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A pastoral letter on guidelines for conflict and unity

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Dear Grace Community,

On November 4 many of us cast our votes for or against politicians and propositions, making our opinions known through the electoral process. The voting booth is a very private place. So it's tempting to think that our opinions are completely private and no one else's business. Until someone disagrees with us in public.

We live in a society where the one who shouts the loudest wins. We've lost the ability to dialog because we value winning the argument over coming to the right conclusion. Public disagreements quickly become shouting matches, figuratively or even literally.

In such a climate how should Christ's body behave? Disagreements within the church community can be redemptive rather than destructive if we use them as an opportunity to follow the Apostle Paul's exhortation to the Christians in the city of Ephesus:

<sup>1</sup> As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. <sup>2</sup> Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. <sup>3</sup> Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3 NIV)

Ephesus was a very cosmopolitan city, a center of trade and a Greek-speaking seat of Roman government. So there was a lot of diversity. There were differences in culture, language, and class. But Paul wasn't just trying to keep the peace so that people could go about their lives. He had a much higher purpose: the church community needs unity so that it can be truly Christ's presence in that city. Paul reminds them that this is why God has called them together ("church" in Greek is ekklesia, "the called out ones").

Paul knows that we are all imperfect (he calls himself the worst of sinners: 1 Timothy 1:15-16). But if the gospel message of reconciliation is to be proclaimed, it must be lived out, especially when there's conflict. We are Christ's presence, not only to the world around us, but also to each other. Am I acting as Christ would act toward my sister or brother in Christ, even when we disagree? To help us understand how we should act toward each other, Paul urges us toward humility and gentleness, patience and forbearance.

No matter what our stance on a matter of public policy, we should express our perspective with humility: we may not have all the facts or details, or we may have drawn the wrong conclusion. Humility leads to gentleness. This doesn't mean that we are doormats, but that we take other's feelings into account. It's a matter of treating others as we would want to be treated: how

would I want to be treated if I were wrong and someone pointed it out to me? A hallmark of gentleness is patience, literally having a “long fuse” so that we don’t disregard other’s feelings and explode in anger over a difference of opinion. And there are times when we just have to agree to disagree, i.e., forbear, putting up with each other for the sake of life together.

What if we haven’t exercised humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance? What if we have a broken relationship with someone in the church community because of the need to be right? Healing starts within. Start by asking yourself what you value more, being right or being in relationship. The need to be right often comes from a need to prove our self-worth. Entrust your sense of worth to God and trust that his love for you demonstrated in Christ’s incarnation and death is enough to validate your significance to God. Such self-reflection, guided by the Holy Spirit and counsel from mature Christians who know us well, will do much to help us become more like Jesus. And then we will be able to truly face the hurts that we have caused or have received.

If you are the party that has caused hurt, go to your sister or brother and apologize for hurtful actions that you have perpetrated against her/him and ask for forgiveness. This is a hard step, but it is the necessary outward expression of what has been started inwardly. Without this step God’s grace toward us remains a seed that bears no fruit.

If you are the hurt party, be ready to extend forgiveness: “Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Colossians 3:13) Consider what is more important: healing the Body of Christ or proving that you are better than someone who is now coming to ask your forgiveness? When we offer forgiveness we allow ourselves to also enjoy the fruit of grace.

Real growth takes time. What I’ve outlined above is not quick or easy. It is a process that needs to be soaked in prayer, guided by wise counsel from others, and may take several attempts. But living out the gospel of reconciliation is worth it because the result is that, as we learn to confront, confess and forgive, we will grow and be able to carry out God’s purposes in this world:

<sup>15</sup> ...speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:15-16 NIV)

I, too, have opinions. I believe in voting my conscience. I want politicians and public policies to reflect my beliefs. But I am also a member of Christ’s body where “it’s more important that we do things together than that we get things done.” May we as a church community learn to live out the reality of God’s grace, becoming like Jesus together and offering hope and healing to our world.

Grace and peace,

*Pastor Steve*