Filling Our Cups

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
August 11, 2024
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I don't know about you, but I have been rather inspired by the Olympics, as I think I tend to be each time they happen. I'm bracing myself for a bit of a sense of withdrawal as they close today. There have been some extraordinary stories, as there will surely be when the Para-Olympics open. Stories of people achieving their personal best. I was as moved by athletes who achieved a new personal best even if they didn't go home with a medal. All too often I feel rather deflated by things that happen around me. Don't we all, at times, feel like our *spiritual cups* are empty, in need of filling?

The Ephesians passage we heard today, attributed to Paul, though very possibly it was a disciple of Paul's using his name, sets out a vision for a new humanity. The vision, followers are told, is of "one humanity".[1] It happens to me regularly, encountering a Bible passage that feels like it speaks powerfully to my modern lived reality. This one speaks to me.

Think for a moment, when your spirit cup felt empty. Were you, are we all, not our best selves? It can get ill tempered, impatient, disrespectful, and lacking in empathy. The ancient world had its fair share of "empty cup syndrome." The conventional wisdom of the ancient world, the "Gentile" (non-Jewish) mindset was (according to this Ephesians letter writer) is fraught with sarcasm, untruths. I get the sense that even within the Jesus community those bad behaviours are visible too.

Imagine, bad attitudes among us in the church community! You show me a church community that has decided that they will imitate Christ in loving community, and I will show you the reality somewhere of sibling rivalries within that community. It is human nature, in and outside the Jesus community.

Two issues raised in this Epistle that I think might be particularly relevant for us, not because necessarily because these issues are problematic in our churches, but because these problems certainly are in the world ecosystem that we live and breathe within.[2]

The Letter to the Ephesians calls the community to clear, truthful communication. Now I don't know if you have noticed a slight leaning in politics towards alternative facts. And political debates, they seem more focused on undermining the other person then they are about communicating differing visions and ideas. Jesus often faced this when dealing with the religious elite around him, who seemed more focused on undermining him than meaningful Rabbinical debate.[3]

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[1] Ephesians chapter 2, verse 15

[2] Special thank you to Dr. Sally A Brown for informing the broad strokes of this Message. Brown wrote a commentary on Ephesians 4:25-5:2 (August 11, 2024) found at workingpreacher.org.

[3] You can see this tendency of the religious elite trying to "catch" Jesus up throughout the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), rather than truly engaging in Rabbinical debate which allowed exchange – arguing, but also listening – of theological visions.

Speaking Truth courageously, and honestly in church, in our meetings, in our conversations at the coffee shop. Easier said than done when we feel we are talking to a person who has no filter, just sounds off. Talking over one another seems more norm than exception in our culture. The Ephesian letter writer, though, calls the Jesus community to live into a more robust vision of love, to be counter cultural.

We are told that Jesus modelled a "new humanity", perhaps coming across as highly improbable given how Jews and Gentiles [4] were often at odds with one another. Think of the image of Baptism, suggests this letter writer. Being welcomed into the Jesus community, like baptism, we *strip off the ordinary clothes*, and *put on a new set of clothes*, a new self.[5]

Easier said than done. My earliest recollections of life as a child in church are of my elders being so kind to me, but as I grew older, I heard stories of that same person acting like a tyrant in a Church Board meeting. How do I square that with the Ephesians vision? They are, we are, human. But in Christ, in this community, we together aspire to being kinder, more compassionate – more courageous in speaking truth, more patient in our attentive listening to one another.

The one other issue raised in today's letter to the Ephesians deals with anger. That ubiquitous phase our elders share with us, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger". That came from earlier in chapter 4 of Ephesians. Now, I don't know about you, but my tendency is to hold onto anger like a trophy. My hunch is that we would have some significant numbers if we called together an ACA meeting – that is "Anger Clingers Anonymous." Sure, we teach our kids to express their anger in healthy ways, but present us with an incident that really gets under our skin, and we will be like a marathoner with that anger – refusing to give in.

As a minister, I have startling moments, flashes of anger expressed with me because of something they heard or experienced in worship. That is not the expression of anger envisioned by this Ephesians letter.

I read an article this past week about anger and power dynamics – and the core idea being that anger can become abusive when it is expressed by a person with more privilege and power towards a person who does not have the same power. Conversely the author suggests that abuse does not happen when a person of little power expresses anger towards a person in power. While I'm not sure I totally agree with the premise, I found the discussion intriguing – the importance of recognizing ones' power and privilege in relation to the other as we work through conflict.[6]

Jesus expressed anger towards individuals and groups on several occasions. It is difficult to get a sense of the dynamic, how the others felt in receiving Jesus' unfiltered honesty. We do know how the authorities unleashed their anger and fear on many in Jesus' time – the persecution, the penalties were ruthless, pervasive abuse. In our modern context, it is helpful for us to consider how the abusive expression of anger and

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[4] "Gentile" was a word often used in the Christian Scriptures for, simply referring to those who are not Jewish

[5] Ephesians chapter 4, verse 24

[6] To read the article, go to https://www.patheos.com, "God and the Angry Christian" (April 21, 2023) by Anthony Costello.

fear is still pervasive in our culture, and some parts of the Body of Christ today. Remember, abuse can be very subtle in our lived realities, especially if we enjoy privilege at different levels – we need to be aware of our microaggressions in everyday conversations, and how light chat can quickly become gossip.

What might that “new humanity” vision of the Letter to the Ephesians look like in our everyday relationships in our communities of faith? How do we cultivate attentive listening, and courage in one another to speak truth but in love? Especially when the culture we live in, social media, politics, is steeped in disrespect, people seeking voices and platforms that will reinforce their opinions, sometimes misinformed opinions.

May we commit ourselves anew today to radical transformation of Christ’s community, loving unconditionally, our pain, our joys felt by one another. May our spirit cups be filled together, in community, in Christ. Amen.