

SERMON FOR MID-WEEK LENT 4, MARCH 30 2022

Midweek Lent 4: Mercy in Relationships

Dear fellow redeemed, our text for tonight includes a wonderful statement: **“They were all in one accord.”**

It didn’t take long, however, before the unity/accord that the early Christians experienced was threatened. Disagreements were voiced and hostilities between one another arose.

The Book of Acts even says of the relationship between the apostle Paul and Barnabas: **“There arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.”** (Acts 15:39)

As one moves on in the New Testament, the epistles of Paul to the Corinthians describe significant discord in that church.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians presents a conflict with legalists in the church. Ephesians was written to help mend a rift between the Gentile and Jewish Christians. And so goes the rest of the New Testament.

It was a challenge in the first century for Christians to be in one accord. If it was challenge for them, you can bet it’s a challenge for 21st century Christians to be in one accord. We, too, find it hard to live in harmony. Yet we are called to be at peace with one another.

This is not easy. In fact, it is difficult. We need mercy in our relationships with one another. Thankfully, God provides his mercy to us so that we can show mercy to others. We are able to live in one accord in view of God’s mercy.

Although we seek to be in one accord with each other, frequently we are in discord. Our text from Ephesians chapter 4 identifies some of the sources of discord.

Verse 29 says: **“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths.”** Corrupting talk is what Paul identifies as promoting discord. What is that corrupting talk? Paul goes on to give these descriptors: **bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice** (v. 31).

The word that is translated as “corrupting” is frequently used of food that spoils. It’s like a fresh banana. They look beautiful initially. But if I subject a banana to abuse, say if were to leave it out on a hot sidewalk for a few days, it would look and smell like something you’d never consider eating.

Why? Because the banana is corrupted.

This is true of our relationships with each other. They are beautiful and delightful when we are in one accord.

But when our relationships are subjected to the corrupting influences of bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice, things get messed up!

Even in the church sin corrupts relationships. A trusted friend gossips about you. A church leader snubs you. A colleague ridicules you. You've become the victim of corrupting talk.

Or perhaps you are the source of the corrupting discourse. Maybe you cause the decay of relationships. When someone disagrees with you in a church meeting, you resent it and seek to destroy her reputation in the congregation.

When you don't feel valued by a church leader, you make it your mission to undermine his authority.

When a decision is made that is contrary to your opinion, you are bitter and cast aspersions on the decision-makers.

When we feel wronged by others, our immediate inclination is to turn against them, seek revenge, and retaliate to harm them.

Yes, even in the church such corrupting conditions arise to destroy the sense of community.

As one frustrated pastor commented: "The commandment that is most neglected in our church is the one that says: **'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.'**"

It is for such reasons that Paul warns us in Ephesians four: **"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths."**

But that's not all that Paul says in our text. He says—**"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths"**—but immediately follows that up with a counterbalance—**"but only such [talk] as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."**

Paul the goal of our discussion should be "building up." We are not to tear down others but instead are to build them up.

This is what makes for healthy relationships in the church. It is what makes for a healthy church.

The key to constructing harmonious relationships is forgiveness. In our text Paul says: **“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”**

If we are the ones engaging in corrupting talk, we are to repent of it. As Paul says, we are to **“put it away.”**

We get rid of it through confession of sin to God and to the ones we have wronged.

Lent is a penitential season, and so especially at this time we are to confess our sins to God and to one another and seek reconciliation with those we have wronged.

The good news is that God promises forgiveness. God forgives our sins for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ: **“in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”**

God reconstructed our broken relationship with him by reconciling us to himself in Christ Jesus.

Through the suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord, he has forgiven our corruption and restored a right relationship to him. This is his mercy. This is his grace.

When we have sinned against others, when we are the source of corruption in the relationship, we confess our sins to God and to those we have wronged. When we do so, we are assured that we are forgiven by God, and we seek the forgiveness of others.

But sometimes we are not the source of the corruption but rather the recipients of it. This occurs when others slander and malign us. How are we to respond in order to be constructive in the relationship rather than to corrupt it even more?

The key is given in verse 32 of the text: **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”**

We forgive those who have sinned against us. We forgive those who have wronged us by their corrupting speech.

Why do we do this? Because, as Paul asserts, **“God in Christ forgave you.”** We forgive because we have first been forgiven. We pardon others of their wrongs against us because we have been pardoned by the mercy of God.

This isn't natural; we cannot do this by our own power, but by the power of God working through us. His forgiving power is given to us and then is channeled through us to others as we forgive them. We forgive in view of God's mercy!

Once a young preschooler was praying the Lord's Prayer out loud. She recited the words as she heard them, but they weren't quite accurate to the original text. Yet her rendition captured a significant truth.

She said: "***Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.***"

Indeed, even in the church there are others who put trash in our baskets. They deliver the corrupting talk of bitterness, anger, clamor, slander and malice.

Paul tells us to put that all away. We are to take out the trash. We do so by forgiving.

We don't let the trash putrefy in our heads and hearts. We release to God the wrongs done to us and the slander spoken against us. We forgive.

We forgive because we have been forgiven. We have been forgiven of the trash in our baskets that stank to high heaven but was removed by the passion of Christ.

"***Forgive us our trash baskets,***" we cry to God in this season of Lent. And in view of his mercy in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. In the power of his mercy and grace, we now forgive those who put trash in our baskets. **AMEN**