

**Make Every Effort**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
August 16, 2020- Outdoor/Livestream Service  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
Ephesian 3:16-4:6

LaGrave is a pretty orderly church, That's a good thing. If we have planned a sermon series, we don't often break from our plans for the sake of some current event. I think I've done it only once or twice in the 7 years I've been here. I'm going to do it again today. We are in the middle of our apologetics series, and this morning's message was supposed to be on Why is there so much violence in the Old Testament-an important question and a real question of faith for a lot of people. We will address that important question someday, but not today. Today we will take some time to reflect on something else. Today I want to reflect together on the spirit of our times.

It seems to me, and I am not alone in this, that there has been a change in mood, a change in spirit, that has been building over the last month to six weeks. When the pandemic started, when we began this lockdown and found ourselves in this Covid limbo, we were frustrated, we were anxious, but we were all determined and we were all together. We stayed at home. We learned to zoom. We washed our hands. Even though we certainly had differences, our overall attitude was, "OK. We can do this together. Let's do this everybody!" That attitude prevailed through March and April and into May. In May the numbers started to turn. Cases went down. Deaths went down. The curve flattened. We thought, I thought, the churches would be open again by July 4. We thought the Schools would fully open in the fall. The LaGrave staff even made a church reopening video outlining all the procedures that we had in place so that we could welcome you back to worship inside our beautiful sanctuary. There was light at the end of the tunnel. But then the tunnel collapsed. The numbers started coming up again. The cases started going up again and instead of moving forward, we were in reverse.

Lately it seems like people's mood has started to change. People are restless and cranky. We are cranky. I am cranky. Have any of you noticed that your temper is shorter than it used to be? Do you find yourself yelling at the TV more? Do little things set you off? Maybe it doesn't show up as anger for you. Are you crying more quickly? Are you having more trouble sleeping? I mentioned this in one of my devotions, but I'll say it again here, have you noticed that people are driving more aggressively? I've seen some of the most outrageous driving moments of my life over the last three months. People passing me going 60 miles per hour in the turning lane on Burton Street. People driving at ludicrous speed. The other day I was driving on 131 in the middle of Grand Rapids. I wasn't paying attention to my speedometer. I was just following the flow of traffic. I looked down at my speed. I was going almost 90.

You feel the restlessness in the church too. The emails are more strident. When people talk about what we should do about worship and programs, the voices are raised just a little bit. I think I can tell you that I've gotten more anonymous letters in the last months than in the rest of my ministry combined. The whole staff has been feeling the pressure, so this week we took a morning to step back and check in with each other. We were really honest about the state of our heads and our hearts and our opinions. We all went around and shared with one another, how we were feeling and how we felt about the current state of LaGrave. All of us admitted that these last months have been disorienting. We feel dislocated. We're not sure where we stand. We can

feel all the problems; we have a hard time feeling the joy and the connections. We're trying to do the right thing, we're not sure if we're succeeding.

I know we're not alone in this. Think of the institutions in your life. The places that give your life support and structure. Your church, your family, your country, your job, school. Are you more or less connected with these institutions today than you were a year ago? Are you more content with these places, or are you more frustrated? Has the level of tension gone up or down? Are there new tensions in your family? Are you irritated with your employer? Are you shaking your head at the decisions made at your church? In your school? I think I know what most of you would answer.

On Monday, the same day we met as a staff, I did my regular devotions and the passage I read was Ephesians 4:1-6. It seemed appropriate for that day, and as the week went on, I felt the Spirit was leading me to bring these words before you today. They seemed like words for such a time as this.

After reading Ephesians 4:1-6, and reflecting on it in light of everything Paul says in his letter up to the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, I would like to suggest a couple of things that Paul is saying to us. A couple of things that suggest how to be gospel people in a time when trust is low and tempers are high.

The first thing Paul tells us to do is to go and stand on the shore of the sea. 'Wait a minute,' you may be thinking, 'I don't recall hearing anything about the sea in our Bible reading.' Let me explain. Chapter 4 is a turning point in Ephesians. In chapter 4, Paul starts to tell us what to do. In chapter 4 he starts giving us suggestions about how to live as God's people. Up to this point Paul hasn't told us to do anything, he just wants us to listen. In chapters 1-3 Paul doesn't ask us to do anything, he just wants us to see something and know something. What does Paul want us to know and see?

He wants us to see God's grand plan for unity. He names that plan in chapter 1:9-10. God has made known to us the "mystery of his will." What is his will? "To bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." All things in heaven and on earth will be brought to unity in Christ, says Paul in chapter one. In chapter 2 Paul tells us that this grand unity is already happening in the church. Jews and gentiles used to be separated by a dividing wall of hostility, but now, because of Jesus' blood, they are one! Jews and gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free are now members of the same household with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. Throughout chapters 1 and 2 Paul proclaims this grand unity and tells us that we are part of this plan. Paul is really excited about God's unifying plan. He gushes. He raves. He gets so worked up that in chapter 1 he writes a sentence that is 12 verses long. Paul's level of excitement here is roughly the same as the enthusiasm of a Tigers fan who just saw Kirk Gibson hit his 8<sup>th</sup> inning home run off of Goose Gossage in game 5 of the 1984 world series. So, in chapters 1 and 2 Paul wants us to see that God is bringing all things together in Christ. And then at the end of chapter 3, Paul brings us to the seashore. In chapter 3 Paul shows us the heart of God. Paul shows us why God wants to bring all the broken things back together. Paul shows us what's in the heart of God that would make him willing to give his one and only Son so that we would have unity. Paul lifts the curtain, we look in at the heart of God, and we see an endless glittering ocean of life changing love. "Look at it!" He says, "I want you to see this!" "I want you to grasp how wide and long, how high and deep is the love of Christ. I want you to know this love which surpasses knowledge so that you can be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God!" Look at it! Look at how deep it is! Look at how beautiful it is!! Let it fill you because this is all for you." Standing at the shore of the great sea of God's love, Paul gets so excited that he starts to sing: "Now to

him who is able to do more than we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work in us, to him be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ through all generations! Amen!”

Linda and I sometimes go up north to Empire Michigan. We camp at a campground up there and one of the things we like to do is visit the Empire Bluff Trail. Maybe you’ve been on it. It’s a trail through the woods on a bluff high above the lake. For three quarters of a mile you walk up and down through the woods of Michigan. There are dangers along the path. There’s lots of poison ivy, some of it right near rails and benches where people sit. There are lots of mosquitos, and of course ticks are always a concern. But after three quarters of a mile through the woods the trail comes around a curve, the trees open up, and you find yourself on top of a 300-foot dune with glittering expanse of Lake Michigan spread out in front of you. As far as the eye can see. When you get to that spot, you can’t help but get quiet and contemplate the lake below you. You can’t help stopping and drinking in the beauty. And just about every time, no matter how the rest of your day has been you find yourself saying, ‘Man, we live in a beautiful state.’ At the end of chapter 3 Paul is taking you down something like the Empire Bluff Trail. Whatever woods you’ve been travelling through, he wants to bring you to a place where you see the wide immensity of God’s love in Jesus Christ. He wants you to see that it is unshakeable, and he wants to see that all of it has been poured out for you. He wants you to stand there and be quiet for a moment and say in your heart, ‘Man, I belong to a beautiful God.’

During this Covid time, as I find myself getting more and more irritable, more and more worried, as I see the people around me get more and more irritable, more and more worried, as I sense the forces of evil pulling us apart and causing us to fray, there is nothing more important for me than to stand on that seashore. There is nothing more important for me than to stand on that seashore every day and remember that by his great love, God will unite all things in heaven on earth under Christ. I know you need that too.

After showing us this great vision of what God has done for us, Paul calls us to do something.

Paul calls us to live out of God’s expansive love and His grand plan of unity. Specifically, God calls us to live the sort of lives that guard and preserve that unity. “Make every effort, Paul says, to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” “Don’t take your community with each other for granted. Make every effort to keep the unity. Work for it, pray for it, bleed for it. Christ died so that we could be one, you should be willing to shed some tears and make some sacrifices for the sake of the community.” In verse 2, Paul holds up four virtues, four habits of mind, that should characterize God’s people. Let’s look at each of these. Notice that they are all community-building virtues. In keeping with the theme of Ephesians so far, they are practices that build unity in the church. More specifically, they are all practices that involve sacrificing my desires, my rights, for the sake of others. They are all habits that involve suppressing my will and my desires for the sake of the community.

Humility: I have an opinion about how things should be. Maybe it’s a strong opinion. But when my brother offers a different opinion, I don’t smack him down right away. I listen. And I’m humbly open to the possibility that I might have something to learn, because after all, I don’t know everything. Humility doesn’t mean you never express your opinion; it just means you sacrifice something, so that we can keep the Spirit of unity through the bond of peace.

Gentleness: Gentleness is about how we exercise power. I have an idea of what needs to be done and where power should be exerted. But my sister is unsure, so rather than charging ahead, I restrain my exercise of power for the sake of the weakness of the other person. I could

force the situation, but I don't. Gentleness doesn't mean you never exercise power; it just means you sacrifice something so that we can keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Patience: I want things to happen at a certain pace. I'm ready to go now! But my brother isn't ready yet and needs more time to sort things out. So I change my timetable. Patience doesn't mean you never try to move things along; it just means that you sacrifice something so we can keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Forbearance: My fellow church member is a difficult person. She has rough edges and annoying habits. Sometimes the way she does things makes you cringe. But you stick with her. You bear with the rough edges. Forbearance doesn't mean you never challenge your sister; it just means you sacrifice something so that you can keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

We desperately need people who practice these habits of heart. We need communities that practice these habits of the heart. We can feel the fraying of all the relationships around us. We can feel the splintering pressure of the times. But here is a love, and here are the habits, that God can use to heal and calm and renew. I urge you, I urge me, to make every effort to take up these practices so that we can keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace!

Paul does not conclude our passage with more things for us to do; he finishes with another glance towards the glittering sea. He reminds us again of the unity we already have in Christ. Did you notice how many times Paul used the word 'one' in verses 4-6 of our passage? Count them. 7 times. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all who is over all and through all and in all. Seven times. One one one one one one one. Do you think that seven was an accident? Or do you think Paul chose the number of wholeness and completeness to remind us that nothing can take away the unity we have through the Holy Spirit of God? May his Spirit fill us his church as we navigate these hard times.

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