

Thank God for Painful People!

A sermon on Ephesians 4:1-16 by Nathan Nettleton, 1st August 2021

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Message

There will always be people in the church you find difficult to get on with, and it is their presence that will really enable you to grow in your ability to love.

Sermon

I would be a rich man if I had a dollar for every time someone's told me that churches are supposed to be places where everybody loves each other and lives in unity and harmony and peace. Usually they have just come up against an uglier reality of a church full of prickly, difficult, fractious, annoying, dysfunctional, or even downright toxic people who nobody in their right mind would be happy to be anywhere near.

“Where is the church that Jesus came to create?” they ask me. “If people have committed themselves to following Jesus, how come they can't live in love and unity?”

The belief that life in the church should be a consistent experience of being surrounded by wonderfully gracious loving beautiful people is widespread, popular, understandable, and completely wrong! It's not just a bit naive; it's completely wrong.

The passage we heard tonight from Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus contains both a wonderfully idealistic vision of the church and some very down to earth reality checks about the church, and it contains a big challenge to us here at SYCBaps. I think it calls us to ask some hard questions about how we are going to be church together into the future; hard questions that we possibly skirted around a bit in our conversations yesterday.

Let's look at the beautifully expressed idealistic vision first. “There is one body and one Spirit; we are all living by one calling. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. And there is one God who is father and mother to everyone on earth.” Oneness, oneness, oneness! Unity, unity, unity! “With Christ as the one head, we all grow into one body with every part working properly and harmoniously. United as one body in Christ we achieve our destiny: full maturity, being completely like Christ.”

It is a glowing picture of Christian community – people totally committed to one another, loving one another and prepared to lay down their lives for one another. People who enjoy one another's company and look out for one another; people who encourage one another, support one another, and care for one another. A wonderful vision, but is it realistic? Are there any churches like that? Is our church like that? Was the church as Paul experienced it like that?

No! And when you read the whole of this passage you realise that Paul was well aware that it was not the everyday reality of life in the church. He's singing the vision, but he's also begging people to try hard to live up to the vision. Paul knows that it's not easy and he knows that it will take a long time and a lot of hard work before we even get close to it. Listen to the reality phrases he uses: “Bear with one another . . . make every effort to maintain the unity . . . be humble, be gentle, be patient . . . speak the truth in love . . . grow up!”

So Paul is not willing to let go of the vision of oneness and harmony, but he is under no illusions about the reality gap. He is acknowledging how tough it is going to be for any community to live up to the vision, to grow into the vision.

But perhaps a little surprisingly, Paul seems quite optimistic and hopeful about the process of growing into that vision. He seems to think that the challenge of dealing with the reality is a positive thing, that it is something we should welcome because it is the very thing that will stimulate our growth as individuals.

I think the logic goes something like this. For each of us as individuals, our goal is to grow into full Christlikeness, to be just like Jesus. To become just like Jesus, we need to become completely and utterly loving – able to love even our enemies, able to love even the people who are deliberately and maliciously crucifying us. To become that loving we will need plenty of practice learning to love people who are really hard to love. Ariarne Titmus didn't become a multi-gold medalist by only ever testing herself against five year old beginners. You only become the best at something by repeatedly working at it in circumstances where the odds are against you.

The church teams us up with a bunch of people who are often not at all easy to love. Some are easier than others, but they are a mixed bag. As a mixed bag of often obnoxious and unlovable people with a vision of unity and harmony, the church is a great opportunity for us to begin to stretch our ability to be really loving. And because of that, learning to love one another in the church is one of the basic disciplines that we need to work at if we want to become more and more like Jesus.

Every one of us in this congregation has at least a couple of other people here who we find particularly difficult to relate to, to get on with, and to love. And probably everyone of us is that particularly irritating person to someone else. Most of us have times when we think that church would be much better if it was made up of people we could relate to better and if we got rid of some of the really painful people. Rubbish!

If everyone in the church was easy to get along with, then the church wouldn't stretch you and challenge your ability to love and call you to grow. It wouldn't be the same stimulus to confront the limitations in your own ability to love others.

There are lots of other places you can go to mix with people like yourself. There are plenty of special interest groups around that are naturally self-selecting and become groups of like-minded compatible people. That's why they can be much more enjoyable and harmonious than most churches. They are just little comfort bubbles, which can be pleasant to be part of and we all need some of them, but they are not the places that challenge you to grow into the image of Jesus.

I think that one of the biggest challenges facing this congregation at the present time is that we don't see enough of each other to force us into facing the difficulties in our relationships. This was already a significant issue for us long before the pandemic prompted our pivot to being a church that specialises in online liturgy. Even back then, we were mostly only seeing each other for a few hours a week, and we could tolerate the irritations for that long so we didn't have to face them and deal with them.

Nowadays we see each other online more than in the flesh, and while that has actually created opportunities to deepen our relationships in many ways, it also enables us to even more easily avoid many of the things that irritate us about one another. The loss of tasks like cleaning up in the church kitchen and packing up the hall and sorting out who's driving who home has deprived us of a lot of opportunities to irritate and frustrate one another. After an online liturgy, nobody cares if you leave the toilet seat up, or don't hang up the tea towels properly, or stack the dishwasher all wrong. And if someone is being particularly obnoxious, you can just say, "Got to go," and press that "Leave" button and they vanish from your awareness just like that.

It's often when we try to work together and plan together and make stuff happen together that we run up against each other's difficulties and have to face up to our own intolerance and ungraciousness and hear the call to grow up. That was one of the good things about the time we spent working together yesterday. It was online, but sustained enough and important enough to begin to prickle at times. And if all goes well and those action groups that formed yesterday afternoon continue to work on stuff together, hopefully they will do enough of it to really annoy the crap out of each other and have to work through it. The growth from that will actually be more important than most of the tasks, and that's not to downplay the tasks.

Let me tell you about something that happened for me yesterday. I've been noticing more often lately that when I find myself feeling a bit grumpy or irritated by someone, the thing that is irritating me often turns out to be something that is a mirror image of me. Sometimes it is funny little things. Like nearly every time I feel a bit peeved about someone missing their cue in one of the liturgies, and keeping everyone waiting, within ten minutes I miss one myself and menacingly scan the faces for the guilty party before realising it is me!

My story from yesterday is a bit like that, but bigger. It's not about people who really piss me off though, because I can't talk about the big ones in a public sermon. This is nowhere near on that scale. If you're one of the other two people in this story, you'll know who you are, but don't panic. It's me that comes out of this story needing a kick up the arse, not you.

For our work together yesterday, we were using a computer app that most of us had never used before, and to make it trickier, we were using two apps at the same time and jumping back and forward between them. So for the second time in eighteen months, I had a week where much of my pastoral contact with you lot was about providing computer tutorials.

There are a couple of you who are blessed with a great lack of confidence about anything to do with computers, and so my little tutorials do not proceed easily. And over the course of the week, I have numerous moments of considerable frustration over my inability to teach these things in a way that you can retain and reproduce unassisted the next day. This is actually very good for me, because it shows me a lot about myself, and yesterday it suddenly gave me a huge and uncomfortable but ultimately very helpful revelation about myself.

I suddenly saw that what these two computer challenged people were going through was an experience that I know intimately. I frequently have exactly the same experience, not about computers, but about something else. When I was looking at those two and feeling frustrated, I was actually looking into the mirror and seeing myself, but I hadn't realised it.

As most of you know, I speak reasonably good Spanish, but all along the journey of learning it as an adult, failures of confidence have been my biggest obstacle. Even now in a Spanish conversation, I sometime have this experience where I badly lose the thread and my confidence falls off the cliff, and I'm like a rabbit in the headlights. In that moment my brain goes into this paralysis and doesn't believe that it can understand a single word of Spanish, and consequently, it can't. My brain freezes in terror and can no longer even try.

Well yesterday, when I was getting slightly irritated by the look of frightened bewilderment on those two faces, I suddenly had a Holy Spirit moment where I realised that I was looking into the mirror. That look was me in another context. In a flash, irritation was replaced with recognition and understanding. I knew what you were going through, and I grew up a bit in that moment. And I'm grateful to the two of you for holding up the mirror to me, even though you had no idea you were doing it.

As I said, I have plenty of other relationships that are off the difficulty scale compared to those two, so I'm not claiming that my little growing up moment yesterday is some massive transformation. But every little step helps. And that's a huge part of what churches are for.

If we make ourselves comfortable in patterns of church life that insulate us from difficult and irritating people; if we manage to live around those people without bumping up against their irritants, we will be avoiding the main point of the church, the impetus to push each other to grow up and become more like Jesus.

At the moment, our pattern of relating doesn't often expose the limits of our capacities for love. We can keep our relating fairly superficial and so keep our incompetence hidden. And on the occasions when trouble does flare up, the individuals involved are not constantly faced with each other so that they have to deal with the conflict, and the rest of us are not constantly faced with the conflict so that we push them and help them to sort it out. We can just form an uneasy truce and miss the opportunity to put in some hard work on our capacity to love. In so doing, we are missing out on the opportunities the church can provide for stimulating us and needling us into growing towards maturity in the image of Jesus.

If you are fair dinkum about following in the footsteps of Jesus and becoming more and more like him, you have to push yourself into uncomfortable and challenging situations. These might not be huge. I know we have people here who feel like a rabbit in the headlights when they think about going into one of the randomly selected breakout rooms for chat at the end of the liturgy. "It might be uncomfortable. I don't know who I might end up with. It could be someone who I find really difficult."

Yep. That's the point. In fact, pray that you do, because that's why you're here. If you really want to grow into the image of the one who kept loving one who betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver, and prayed forgiveness for his executioners even as they drove the nails into his flesh, then you've going to have to deal with much much bigger challenges than awkward people in a breakout room, but that would be a good place to start. And if you randomly end up with only your best friends in there, I'm sorry. We'll pray that the algorithm gods give you a bigger challenge next week.

Any church where all the members are already seasoned veterans who have totally mastered the art of loving one another has obviously failed to draw in and keep anybody new for a very

long time. If the church is doing its job, it will not only be helping us to grow, it will be attracting in lots of people who are thoroughly unloving and have still got that whole journey of growth ahead of them. Both lots need each other.

The church does not exist to make us comfortable and happy. It exists to inaugurate the culture of God on earth. And to do that, it needs to confront us repeatedly and regularly with the truth about how much growing up we've still got to do.

Yesterday, it confronted me with what an asshole I was being in my petty irritations with a couple of you. It gave me the opportunity to grow up just a little bit more. I'm a tiny fraction more suited to the culture of God than I was before. That's what it is all about.

If the challenge of loving one another in the church doesn't sometimes seem so hard that it leaves you feeling like Ariarne Titmus throwing up at the side of the pool after a gruelling six hour training session, then you're not doing it right. The training regime for becoming just like Jesus is going to make preparing for olympic gold look like child's play, and if you're not up for it, what did you get baptised for?

I think that the patterns of worship we have developed here are unique and precious, and that they have contributed to much growth in all of us. I think that they have given us a growing vision of who Jesus is and how he gives himself to us in self-sacrificing love. I think too, that they have given many of us a growing hunger to find ways of living in grateful response to that self-giving that have real substance and integrity. But the challenge to find ways of doing that together still lies mostly ahead of us, and the recent changes have made it easier for us to succumb to the temptation to hide in the change rooms and avoid diving into the training pool.

If we really desire to grow fully into the image of Christ, we are going to have to first recognise that the difficult hard-to-love people in the church are gifts from God, absolutely essential to our growth. Thank God for them. And then we'll have to find ways of putting ourselves in a position where we have to live alongside and interact and cooperate with those difficult people enough to confront us frequently with the limits of our humility, tolerance and gentleness. And then we'll have to tough it out, to bear with one another in love, as we grow into a genuine mature self-sacrificing Jesus-y love.

It will be no easy road, but Jesus never promised that the fullness of life in the culture of God would come easily. The road to life follows the way of the cross.