for years to come. Further, the manner in which the invasion awakened a unified Western response has surprised many. In reaction to the West’s unity, there have been some eerie alliances beginning to solidify in the East. Globally, our world is seeing greater and alarming division.

The division that is taking place on a global scale is mirrored in our own nation—not in overt war, but in competing visions for our nation. The lines of ideological division seem to be widening and the very heart of our nation seems to be exposed and vulnerable right now. Just as in cardiac surgery, where following the initial incision, rib spreaders are inserted and leveraged to crack the ribcage to gain access to the heart, today, our ideological divisions have seemed to crack open our national chest, making everybody feel vulnerable. It’s playing out in politics, in the courts, and in education, and all of us are feeling it. I had a conversation with someone recently who said, “I used to identify myself as a party-line progressive, but I was in a meeting where I felt that I didn’t belong anymore.” In other words, the dividing lines are widening so much that this progressive felt left behind. Many who used to be considered on the extremes are no longer!

Locally, our neighbors seem to be more hostile toward one another. Have you ever attended an HOA meeting? Those are a fun microcosm of humanity. Or consider the incidence of road rage: Is it just me, or do you, too, sense that there are more and more such incidents happening around I-75? Hostility is felt in our families, on our streets, in our neighborhoods, in our schools, and even in our churches.

Candidly, this division exists anywhere humanity goes to meet, including the digital world that didn't exist when the scriptures were written. Today, there is a sort of neotribalism which exists online. People can find support and community for their own convictions and thus "tribes" are beginning to form where individuals are becoming more entrenched in their thinking. It suffices to say that humanity's default mode of operation seems to be creating lines of division—dividing walls of hostility, as Ephesians says—that slice between people. It is all symptomatic of the problem that is common to all of us.

### **The Problem: Sin**

As Christians, our core conviction is that humanity has a **sin** problem. And sin's toxicity is actually the catalyst that stirs division and hostility—individually, relationally, and corporately. At its most primal level, sin underpins every conflict, division, war, and everything that separates humanity from one another. The reason that sin affects every relationship is because sin is even at work causing us to be disintegrated and divided in our own minds. This is what the scriptures refer to as human sinful nature. Sin disintegrates our minds and we project this disintegration into every sphere of human interaction. A little later in Ephesians chapter 4, Paul writes that those who live under the dominion of sin "are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts." This is why commentator William Barclay has observed:

The world, as we see it without Christ, is a divided, disunited, fragmented world. What is true of the world of our outer nature is true of human nature itself.

In summary, our inner lives are fragmented by sin and it is the root source of the disintegrating of the world. It is why you and I feel as though the world is spinning out of control at times. It is why we are dissatisfied. It is why we do not experience peace. It is why power is abused and corrupted. It is why we struggle to forgive. It is why families have seemingly irreconcilable conflicts, and marriages and friendships fail. Sin is like a cancer that starts within a single cell—an individual life—and if left untreated, may metastasize and infect the whole body. The global, national, corporate, local, and familial disunity all stems from a common source: the brokenness that is in the human soul—our sinful nature.

### **The Solution: Christ**

But here is the good news. There is a solution to the problem of sin, and that is Christ Jesus. It is because of sin that Christ came to proclaim peace, to make peace, and to tear down the dividing wall of hostility, creating unity where there has been division. How did He do that? Let's return once again to Ephesians 2.

His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.

Ephesians 2:15-16, NIV

Jesus made peace with humanity through the cross. The peace that humanity has missed, longed for, and pursued in all the wrong ways has been made with God through Jesus on the cross. And this reality can begin to change you and me from the inside out. It can heal the brokenness in our hearts, minds, and souls. And once that healing begins in us, it can change how we live in the world. Just as our sinful nature has infected every human relationship and institution, the spiritual nature given to us through faith in Christ can begin to mend our world. Note that it happens not from the top down, but as a grassroots effort that begins in a single heart and spreads.

## Paul's Challenge

Ephesians 4 is the hinge where Paul challenges the church to live into the peace and unity that God has made. Paul writes that Christians are to make every effort to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” As Christians, we are called to unity (as opposed to the disunity of the world). We are a people that longs to draw people together, not divide them. We fight for peace and not conflict. Here are a couple of observations about this peace.

First, the peace that we are invited to keep is primarily among other believers. The truth is that Jesus came to proclaim peace and yet He was met with opposition and hostility that would ultimately cost Him His life. So while Jesus proclaimed peace and procured it, Jesus was able to disagree with and even challenge ideas that stood in contrast to God's ways. He did so while simultaneously embodying grace and love. So, too, the peace and unity we proclaim is not mere tolerance, nor is it another amorphously, squishy term: kindness. Rather, we are to keep peace in the manner in which Jesus did. We stand for love and grace, but equally for truth and justice and righteousness. So, the litmus test for whether we are being faithful to this is not whether or not our Christian convictions stir conflict. At times, they will.

Frankly, claiming that Jesus is Lord has always led to division. On an individual level, following Jesus requires our turning from our old ways—separating ourselves from our past, sinful ways—and accepting the Way of Jesus. This is a division from our disintegrated life, in order to unite to a redeemed life connected to God. Moreover, at times, our commitment to Christ creates strain within families. Jesus spoke about this in the New Testament (Luke 12) when He said that following Him would lead to the division of families, where children and parents would even be at odds. The easiest way to observe this is by looking to the story of those who convert to Christianity from other religions across the world. To accept Christ in a Muslim family may lead to being cut off from the family and community. (Truth be told, it may be the story in reverse in many families in America.

Though you have faith in Christ, your children or grandchildren may have wandered.) To accept Christ as Lord—to accept the Gospel—can and does sometimes lead to being disowned by one’s family or community. So just because Christ tore down the dividing walls of hostility does not mean that following Christ will lead to unity with those who are far from the Lord. Peace and unity are extensions of the Gospel. **Sacrificing the Gospel will not create peace and unity.**

Second, this oneness about which Paul speaks was to be true in our sphere of influence, primarily with other believers. As those who are committed to Christ, we are to take on the mind of Christ, to be filled with the Spirit of God, and in doing so, to be united under one God. The mystery of God that was revealed to the church was that God was making peace with humanity through the cross and tearing down age-old hostilities that used to exist between people groups. In the context of the early church, cultural divisions separated different people groups. One biblical example was the hatred that Samaritans and Jews had for one another. This cultural division was why the parable of the Good Samaritan was so compelling and challenging. It was completely unexpected. There were also divisions between Jews and Gentiles. However, in Christ, Paul declares, believers are united across socio-economic, racial and ethnic, and any other human-made dividing lines. In Christ, that which unites us is greater than that which divides us, by far. The peace that God made and the unity of the Spirit are to reign among believers. This is the realm in which we are to make every effort to seek unity.

Third, this unity among believers, then, is to be a foretaste of what heaven is like right now and will be like for us someday. What happened in Jesus Christ was that no single group of people was “the chosen people.” Rather, the gospel is for all nations and tribes and tongues. Therefore, Paul points to how things will ultimately be in heaven. Heaven looks much more diverse than what our mind’s eye may imagine. If your imagination of heaven looks like those sitting in this room or if it sounds like those sitting in this room, your vision is too small. Revelation declares that there will be a great multitude

from every tribe, tongue, and nation sitting before the Lamb and worshipping God. Still, the church is united and at peace in worship. The unity that exists now in heaven is to be embodied in advance here on earth by the church, which makes the church a foretaste. Remember the sample of free ice cream that you can try before you buy? On a hot day, nothing tastes better. The contrast of the cool ice cream on the hot day makes it all the more refreshing. This is what the church is to be like to a world ravaged by divisions. In a world that seems endlessly fragmented by divisions and hostilities, we are to be the foretaste of God's peace and unity. It is part of our witness! How sweet and compelling it will be to the world. This is part of our evangelism to the world.

### **A Powerful Witness**

Recently I traveled to Asheville, North Carolina for a time of personal retreat at The Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove. This being my first visit, I spent some time poking around and looking through the history of Billy Graham's life which lines the walls. I was particularly struck by one image. It was captured in June of 2007 during the grand opening of the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, North Carolina, built upon the site of Graham's childhood home.

Graham had a tremendously impactful ministry that spanned almost 70 years and 185 countries around the world. He literally shared the good news of Jesus Christ with over 250 million people. So powerful was his preaching that he was deemed "America's Pastor" and even "the pastor to the presidents." During his lifetime, he was able to sit personally with 13 presidents, from Harry Truman to Donald Trump, and to spiritually advise and befriend many of them.

As such, when the Billy Graham Library was dedicated in June of 2007, three former presidents (Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton) were in attendance and spoke of the personal impact of Graham's proclamation of the gospel. Following the dedication, a photograph was taken in front of the newly-minted library.

In that image, standing before windows in the shape of a cross which reflect the beauty of creation, was America's Pastor with his son and three U.S. presidents who, frankly, spanned the political spectrum.

What struck me about this image was that Billy Graham was so fiercely committed to the gospel that he was initially opposed to the idea of building a library with his name on it. He felt this way until it was framed as a means of being an enduring proclamation of the gospel message. Graham said at the dedication, "This building is just a building. It's an instrument, it's a tool for the Gospel. The primary thing is the Gospel of Christ." He made no concessions of the gospel. Still, because of his commitment to the gospel, during the dedication, Billy Graham said of the politicians in attendance, "I love them all. Regardless of politics and regardless of who stands for what."

Like our Savior, Graham was able to not only preach with conviction, never wavering from the message, but also to engage in enduring relationships with people inside and outside of the church. How could he do this? I suspect that, following after his Savior and the advice of Paul, he took seriously Ephesians 4.

### **Building Peace and Unity**

First and foremost, this type of presence is accomplished only by the Spirit. This type of unity is only possible if we are nurturing our spiritual lives by the Word of God and communion with the Holy Spirit. This is our source. It is not possible by our own power. Then, empowered by the Holy Spirit, God separates us from our former way of life and cultivates a new nature.

There are four graces which God will cultivate in the believer which build up peace and unity: humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearing love.

In place of pride (the overindulged focus on the self, or even self-obsession), God cultivates in us humility—the ability to consider the needs of others ahead of our own. Humility in the ancient world, as

in ours, was regarded as more of a weakness than a virtue. It was something to be despised. However, for the Christian, humility is perhaps the supreme virtue, for from it flow all the others. Humility allows us to hold our convictions sincerely, and also honor another who disagrees with us.

In place of harshness or reactive anger, God develops in us gentleness. So, in Christian community, when someone goes on the attack and we are on the receiving end, the Christian does not respond in kind, with the same vitriol. Rather, he or she recognizes that a harsh word stirs up anger, but a gentle answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1). This takes incredible emotional intelligence and strength, which the Spirit of God can form in us.

In the place of anxiety, impatience and rashness, God cultivates in us His patience. God is supremely patient, not desiring that any of us perish, but that we all come to a knowledge of the Lord, He patiently pursues us. And when the Spirit of God lives in us, we are graced with patience.

Finally, we are given the ability to bear with one another in love. This is perhaps the most difficult of the lot. We can humble ourselves by putting others' needs ahead of our own. We can learn to be gentle, even in the face of anger. We can develop patience. But to bear with one another in love is a deeper and more costly love. This is the love that Christ demonstrated on the cross. Jesus, bearing with us in love, offered His life to save the ones who rejected Him. This, brothers and sisters, is what we are called to.

God has made unity and peace possible with Him through the cross. God has tasked us to let unity and peace reign in the church through the gospel message and the power of the Holy Spirit. And God longs to develop humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearing love in each of us, such that we become a foretaste of heaven for our broken and divided world. How sweet our peace and unity will taste in our broken and fragmented world. Amen? ■



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