

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: What Could Be

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Scripture:

Ephesians 4

¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

⁷But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”

⁹(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every

respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their

hearts. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

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²⁰ That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful

desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶ "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. ²⁸ Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Transcript:

The scripture passage comes from each Ephesians chapter 4 says this, "I urge you to live life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and Father of all who is overall and through all and in all."

So the very first time I preached in this church was when I was a candidate for this job. And the way it works in our denomination is you come and you preach a sermon. And then immediately afterwards, the whole congregation votes on whether or not they want you. Not that triggers any childhood wounds from choosing teams on the playground.

No, no. It's all good, right? So obviously, I passed since I'm here. And afterwards, a woman came up to me and said, "Welcome to our church." We fight like family, but we love each other, I think. And then, she laughed, and I haven't seen her since.

So I don't know what that has to do with what she meant by that. But actually over the years, I've discovered that she was pretty much completely right. We don't agree on anything in this church except for Jesus.

Amen.

And that's what is the most important thing. And that is what matters because there is conflict in every church. And actually, when it comes to working through conflict, well, I think BelPres actually, we do it better than normal, better than average. I think we do okay on this. But there's conflict in every church. There's conflict in every family.

There's conflict in every work situation. Jesus said, "Wherever two or more of you gathered, there I am." He also could have said, "Wherever two or more of you are gathered, there's going to be some conflict," because people generate conflict.

And as we know, our culture has a lot of conflict in it right now. We are more divided than we've been as a nation in decades. Conflict between different generations, criticizing each other, racial conflict, political conflict between liberals and conservatives who no longer view each other as opponents, but enemies who aren't wrong, but who are evil.

And that conflict is dividing families. Some of you have that in your own family where family members have stopped talking to each other. Some people are getting divorced over this.

This conflict is in our workplaces. It's in our schools. It's in our churches. It's all around causing some people to wonder, "Are we headed toward another civil war?"

And sadly, Christians often aren't making it better. We're making it worse. Just one more special interest group, angrily demanding what we think we want, what we think we need. But if we're just as angry as the rest of the culture, then, what we say to the rest of the culture is Jesus doesn't make any difference in our lives at all.

So all of that is depressing. I'm done with the depressing part. From here on out, the sermon is just so happy. Good news, Jesus has a better way. Jesus has a way that has been proven. It has been tested, and it has been proven for 2000 years. He has a better way, less anger, less division, more joy, more unity, more hope, more peace, a Christ-centered way of being different and disagreeing in unity because that's what we see in the Bible. Just to be clear, biblical unity does not mean we agree.

We don't agree on many things. We agree on some things, but not on other things. Biblical unity also does not mean we quote, "agree to disagree," which basically means let's not talk about it and walk on eggshells all the time. Biblical unity also does not mean that all views must be accepted because some views are biblically wrong. They are sinful, and the Bible calls them so. So here's what biblical unity is. It's long definition, but work through it with me. Biblical unity is a supernatural transformation of the heart. This is something the Holy Spirit does. Transformation of our hearts where we disagree in ways that show the world the power of Jesus to bring different kinds of people together.

And we allow the Holy Spirit to use our differences to refine our worldviews, to align closer and more with God's. If that's who Christians were, if that's what we were doing, how would that change our families, our schools, our workplaces, our churches, our country, more joy, less anger, more unity? Not agreement. Unity.

Here at BelPres, we are laser focused on being disciples, not just church growers, but disciples. Disciples are people who are becoming like Jesus. And we've said there are six characteristics of a disciple marked by Jesus love, equipped and eager to share the good news of Jesus, healers of injustice, live connected to a multicultural multi-generational community, live sacrificially and obey Jesus' Lord, through prayer in scripture.

And at vision night, if you were there, I said, "Trouble with this list is as long and it's hard to remember. So we need a jingle to kind of a song or a jingle." Some of you are actually writing jingles, which is awesome. One guy put this list into ChatGPT and said, "Write a song in the style of Taylor Swift," and out popped a jingle. And other people are composing jingles. So maybe we'll have a jingle that we can sing soon because we are focused on this list. We've been working on it.

This list is why we had a Baptism Sunday because one of the ways that disciples tell their story is through baptism, because one of the marks of a disciple is sharing the good news of Jesus, we set a goal that by Easter we would collectively have 1200 gospel conversations

about Jesus with people who don't know him. And we asked you to report those conversations. And we've had so far 277. So not our goal, a little bit shy of the goal, but here's the thing. That's 277 gospel conversations that might not have happened if we hadn't focused on it.

And the point of it wasn't just to do some weird contest, but to change how we live. So hopefully, those conversations are still happening. We are serious about discipleship here. We're doing this. And two of the characteristics of disciple marked by Jesus love lives connected to a multi-generational, multicultural community are about how disciples disagree in unity because it's different than the world.

This is a discipleship issue. So just short sermon series for a couple of weeks, we're going to talk about how do we stay unified in all of our disagreements and differences, less anger, more joy, more harmony? And show the world the power of Jesus to bring together different kinds of people.

And this is a major theme in the New Testament. A lot of the New Testament talks about this, not a little minor theme, major theme in the New Testament. Care to guess why? Because there was so much conflict in the early church. The early church had all different kinds of races, people from Africa and Asia and Europe, all in one church. They were different generations and ages, different politics. It was a multicultural, multi-generational community that looked different, thought different, worshiped differently. And that's not an accident. The New Testament makes it crystal clear God did that on purpose because God doesn't want uniformity in his church.

He wants unity and diversity. The challenge though is a multicultural, multi-generational church is way harder than a church where everyone's the same, because people don't agree, which is why today most churches are filled with people who are pretty much the same. And people look for churches where everyone agrees with them politically and everyone is kind of more or less just like them because it's easier. It's less frustrating. It's less irritating. There's only one problem.

Start in Matthew, end in Revelation, you will not find it in one verse in the Bible. Not one verse, not one. But everywhere you'll find a multicultural, multi-generational church. That is what God intended. And the early church had it. They had ethnic conflict. They had generational conflicts. They had political conflicts. Conflict is normal in the church.

I will go one step further. Conflict in the church is not a bug. It's a feature because it means that we are different and diverse. And that is what God intended because it shows his power because that kind of community's not natural. It's supernatural.

And in the text I just read, the apostle Paul writing to a very divided church in Ephesus talks about how we get there so that in his words, the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith, maybe not unity and other things, but in the faith and become mature, attaining to the fullness of Christ. Then, we, doesn't say you, he includes himself, we

will no longer be infants. Instead, speaking the truth and love, we will grow to become the mature body of Him who is the head that is Christ.

And look at the highlighted words. He contrasts being spiritually mature with being infants, babies. And his point is, we are spiritual babies until we do the hard work of creating unity in the church. If we don't do it, then, we're just spiritually immature because spiritual maturity isn't about how much theology we know. It's being focused on others, being quick to admit when we're wrong. It's helping other people have what they need. So he says, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace." Every effort. He doesn't say, "Try it for a little bit and then if you don't like it, go back to fighting." He says, "Make every effort to preserve unity."

So how do we do that especially when we don't always agree and when we are so different? How do we do that in our families, in our churches, in our country? How do we do this? Well, the passage goes on and it says, "Be completely humble and gentle bearing with one another in love. There is one body and one spirit, one Lord, one God, and father of all."

So first step toward unity that is not uniformity, prioritize relationship. When Paul says, "Bear with one another," the Greek word in the original text means don't stop loving someone because they irritate you or get on your nerves. In other words, don't cut people off. Stay in relationship. And Paul says, "There's one spirit, Holy Spirit, one Lord, that's Jesus, one father." That's a reference to the trinity that God doesn't just have relationships. God is a relationship, between Father, Son and Spirit. God is a small group. Relationship is the center of the universe. And we need relationships with Christians who are different than we are in order to grow spiritually.

And this just makes sense. If part of spiritual maturity is unity, you can only practice that with Christians who are different than you, not the same as you. That's uniformity. Unity requires some differences. To borrow a phrase from pastor friend of mine, Josh Gritter, used to be on staff here, "Unity is friendship across difference." Friendship across difference.

And that is essential for us to grow spiritually as people. And as I've said before, the wonderful thing about church is there's always someone here to irritate you, right? We live to please, right? We're just here to meet your needs. Always someone here to irritate you. But that person that's irritating you is there on purpose to help you grow spiritually.

So don't think this person irritates me. Think this person is sanctifying me because we need each other to become spiritually mature. And the very differences, those are the things that help us grow spiritually. Prioritize relationship. Instead of sending an email, meet face-to-face. Cultivate relationships with people who are of a different generation, race politics, to know them as people, not as categories.

So then, the text goes on. Later on, it says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling in slander." And that word slander leads to step two of unity, that is not uniformity,

assume good intent. Assume good intent because one of the ways we slander people is when we ascribe bad motives for what they're doing, thinking or saying.

Part of my job, is to be criticized. It kind of just goes with the territory. And nobody likes to be criticized. But I believe that feedback is our friend. Criticism is how we grow. Criticism is how we get better, which is why every Thursday morning, I give my sermon to a group of people who then criticize it like that's their job. Their job is to criticize the sermon. And they're really good at their job.

In fact, there's one man in that group that says his spiritual gift is criticism. I am inclined to agree with him, but it always makes a better sermon. It always makes a better sermon. So criticism is fine. But when it goes to motive, that's when it hurts.

Now, of course, some people really do have bad motives. There are people with bad motives. But we are really quick, too quick to ascribe bad motives to someone for what they do or say especially if we don't know them very well. We just put a motive on them. The pandemic was interesting for pastors around the country. We all have the same experience, not just this church. Every pastor I know had this experience during the pandemic.

Now the question of what should the role of government be in public health? That is a legit topic for debate. That is a legit topic for debate. And most of the critical emails I received from this church, they were super respectful. Thank you so much. The majority were really respectful.

But there were a few that were kind of a little over the top. So when we were shut down, I got a number of emails calling me a coward, said that I was a coward. A few of them, more than one, a few of them actually said I either was the anti-Christ or I was preparing the way for the I kid you not. Some of you were like, "Oh no, I kid you not," or preparing the way for the anti-Christ. And I was just like, "Oh yes, you've discovered my secret." Preparing for the anti-Christ is what I live for, gets me out of bed in the morning. How can I prepare for the anti-Christ today? And then when we opened back up, again, I got emails again calling me a coward. And I didn't care that, who didn't care if people died.

And I was just like... I just wanted to say, "Okay, people, come on. Let's just for a moment assume that I am not Attila the Hun." Okay. Let's just kind of go out on a limb here, not Attila the Hun, not Genghis Khan. And might there have been other motives for the decisions we made? And maybe those decisions were right. Maybe those decisions were wrong.

But motive wise, might there have been something other than the fact that I'm the anti-Christ? Might there have been another motive there that was a good motive? And just for the record, I am not the anti-Christ, I mean, because that would be kind of a letdown, don't you think? Like that 2000 years of buildup and the anti-Christ turns out to be a middle-aged pastor in Bellevue. Way to overwhelm, right?

Motive, assume good motives and intent. And I know it's hard to do. I find myself ascribing bad motives to people that I don't know, especially all too easily. And I have to stop myself

and practice the spiritual discipline of saying, "Am I really sure that's their motive?" Maybe, I disagree with them, but maybe there's some good motives behind what they're doing or saying.

Third ingredient to unity that is not uniformity, humility. The text says, "Be completely humble." Not a little humble. Completely humble which is shocking because in this time, in this culture, in Roman culture, humility was not a virtue. It was considered a character defect. And humility means lots of things. Let me just name two. First, humility means thinking of others, not just ourselves. The Bible says, "In humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of the others."

This is how the church is supposed to work. This is how we're supposed to do it. I want you to have what you need. You want me to have what I need. Have the same mindset at Christ Jesus who do not consider equality with God, something to be used to his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.

Look to other people's interests, not just our own because as I've said before, here's the thing, if everyone here is looking out for your needs and you are looking out for theirs, are your needs being met? Yes, they are. Yes, they are, only without all the fighting and arguing and bickering. And that's just better. Humility is looking to the interest of others. And then, the second thing that humility is, I could be wrong. It's just possible that I could be wrong once in a while.

I may not always get it right. Most of the things we disagree about are really complex issues. And here's the thing. Complexity demands, humility. Complexity demands humility. The more complex something is, the less often our sentences should begin with the words, "Well, obviously," because if it was obvious, more people would agree.

And then finally, so a prioritized relationship, assume good intent, be humble. And then finally, and this is not in the text, but it's just good to know how your brain works because all the brain research shows that when we are in conflict, our higher reasoning faculties, they shut down. We retreat to what's called our lizard brain. That's all the fight or flight stuff.

So in conflict, just remind yourself, I'm thinking like a lizard right now. And say that to yourself, not other people. In conflict with your spouse, don't say, "Oh yeah, a lizard brain," not recommended.

But I have found it helpful in conflict just to stop myself sometimes and say, "You're thinking like a lizard. Don't think like a lizard. You're in your lizard brain. Okay?" We are humans. We use tools. We have language and opposable thumbs. You are the ruler of your inner lizard. You are in control of your lizardness. You are the boss of your lizard. Put them in check.

Now, some of you may look at this list of ways to have disagreement and still be united and go, "Yeah, that's fine. That's all right." But aren't there sometimes in some people whose viewpoints are so destructive that we can't be in unity with them? And that's partially right.

There are viewpoints that are destructive. There are certain viewpoints and ideas that are sin. The Bible calls them sinful. And those need to be called out and those need to be corrected.

That's why Paul says, "Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head. And that is Christ." In Christian community, we speak a truth that is saturated with love, and we are humble and listen to each other so that gradually, we correct each other so that our worldview comes closer and closer to that of Jesus. And I'll talk more about how we actually do that in an upcoming sermon and how we do this with people that aren't respectful back. And talk about that in an upcoming sermon.

Years ago, when I was a college pastor, I had kind of a breakthrough moment on this kind of disagreement unity thing that has stuck with me ever since. And it was back when I was a college pastor in California. Some of you maybe have heard me tell this story, but it was kind of a defining moment. And I had preached a sermon in the main church service. And afterwards, I got a white hot email from an enraged man who didn't go to our church but was visiting our church that day.

And the email, it was really angry. He said my theology was all wrong. He said I was leading people astray. He said I was not honoring God. I was disrespecting God, on and on and on. He was really mad. So knowing everything that I just preached about unity, I immediately flamed him right back. With shocking speed, my hand hit the reply button. And I typed out a passionate response, the first sentence of which was, "Had you actually been listening?" And it only got better from there.

I mean, I have a PhD in English. I martialled the English language, and I sent it into war. Oh, it was magnificent. It was artistic. It was aesthetically beautiful. It was so just commanding use of the English language. I reread it, and I triumphantly hit send and thought that'll teach him a lesson.

But deep down, I knew that I had just hurt him as much as he had hurt me. But I got over it faster than I should have. Three months later, three months later, this man emailed me and he said, "Three months ago, I sent you an email that was pretty rude. And when I got your response to my email, I was even more angry at you. But I have now come to realize that it wasn't right. The way I said it, the email I sent you, I hurt you. And for that, I apologize."

And suddenly, I felt very, very small and petty, and sinful. So I emailed him back and I said, "Let's get together." So we did. And when we got together, I said, "Look, you did not deserve the email I sent you, my response. You didn't deserve that. You were just concerned that God's word be preached well and faithfully. You had good motives. Your motives were really good."

And he said, "Yeah, but I didn't do it very well." And I said, "No, you didn't do it very well. But then again, neither did I, did I?" so it's kind of good that Jesus forgives both of us. And then he said, "I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but I'm actually a pastor too."

So we were both pastors, lizard pastors, but pastors. And then, we started talking about how hard being a pastor is and the difficulty of being a pastor. And he said, "I know, right, like angry emails, which we had just been exchanging." And then, we went on. We talked about how being a pastor was a blessing. And at the end, we prayed for each other.

Now, along the way, we also talked about theology and preaching. And we didn't agree. We did not agree. We still didn't agree, but we disagreed in unity in a way and blessing each other. We prioritized relationship, met face to face, assumed good motives on the part of the other person. We got humble, looked to the needs of the other person as well as able to admit that we were wrong. And we stopped thinking like lizards. And it felt so much better, guys. It just felt so much better than being angry and divided and mad all the time. It just felt so much better, more hope, more joy, more unity.

And for me, it was a turning point in how to disagree well. And now, I still screw up. I still screw it up. I've had to apologize to some of you. And maybe some of you, I should have apologized and I didn't. So I apologize for that. And I know that some of the things we disagree about are deep and painful and personal, way more so than in the story I just told. And we'll talk about that in an upcoming sermon as well.

But that moment gave me a paradigm to understand how do we disagree in unity? So action step for this week, pick one of these things I talked about. And every day, pray to ask Jesus to help you do it because this takes prayer.

I cannot do this on my own. I am too selfish. I am too sinful. I need you to help me. And I need the supernatural power of Jesus because this kind of unity is not natural. Being mad at each other, that's natural. Being united with people who are just like you and think like you, that's natural. This kind of unity, this kind of unity, it's supernatural.

So ask Jesus to help you do it every day this week. Pick one of those things. Ask Jesus to help you with it. And then, maybe even after the service, get prayer from one of our prayer ministers because this can only happen through the power of Jesus. But it's important that it happens because church BelPres, we have an opportunity here. We really do. We've got the ingredients. God is making us a more and more diverse community in all kinds of ways.

We have a moment here, church. We have a chance. We have a chance to do something really amazing. We have a chance to do something that doesn't happen very often. We have a chance to do something that could heal our families and our country. What could be if we found unity with people who think different, look different, act different, vote different, different generations.

Wouldn't it be so much better than what's going on right now, all the anger and noise and yelling and division, families, churches, workplaces, schools so divided? And BelPres, I

believe with God's help, we'll do it. I believe we will be that New Testament church where different cultures and different generations come together and learn from each other and love the rich diversity of food and music and culture and perspective, and be that every tribe, tongue and nation church the New Testament talks about. In a culture of generational warfare, we will build a culture of honor and respect where younger generation honors the older generations and the older generations empower the younger ones.

In a culture of toxic political divisions, we will bring liberals and conservatives together. We will pray for each other. We will be friends with each other. We will eat in each other's homes and take the best ideas from all sides as we further God's kingdom. We will not all be the same. We will not always agree, but we will disagree in a way that is so holy, so beautiful, so inspiring people will say, "It's a miracle." And how in such a divided culture, are you able to put all those different kinds of people together in one church and we will answer with one united voice, one word only, Jesus.

Lord, thank you that you unite what the world divides. We confess, I confess, I fuel division far too often. Lord, correct us. Help us know your love. Give us your love for others and make us one as you and the Father are one. Fulfill that prayer you prayed 2000 years ago. And may we be a place of very different perspectives in people that is still unified in a way that shows the world that you are Lord, in your name Jesus, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

For further Study: *Read Philippians 2:1-11 this week.*

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Do you have any "friendships across difference" that are made possible by the Holy Spirit? If yes, why is this possible. If no, how could you seek that out?
- Are you more likely to speak the truth without a lot of love, or love, but never speak the truth (v. 15)?
- How (or with whom) is God calling you to seek greater unity?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.