

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2: 3-22 and 4: 1-6 (selected verses)

³All of us once lived...in the passions of our flesh, ... and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

...⁸By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

¹¹So then, ... ¹²remember that you were at [one] time without Christ...having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it....

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God....

⁴I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

The Sermon:

As a child, one of my early memories is of my grandmother reading our local newspaper. She'd be in the forthcoming marriages section, reading it like some people read the sports

pages: Protestants up one -- that completes the week, Protestants over Catholics, three and 0. The critical details were the family names and where the wedding was taking place. If a MacIssac girl was marrying a MacKay boy in one of the town's three great monumental Presbyterian churches, then my grandmother would pronounce with satisfaction and triumph: "He's brought her over." But if, in such a pairing, the bride had prevailed, and the wedding was at St. John the Baptist parish, then my grandmother would declare grimly, in the tone of one who had just sniffed sour milk: "He's turned; he's turned." So I grew up in an environment of vigorous sectarian rivalry, and yet Nova Scotia, unlike Ontario, had no separate school board. Perhaps that is what encouraged so many of these so-called "mixed marriages." Certainly it encouraged mixed friendships. All in all, my grandmother took it rather well when in grade three I brought home a best friend who was Catholic. Theresa and I remained best friends right through to high school. It was in this context of my friendship with Theresa that I first experienced Catholic worship, and that I began to sort through exactly what divides and what unites Catholics and Protestants in their belief. Today I would have to say that my closest friendships are still with Catholic believers. And that my greatest level of comfort, when asked to lead institutional services here in Guelph, is when I am in the Catholic institutions. My experience is that while the institutions with Protestant roots are abashed to call themselves Christian, the Catholic institutions provide the freedom to minister in the name of Christ.

I wanted to include in this summer's series of sermons on "touchy topics," something on how we relate to Christians who are not like us. This week it's our relationship with the Roman Catholic church. Because here in Guelph – a city with a large Italian population, built in the shadow of Church of our Lady, home to the quite well-known Ignatian spirituality center, Loyola House – Catholicism is a big player in our community. Next week it's our relationship with those other Protestants, like those up at Lakeside, at Marden and Elora Road, whose popularity represents

to us a shift in Christian culture that we can hardly understand. As with all our topics this summer, we are looking for the guidance of the Spirit, given at Pentecost to guide the church into all truth. But the Spirit of God is both a spirit of truth and a spirit of unity – binding believers together in the bond of love. At times the sorry history of sectarianism in religion has pitted truth against unity. We have said that *we* are right – *we* have the truth about God on our side – so it is alright to hate, to compete with, to say detractory things about other denominations and to rejoice in any problems they may be having.

As I began reflecting on my early memories of my grandmother reading the forthcoming marriages as if it were the sports section, I realized that really, that is what sectarianism in religion is. It’s when we begin to wear our “team’s colours,” not because we have any deep understanding of what distinguishes us from the other “team,” but because we have been taught we’re to cheer for *this* side. We’re to be loyal to *this* side. I think God calls us to something better than that – some better model of ecumenism, which asks for our deep commitment, *not* to a denominational name-brand, but to truth *and* to unity.

Perhaps that’s why I have a little more enjoyment in watching the Olympics than in watching professional sport. Each Olympian is proud to represent their own country and yet there prevails at the Olympics this spirit of the world being brought together around a common pursuit of excellence – united, in a form of competition that is non-destructive and non-violent. My very best encounters in ecumenism have been tinged with something like that spirit of the Olympics: I have been proud to represent my own tradition, and often I have been pushed, through dialogue with others, to understand it and to practice it better than I formerly had done. But I have also been aware of just how much I share with believers that are not of my tradition – just as I’m sure the female wrestler who won gold for Canada finds more understanding for her untraditional sport among the female wrestlers from other nations, than even among her own Team Canada teammates.

I selected the verses from Ephesians chapters 2 and 4 as today’s reading because they contain the teaching which is at the heart of our identity as Reformed Christians – the insistence on salvation by grace alone, and not by works, lest anyone should boast. But even moreso I picked them because they contain such a strong statement about Christian unity. Although the dividing wall which Paul speaks of as having been broken down is between Jews and Gentiles, it can apply to any of the sectarian walls we build. This is what Paul says: “There is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” Therefore he urges the Ephesian Christians, and us also, to live “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Unity among Christians is imperative today. It is imperative because God commands it, but it is also imperative because there are so few of us, and if we are not to eradicate our witness entirely, we must show the world that we stand together. Gone are the days, even in places like my native Pictou County, where you can divide brides and grooms in the local paper into pretty much equal categories of “protestant” and “catholic.” Today the overwhelming majority of young people have no Christian worship practice at all. Today if your Presbyterian son or daughter is in a relationship with a Christian of any stripe, you can be devoutly thankful. Due to the smallness of our numbers, unity among Christians is more important than ever before. Yet as Presbyterians, we have never regarded union as the ultimate expression of unity. That option tempted us in 1925 when the United Church was formed. From the perspective of those who stayed out of church union, unity is defined as an attitude of the spirit. We can have unity with our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic Church without becoming Catholic, and we can have unity with other Protestants, without merging to become a mega-church. The ideal, I believe, is a strong sense of our own identity and theological emphases, so that we might have

something distinctive to share with the commonwealth of Christians, and a strong commitment to unity: which means, mutual recognition, practical co-operation and spiritual support.

This morning I want, first, to list a few of the beliefs which distinguish us from Catholic Christians, because without an historic understanding of the reasons we are separate, we fall back on unreasoning prejudice. We cheer for our “team,” not really knowing why, only knowing that we are not like “them.” If that’s our position, then, really, we insult both Catholic theology and the seriousness of our own tradition. Secondly I want to list a few of the things that I particularly appreciate about the Catholic church – things we can learn from. Paul commends a spirit of humility to believers as they seek unity. There is no tradition in the Christian family which we cannot learn from, if we are humble enough to receive teaching.

First then: the historic reason that the Protestant church formed had to do with the grace versus works debate. Martin Luther, a German monk, after years of trying to come up to scratch -- years of beating himself up because he could not close the gap between God’s perfect standards and the best of his human efforts, found in his study of Scripture a liberating teaching: namely that God accepted us, not on the basis of our performance but on the basis of what Christ did for us on the cross. Paul says: “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” Grace means that we don’t earn God’s acceptance, it is freely given in Christ. The purpose of good works is not to gain salvation, but to express our gratitude for it.

The Catholic church of Luther’s day was very works-oriented: eternal credit was gained for money paid, for sacraments received, for pilgrimages undertaken, for prayers said. Today, while every Protestant should understand the centrality of grace to our gospel and our hope, grace versus works has become less of a distinguishing feature between Protestants and Catholics. Protestants still cringe when they read those ads in the Pennysaver

which say “pray this prayer to Saint Jude 9 times and expect good things to come your way, then pay Saint Jude off by taking out an ad in the paper giving him recognition for favours received.” We cringe because besides being superstitious, this again, is an effort to earn God’s favour by something *we do*. But my sense is, that both in official Catholic teaching and in popular Catholic piety, there is great awareness of grace, and a greater understanding of the disciplines Catholics undertake -- whether it’s praying the rosary or receiving the sacraments – as means of grace: things which help the believer, more than things which exercise leverage upon God.

Today probably the most significant difference between Catholics and Protestants has to do with the question of authority. The Reformation entailed a rejection of the *pope’s* authority, and even the *Church’s* authority, in favour of the *Bible’s* authority. If you’re a Catholic, you have to heed equally what the Bible says and the additional things that the Church teaches. Over the years the popes and the councils added in many teachings that are non-Biblical, beliefs about purgatory and limbo,¹ beliefs about Mary,² beliefs about the mass, beliefs about prayer to the saints and prayers for the dead.³ The Catholic Church continues to believe these things, though since the second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Catholic Church has embraced the Bible in a new way. Catholic laity were once discouraged from reading the Bible, but

¹ The Catholic Church has recently abolished the concept of limbo. Limbo was neither heaven nor hell, and unlike purgatory it did not involve punishment with the hope of promotion, after purification, to heaven. It was reserved for infants who had died without baptism and for aborted fetuses.

² Papal infallibility has only ever been used to promulgate Marian doctrines, namely Mary’s immaculate conception (this refers not to her conception of Christ but to Mary’s own conception by Anna and Joachim) and Mary’s assumption (her being taken directly into heaven without undergoing physical death).

³ Catholics and Protestants differ from each other on the definition of the saints. Protestants follow the Pauline usage in which saints are simply believers (both living and passed on) – any who, by faith, are united to Christ. Catholics believe that only a small number of believers are saints – those who have lived a perfect life (hence the need for stringent criteria and investigation before canonization (sainthood) can be conferred). The medieval Catholic church spoke about a “treasury of merit.” Because the saints had done more good than was strictly necessary, they ended their lives with a surplus of merit. This surplus could be applied to by ordinary Christians, who feared they might not be as good as was necessary, or who feared for a family member who had died in sin. This idea of the saints’ surplus merit (which the Reformers found ridiculous) is why Catholics appeal to them as intercessors, and even to intercede for those who have died.

these days one is more likely to find a Bible-reading Catholic than a Bible-reading Presbyterian. And one is more likely, these days, to hear a Biblical sermon from a Catholic bishop than from a Presbyterian moderator. At the Reformation, while Catholics kept their eggs in two baskets: the “Bible basket” and the “Church basket,” Protestants put all their eggs in the “Bible basket” alone. Then a kind of Biblical scholarship took hold in the mainline Protestant churches, which smashed that basket against the wall. Mainline Protestants are foundering because they have lost their sense of confidence in the Bible and have long since lost their sense of need for the Church.

The 20th century has also brought sweeping changes for the Catholic Church, not least of all as a result of the media. It is possible now for Catholics worldwide to follow the every move of their pontiff on television, and certainly under John Paul II, the cult of the pope seems to have risen in a new way. When I visited Rome back in 2001, I attended his weekly address in St. Peter’s Square. There was almost hysteria among the crowd as Catholics of all nations cried out “Papa.” Part of me could admire this sense of love on the part of a Church for its Universal Pastor, and it was in order to stand in solidarity with my Catholic brothers and sisters in Montreal, who were grieving his death like a personal loss, that I attended his memorial service at Reine du Monde Cathedral. At that service, however, which featured folk bowing to a skull cap once worn by the pontiff, as it was processed down the aisle, and another group of young enthusiasts chanting “JP Two, we love you” I was struck by the thought that perhaps this vicar of Christ was not vicarious enough – that it should be Jesus who is loved and acclaimed by any gathering of Christian people, not a man, whatever his office.

Since the late 1800s many of the papal encyclicals – the open letters that the popes write to the Church -- a vehicle for their teaching -- have dealt with social issues. Perhaps most famous are the Catholic teachings on birth control, abortion, euthanasia and most recently, stem-cell research and in-vitro fertilization. Taken

together with the Church’s long-held teachings on divorce, sex outside marriage, and celibacy in the priesthood, they present quite an ethically conservative picture. Many young Catholics have rejected the church, or merely defy it, because in our age of promiscuity, they find its teachings on human sexuality just too unpalatable. But many other young Catholics, the same who have joined the cult of the pope, have taken up the social conservatism of the current papal regime. Often in these circles one hears about the contrast between a “culture of life” and a “culture of death” – phrases coined by John Paul II back in the 1990s,⁴ which have captured the Catholic imagination. Again, while some of these issues, particularly birth control within marriage and celibacy for the clergy, distinguish Catholics from Protestants, this idea that God is on the side of life, I think, has an interesting potential to unite all Christians. While we might find it difficult to live according to the Catholic strictures, I think we must admire the clear voice of protest that the Catholic Church has raised on a lot of these issues, while Protestants are often so divided and so captive to the culture, that they cannot speak. This is one advantage of having a singular authority, such as the pope, who speaks for the Church and calls it to unity.

Well, I think you can already see where some of my appreciation for the Catholic Church lies, and often these good things come as a result of the very things, (such as the papal office), which I would, from Protestant principle, have to oppose. Perhaps the two things which I most appreciate about the Catholic Church are firstly, its catholicity: its ability to keep incredible diversity within the bond of its communion, and secondly, its sense of mystery -- its comfort with the supernatural. While this latter has sometimes led it into superstition – caused it to look for bleeding statues and the face of Christ appearing in a bagel – I sometimes think that we, as reasoning Presbyterians, don’t expect any sort of miracles from God. And certainly the sense of the holy

⁴ See *Evangelium Vitae* 1995

in most Catholic worship spaces, where people kneel quietly to pray, is a welcome contrast from the chatter before *our* worship services. A Catholic friend once explained the intercession of the saints to me in such a way that I could almost accept it. I asked him: “Why do you pray to Mary or to the other saints when you could just go straight to the top and pray to Christ himself?” He said, “Don’t you ask your Christian friends here on earth to pray for you? And don’t you think that the saints in heaven are much more Alive than any living person we know here?” I do believe that – I believe we gather in the company of the angels and the saints when we worship God, and when we gather at the Lord’s table, but that awareness is more at home in the world of Catholicism than in most Presbyterian churches.

I admire the Catholic Church’s catholicity because sometimes I think at the Reformation, Protestants forgot what a grievous thing church division is. The definition of a Catholic is one who is in communion with the pope, and within that broad definition it can embrace many different kinds of spirituality -- from the liberationist priests of Latin America to the members of the ultra-conservative Opus Dei. Defining “the Church” as those who are in communion with the pope, of course, means that Catholics cannot recognize other denominations as “churches” and this can be frustrating for one who would like to engage in ecumenical dialogue with Catholics from an equal footing. But it is also responsible for the great hospitality that one always experiences when dealing with Catholics, as again and again one is invited to “come home to Rome.”

No sermon on the Catholic Church today could ignore the terrible revelations we have heard in recent years about pedophile priests. Psychologists tell us that rape is more a crime about power, more about anger, than it is about sex. And the events which are coming to light in the Catholic Church no doubt have more to do with the lack of accountability in institutions that are very powerful, than with widespread perversion in the priesthood. This is a cautionary tale for all of us who are placed in positions of

trust. May we never lack that humility, that gentleness, which Paul says are the rules of Christian engagement. When we, as Presbyterians, hear about these horrors, it is perhaps our first reaction, based on those years of sectarian history, to get a little vicious and to feel a little smug. It's not "us" that's having those problems. How could "they"?! But I honestly think that this "they" and "us" mentality is such a blow to the Body of Christ. The Catholics are not our enemy. The enemy is unbelief. The enemy is sin, and the enemy is Satan, who delights when the church of Christ is divided. "There is one body," (Eph. 4.4) says the apostle Paul, and when one part of the body is hurting, all the members suffer (I Cor. 12.26).

So I have come, in my own thinking, to reject that black-and-white world in which my grandmother lived. And I am much more struck by all that we share with the Catholic church than by the things which divide us. For there is but "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4.5-6).