

“Growing Up in Truth and Love”

Psalm 51:1-12; Ephesians 4:1-16 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might grow up in every way
into Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

“With all humility and gentleness, with patience,” he says. Is that how you’ve been leading your life lately? You don’t have to answer that. Let’s just say we all know it’s been a struggle lately, hasn’t it? It occurred to me the other day to notice how difficult this past year would have been even without a global pandemic happening. Heightening intensity in the struggle for racial justice, an ugly presidential campaign, an unprecedented insurrection in our nation’s capital, a severe drought we barely hear about and other consequences of climate change looming on the horizon... Any one of these situations would be enough to strain our capacity for gentleness, but we got all of them, with a global pandemic on top of it all.

Because it’s been going on for so long now, I think it’s easy for us to underestimate the emotional toll of living through the coronavirus crisis. The increased sense of danger, the constant hyper vigilance and prolonged isolation, the constantly changing expectations of the coming months or even the next few weeks, plus an entirely unnecessary political polarization of all the related issues. It’s no wonder if we’re exhausted. It’s no wonder if we’ve run out of patience or a desire to put effort into maintaining unity.

Like the writer of Psalm 51, it's likely we know our transgressions. Our sins are pretty obvious. It's just been hard to keep them under control because we're so worn out and stressed. We are short with one another even when we don't mean to be. We neglect getting back to that friend who left a message. We tune out from the important conversations happening in our communities about the changes that need to come so all people can flourish. We see malicious intent in others' actions when they were probably just rooted in shared exhaustion or badly expressed frustration. Humility, gentleness, and patience are in short supply.

It's here that I want us to notice a major difference between Psalm 51 and Ephesians 4. The perspective in Psalm 51 is very individual, focused just on me, seeking forgiveness all by myself: "Have mercy on **me**... **I** know **my** transgressions... **I** was born guilty... teach **me** wisdom... **I** shall be clean... Create in **me** a clean heart." But in Ephesians, Paul is writing to a whole church, a community, not just an individual. There's no need to maintain unity and the bond of peace by yourself. We may find our own actions frustrating sometimes, but when Paul counsels the Ephesians to "bear with one another in love," he's talking about how each member of the community relates to each other member. The community is called to grow up into Christ. The community is called to build up the body in love.

We are not alone. We are not alone in our exhaustion. We are not alone in our stress. We're not even alone in our isolation! This conviction that we're in this together is central to the Christian faith, whether we like it or not. And let's be

honest, sometimes we wish it weren't. Everyone knows it's easier to feel God's majesty in solitude on a mountaintop than it is in a committee meeting. But God already did the work of making the mountains. God's current work happens down here, where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, down here where the work requires a lot of "bearing with one another in love."

So how do we, as a community, grow up in truth and love? Paul plays his familiar tune here, reminding us that one of the blessings of living our faith together is that everyone brings different gifts. It's okay if you don't have the skills to do all the things, because someone else will have what you lack. When we all contribute the gifts we do have, our individual weaknesses are covered by the strengths of others. Hallelujah! But it's more than that too. Paul mentions humility. He calls the church to "speak the truth with love." Reading this in the light of Psalm 51, it becomes a call to shared confession. What does the line "I was born guilty" mean in the context of community? It's clearly not an excuse to isolate ourselves and assume we're not worthy of helping out with the work of the church. I would suggest that it's an invitation to consider the systemic sins we participate in simply by virtue of the positions we're born into. The food we eat comes from systems that rely on the exploitation of farm workers. The clothes we wear are often sewn by underpaid workers in faraway places. The air conditioning we enjoy during these hot summer days increases the threat to island dwellers of rising ocean levels caused by higher levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The systems some of us rely on to feel

safe are a menace to some of our neighbors because of the racism inherent in their development. There are sins we are born into. We do not choose them intentionally, but we are complicit with their consequences nonetheless. Wrestling with these systemic sins is part of what it means to speak the truth in love so we can grow up into Christ as a community. If we do not confess them, with humility and gentleness, we cannot address them and search for ways to rectify the damage created.

But that's not all. Psalm 51 speaks of "joy and gladness," of the "joy of salvation." How does that apply to the body of Christ that Paul writes about? He knows of this joy too. Christian community is not just created by "bearing with one another in love." When we say we are not alone, we don't just mean that we've got other people around us. "There is one body *and one Spirit*," Paul writes. "One hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God." We are not alone; we are held together in the arms of God. Humility and gentleness are possible because God's grace abounds. We can grow up in truth and love because we're growing up into Christ. We're not directionless; we have very clear instructions about what to aim for: feed the hungry, free the captives, heal the sick, clothe the naked, protect the vulnerable, love our neighbors, pray for our enemies. Individually and together as community. As best we can, when it comes naturally and when it's a struggle.

Yes, it's been a terribly difficult year. Yes, we're exhausted and stressed out. Yes, humility and gentleness and patience are in short supply. But the everlasting mercy of God abounds, and Jesus is leading us forward together. One faith, one

Lord, one hope of our calling. Many gifts, one spirit of love. One Spirit to comfort us when times are hard, to restore us to a state of grace from which we can renew our commitment to this community in which we continue to grow up in truth and love.

May we answer the call! Hallelujah and Amen!