

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from July 22, 2007

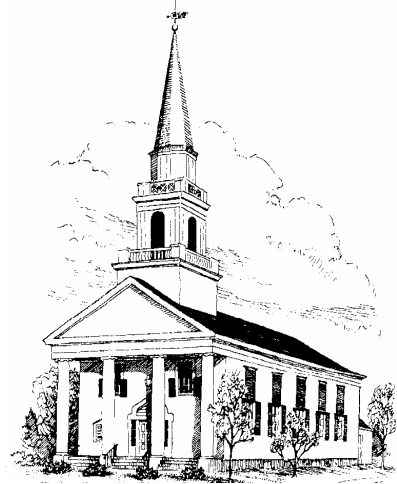
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“All Members of the Same Body”

Scriptures:

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 41-51



Our lesson from Ephesians this morning points to the reality that tensions in the church are nothing new! Even in the church of the 1st century, there were sometimes tensions and conflicts. This letter suggests some of the challenges that any community has to face, to live together well. The letter offers some rather practical advice and matter-of-fact suggestions to churches as they learn to overcome difficulties that they encounter along life’s journey together.

The writer of Ephesians points to the reality that it takes everyone working together to make any church work well. If a church is to be more than simply a social gathering or a social club, a successful and healthy church needs each member to carry a piece of responsibility for the whole system so that it can work well. The writer of Ephesians isn’t telling us something we don’t already know. We all know that a church community doesn’t just “happen”. Like any good committed relationship, like any good marriage, like any good partnership, it takes effort, it takes practice, and it takes some careful attention to help make things work well—whether we are talking about relationships at work, at home, or here at church.

Ephesians suggests some obvious strategies for living together well: speak the truth in love, don’t let anger fester, help those in need, build up rather than tear down one another, forgive one another, follow Jesus’ example of self-giving love, and be kind to one another. It’s not a bad list really! Ephesians points out that, too often, we can get tangled up in our emotions. You know the drill: folks differ about something, tempers flare, rumors get started, people hear different parts of the story, rifts develop. We all know that problems of communication happen—at home, in the workplace, and yes, even at church. Anger anywhere, if left untended, can create rifts and divisions. Strong emotion anywhere, if left untended and unexamined, can be a problem—both for the persons who carry that emotion and even for the persons nearby.

Today’s text clearly says that it is okay to be angry. We are not being told not to get angry here. Even folks in the 1st century were being invited to look at and examine their emotions. We hear invitation in this “circular letter” to notice when there is anger and/or strong emotion in the community of faith. We are invited to acknowledge our emotions, to examine them, and then to work toward some sort of resolution.

We are encouraged that when—not if—we have strong emotions, we need to learn to talk about them with one another, to discuss the emotions with each other openly and honestly, to speak our own truth, to own our feelings, and then, perhaps equally important, the text suggests that we also need to be willing to let some of those emotions go.

We are not to hold onto our anger, or whatever the emotion, for that “holding on” to emotion can make it destructive for ourselves and for the relationships around us. Like any relationship among two or more persons—whether between two friends, two work partners, two married partners, or even among members in this church—we are invited to try to unpack our feelings, to examine our emotions and, as our text puts it: “to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

But remember that first, we are invited to be honest with one another—speaking the truth in love—and that may be where we find it most difficult in the church. It is difficult for many of us to find ways to let our feelings out, to identify and own our own feelings and to acknowledge them to one another. It may also be difficult to others to hear those strong feelings and to not try to argue or talk others out of those strong emotions.

I hear this text suggesting that it would be healthier for all of us, both as individuals and as members of a collective body like the church, to be able to identify those strong emotions that we each have, to talk about them and even to let others know about them and to then let them go! The 12-Step Programs would go even further when they use the expression: *Let go and let God!* Another way of putting this might be: Let go of whatever strong emotion you may carry and then let God get to work on it.

This text speaks about some real and ongoing challenges for all of us, both here at the church and in all our relationships. We too easily harbor and hold onto our grievances or our concerns or our anger which means they can fester and get bigger in us and even become harmful to us. Instead, let’s be sure to bring our concerns out into the open, let us air our grievances or our questions, and then perhaps we can be on the way to learning how to let them go.

I also hear this passage speaking to the problem of gossip. Webster defines gossip as “repeated idle talk or rumors about others.” Unfortunately, it often seems easier to spread gossip than it is to find the truth about something.

Look at all the pseudo-*news* programs we can watch these days on the television or read in popular gossip magazines. There are plenty of folks out there who try to convince us that the latest piece of gossip or creative rumor about that movie star, or that politician, or that person under suspicion is really worth spending our time on. What a waste of our time! Let’s learn to shut off those kinds of programs or not buy those sorts of trashy magazines rather than letting anyone, especially our families, think that gossip is worth hearing or reading.

Gossip can be very injurious to any community and especially to a church because it often spreads *mis*-information and half-truths instead of what is really happening. Let’s be a church body that speaks the truth in love, that gives true, clear and honest messages to one another. Let’s not engage in gossip, which is often comprised of rumor and false information. Let’s stop gossip before it gets going.

If you have questions or concerns or feelings about things happening here at Mystic Congregational Church, help all of us out by putting those concerns “out on the table”. At least that way, we can work together to clarify and to find the truth together in an atmosphere of trust and honesty and genuine caring for one another. Let’s learn to “speak the truth with our neighbor” and not murmur our grievances behind the scenes. We all must learn to talk directly with one another.

After this morning’s 10:00 worship and later on this week, on Wednesday evening at 7:00, anyone who is interested in reviewing the details about the Fitness Review for Thomas Ratmeyer is wel-

come to join the Deacons and me in the library. This opportunity to gather and share feelings and questions we may still have about this event, which is now part of the history of this church, is open to anyone, with the understanding that we will listen to one another in love.

As we learn as a body of Christ to share difficult emotions and feelings, we can learn how to move forward together. As a community of faith, devoted to imitating Christ, we can continue to care for one another and to listen to one another.

Let's bring our concerns into the open. Let's help clear the air if there are things that need to be discussed and not let things fester. Let's remember that murmuring behind the scenes seldom accomplishes anything. We saw how the crowds started murmuring in our Gospel lesson. We remember how the Israelites murmured as they wandered with Moses in the wilderness. Let's keep in mind that murmuring seldom accomplishes much, except spreading mis-information, spreading ill-will, creating hard feelings, and fostering bitterness. Murmuring, like gossip, breaks down the body of the church and destroys the effectiveness of the whole body of Christ.

In his book *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, Loren Mead suggests that there are clear indicators of a healthy church system. He suggests the following:

Strangers meet on common ground.
Fear is faced and dealt with.
Scarce resources are shared and abundance is generated.
Conflict occurs and is resolved.
Life is given color, texture, drama and a festive air.
People are drawn out of themselves.
Mutual responsibility becomes evident and mutual aid is possible.
Opinions become audible and accountable.
Vision is projected and projects attempted.
People are empowered and protected against power.

I believe that this church system is a pretty healthy system overall. Do we need to pay attention to some things? Sure we do! Do we need to address some behaviors that are hurtful and harmful to the health of this body of Christ? Sure we do! Just like the church of the 1st century, we are not immune. Just like the writer of the "circular letter" of the 1st century suggests, we need to take care of one another because we are "members of one another."

If you know of folks who have been away too long in recent months, give them a call and encourage them to come back to this fellowship. If you know folks who are carrying bitterness or concerns about this church, contact them or let us know who they are so we can call. When the body of Christ hurts, we all hurt and it is up to all of us to care for this body. If you have a grievance or a concern, don't stew about it behind the scenes or in a social setting. Instead, come to your leadership—bring your concern to the pastor directly, bring your concern to the Moderator of this church, bring your concern to the Deacons of the church. Let us know of your feelings directly. In psychological language, I'm suggesting that we need to stop triangulating—that is, asking another person to send a message on to someone else. We need to learn how to talk with each other directly about our concerns and questions.

As this and every church knows, we must keep trying and keep learning how to be one body of Christ. Let's remember that we are all about love. As one wise writer has put it:

God has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. This is the essential message of the church and it is summed up in one word: love.
We are entrusted with the message of love, hence the church at its best

must be a center of love.

Every group in a local church ought to be a center of love: organizations, boards, committees, Sunday School classes, even the choir.

Whatever else it is or does, the individual's first function is to be a unit of love and its first work is to express love.

Paul describes such a fellowship as 'hearts knit together in love.' [col 2:2]

(Gordon Hunger, from When the Walls Come Tumbling Down

– Alive Now magazine, p. 8 March/April 1994)

If this church, if this body of Christ, if Mystic Congregational Church is truly to be a fellowship of *hearts knit together in love*, then we need to continue to learn how to be “imitators of Christ”. We need to continue to learn how “to live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” If we are indeed trying to be a body of Christ where all the parts work together, then we need to continue to commit ourselves to be reconciled to one another.

We must not let our anger, or our differences of opinion, or the times when we differ with one another, become all that there is. Rather, we need to learn how to listen carefully to one another, to identify and share and then let go of anger, to be reconciled with one another, so that we can turn and move together into the future with a clean slate.

It is not easy, speaking the truth in love. It is only by the grace of God that it can be done at all. Amen.