**Civil Church, Civil Society**

**Text: Ephesians 4:29, 31-32**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Some years ago my dad and I and a few other family members went looking for the sites out west where he spent his teenage years. My granddad was a banker in Nebraska, but the bank failed in 1934 and the family spent the better part of the next decade moving around from mining camp to mining camp while Granddad tried to make a go of it gold mining. By 2003 some of these places were a bit of a challenge to find. For example, we found the site of the Buffalo Mine near Granite, Oregon, but it was all locked-up. So we went into Granite to see if there was someone with a key who would let us in and show us around. I went into the general store and asked if there was maybe a caretaker for the mine and the gal behind the counter said, “Oh, that would be Old Bill.”

I said, “Could you tell me where Old Bill lives?”

And she said, “Well, you go down this street a piece, and then you turn this way, and then that way,” and so on, and so on… and she got me completely confused. Needless to say, I didn’t have a GPS. Even if I had one, I’m sure that in 2003, Granite, Oregon hadn’t been programmed into it yet. Anyway, I finally had to go the wrong way down a one way street in order to get to Old Bill’s house. Now, you have to know that Granite is the kind of place that people move to in order to get away from everybody; especially the government. The place must be crawling with militias who’d love to get their hands on an old liberal like me. But I’m too dumb to realize this. So I get out of the car in front of Old Bill’s house. There’s a sign: “Trespassers will be shot. Survivors will be shot again.” Undaunted, I knock on the door. And this big, burly, bearded dude opens the door and growls, “What do you want!?”

So I tell him how my dad worked in the Buffalo Mine 65 years ago and we’d like to look around the place if he’d be willing to let us in.

Well, all I had to do was mention the Buffalo Mine and his face lit-up with a great big smile and he said, “Sure, I’ll show you around.” So we headed up there the next day and had a great tour and Dad was thrilled and Bill turned out to be just the nicest guy and I’m sure that if Bill bothered to vote in 2016 he voted for Trump, and that’s exactly the point: We can be civil to each other, we can even enjoy each other, across the great divides of the body politic. We just need to take the time to find some common ground.

The Church can help. In the ways in which we interact with each other, and the ways in which we engage with the community, we can model the kind of civil behavior that is needed in both Church and society. We need to find common ground.

Our text for today points us in the right direction. Hear again these words that Maggie B. read for us a few minutes ago:

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear…Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Eph. 4:29, 31-32).

The starting point – as it is throughout Ephesians – is Jesus Christ. He is the Firm Foundation the binds together *all* things: including people on either side of the political divide. His grace has saved us from evil, forgiven our sins, embraced us with love, and called us into the embrace of the Church. And if God has offered the likes of you and me such grace, who are we not to offer grace to each other? Indeed, the one flows from the other. I don’t know about you all, but when someone goes out of their way to do something kind or tenderhearted or generous toward me, I can’t help but in turn be kind or tenderhearted or generous to others.

I was not in a good mood on Friday night. Helen and I usually go out for dinner or a movie on Fridays, but I just wanted to stay home and watch a ball game on t.v. Even if it meant watching the White Sox lose again. But, we went out. Bumped into a fellow member of the Bloomington Rotary Club at the restaurant. Waved to each other, didn’t really say much, as he and his wife sat down at a table near ours. They finished eating and left just a little ahead of us. When it came time to pay our bill, the waiter said, “There is no bill. That gentleman at the next table paid yours.” It was one of those random acts of kindness that Maggie B. mentioned to the children. Well, my mood did a 180! I went from being grumpy to being kind and tenderhearted and generous; and that’s just the way that the grace of Jesus Christ works. When grace is poured out on you, you can’t help but be gracious to others.

And we’re called to be especially called to be kind and tenderhearted and generous and gracious in the Church: not only because it’s worthy behavior in and of itself, but also because it models good behavior for the community; for the wider society; for the body politic. Cast your minds back two weeks to the 3rd chapter of Ephesians, where we read: “Through the Church, the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10). God’s wisdom will be revealed to the rulers and the authorities through the Church! The rulers and authorities – or, as they’re called elsewhere in Paul’s letters, the powers and principalities – that’s biblical code language for the cosmic forces that seek to divide and destroy all that brings life and love and healing and reconciliation. And just as God’s cosmic power of love is at work here on earth, so the cosmic powers of death and hate and chaos and destruction are at work on earth. At work especially through social systems, and at work as well through people’s prejudices. And it seems to me that at this present moment the powers and principalities are having a field day on social media. In that realm of both anonymity and animosity, the powers and principalities get a hold of us and churn-up our anger and fear, and all manner of venom spews forth through our fingers and especially our thumbs as we say things to political opponents that we’d never say face to face.

Which is why we in the Church have a special responsibility – and a special opportunity – to model a different way of being, and so reveal to the powers and principalities the wisdom and grace of God. Every church that I’ve ever served has had a wide variety of political, social and economic views. And on our good days we have found ways to bridge the chasms between us. The author of Ephesians shows us how. “So then putting away all falsehood,” he says, “let us all speak the *truth* to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” In other words, speak the truth; don’t hide the truth. Speak openly to each other and not behind each other’s backs. But do it in a kind and tenderhearted way. Do it by “speaking the truth in love,” as we read earlier in Ephesians 4:15. In so doing we will build up the Body of Christ, and we will model behavior that can build-up the body politic.

Kind of like the experience that a young man had driving across the Great Plains. He’s the son of a couple of Disciples of Christ ministers in Washington State. He’d just graduated from college on the East Coast, and he was headed back home to the West Coast with all of his worldly possessions packed into this old clunker of a car. Well, in some little town in North Dakota, the engine blew. Car gets towed to a gas station, the mechanic finds a used engine on line, but it’s going to take a week to get it shipped and installed. Now he’s stranded. So this liberal kid is looking around, wondering what he can do, and all he can see are pick-up trucks. And each one has a gun rack. Well, he is scared to death.

A man walks up to him. “Hey stranger,” he says, “I like your anti-drinking bumper sticker.”

And Joe says, “What?”

“You know, that red wine glass with the X on it on your bumper. I like it.”

Well, of course, that isn’t an anti-drinking sticker, it’s our Disciples of Christ Chalice. So Joe tells the man about the Disciples of Christ and the man explains that he’s a Lutheran – as is pretty well the whole town – and the man says, “Hop into my truck, young fella. Gonna take you home to the wife and she’ll get some food inside of you and we’re going to take care of you.” So Joe climbs into the pick-up – gun rack and all – and not only that family but the whole town takes Joe under its wing. Housed him, fed him, loaned him a car, he had a great week. Actually, it was longer than a week. Because, you know, sometimes when a mechanic in a small town says that he’ll have something fixed for you in a week, he doesn’t mean *next* week, he means *a* week, sometime, before Jesus returns.

Be kind to one another, Ephesians says; be tenderhearted with one another. “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up.” Like that liberal Disciple Joe and those conservative Lutherans out in North Dakota. They treated each other as brothers and sisters within the body of Christ because they *are* brothers and sisters within the body of Christ. Good thing that Joe put on the Disciples bumper sticker and not the Hillary bumper sticker. Because as Christians they bridged a gap that would’ve been harder to bridge as citizens. But they did bridge that gap. As Christians, they modeled behavior which the world would do well to emulate. They could’ve broken each other down, but instead they built each other up; on common ground.

This is possible because, as it says back in Ephesians 2, “Christ 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” (Eph. 2:14). Joe and those small town Lutherans, and Christians of all sorts of different convictions and commitments, and folks all across this country, and you and I: we are members of one another. In Christ we are one body. And we’re called to build-up that body. Not tear it down by tearing each other down, but build it up. Not tear things apart by insisting that my way is the only way, but bring things together by listening, and seeking partners, and compromising, and finding common ground.

I’m excited by the partnership potential that I see in the reports of our community study teams. I’m especially excited about the ways in which the churches, in partnership with the schools of our community, might work together to nurture the children and youth of Bedford. The schools tell us that many of our young people need a safe place to be, both before and after school. They tell us that with parents working multiple jobs, our youth aren’t receiving the support they need around home work. We have the space to create such a safe place, and with paid staff and sufficient volunteers from this and other churches we could be that safe space; offering help with homework and spiritual nurture at the same time, and all the while modeling civil behavior and sharing in word and deed the love of Jesus. We can do this.

And likewise, if we come alongside some of our neighbors who’ve been out of the workforce and mentor them, we can be modeling civil behavior and offering life skills to them and offering Jesus to them. We can do this.

And when we do, we’ll be opening our doors to folks from all over the political and social and economic and religious spectrum. And that’s a good thing, because in so doing we will be expressing our basic nature of being members of each other, because we are all children of God and beloved by Jesus, who lived and died and lives again for *all* people.

That’s a good thing, because as Jesus’ hands and feet we too will be tearing down the wall of hostility between us.

That’s a good thing because the bridges that we will be building are rooted and grounded in the Firm Foundation who is Jesus Christ.

The rulers and authorities – the powers and principalities who have such a firm grip on our nation and on the world – they don’t want us to be doing this. They want to keep the sacred and the secular separate. They want to keep liberals and evangelicals in different camps. They want to keep progressives and conservatives at each other’s throats. And they are doing their best to make it so. But we who are the Church, we are not beholden to these powers and principalities who derive their influence from the devil, for the evil one, from the one who has been called the father of lies. No, we are beholden only to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than anything that we might ask or imagine. That One is Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be glory in the Church and in Bedford and in the United States and throughout the whole world, to all generations, now and forever more. Amen!