

Aug 1, 2021-- Circuit Online Service

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Summoned by the God who made us rich in our diversity – StF 689

One human family God has made – StF 687

All praise to our redeeming Lord – StF 608

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship

Summoned by the God who made us rich in our diversity – **StF 689**

Prayer

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

Meditation: Faster, Higher, Stronger -- *Together*

One human family God has made – **StF 687**

Intercessions

All praise to our redeeming Lord – **StF 608**

Benediction

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

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.

7 But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.

¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Prayer Handbook – p 77 – waiting upon the Lord

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,

You remind us that the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong.

This day we wait upon you that our strength will be renewed,

So we can run and not be weary.

Thank you for those with whom we run as companions, not competitors,

Following the tracks of righteousness and faith

Led by our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

(Lily Twist, Scotland District Chair)

Olympics – Faster, Higher, Stronger – Together

I love the new Olympic slogan!

An emphasis on how we spur each other on to be their best

Run their fastest, jump their highest,

Use every bit of their strength to reach new heights

Moving away from a mindset of ‘defeating’ every one else...

Or being ‘defeated’ because one isn’t the fastest or highest or strongest...

Reminding us that the best races are those in which everyone is spurring each other on

To do their best –

Perhaps the past year and a half of isolation have reminded us

What a privilege it is to work together –

And how our working together can inspire and enable each of us

to do our best as well!

In the scripture passage we’ve read,

Paul is encouraging the Christians in Ephesus to spur each other on –

to measure up to the standard that Jesus has set:

a standard of love for God, for each other, for ourselves.

That’s a standard that still stands for us!

As we encourage each other

To be kinder, fairer, more faithful, more loving... together

Working together to build up God’s kingdom

Not just for us and ourselves, but for the whole world.

When Jesus is talking about God’s kingdom reigning,

I don’t think he means just getting everyone to sign up to say they’re Christian,

I believe he means everyone spurring everyone else on to be their very best,

Their most loving, their most caring,

Using all the gifts and talents God gives them

To make the world a just and safe and caring environment for all.

In our local churches, this could mean that someone sees a need

and starts to do what they can

And another gets inspired to do what they can

Perhaps it’s in fundraising

Perhaps in prayer ministry

Perhaps in homeless care

Perhaps working with children and youth

Perhaps with older people

As can happen in the Olympics, so church congregations could become teams

That work their hardest to prepare themselves

To be their best in ministry to all God’s people.

Working with each other, we begin to learn new things about ourselves and our capabilities.

We learn from other’s strengths and their weaknesses.

We learn about our own strengths and weaknesses.

And how we are to interact with each other,

How we can encourage each other...

I’m also reading a new book by Gordon Brown, *Seven Ways to Change the World*,

In which he’s describing some of the biggest challenges the world currently faces:

From climate change to nuclear disarmament to poverty and lack of education.
Sometimes it is very difficult to look at the big picture and not get discouraged.
As many of you will know, Gordon Brown's father was a Church of Scotland minister,
So he looks at the world's problems not just as a politician
But as a follower of Jesus –
And his ultimate message is that we *can* change the world –
But only if we all work together –
Beyond what we perceive as 'national' interests –
Because ultimately what is good for all of us
Is good for each of us.
Perhaps the crises are important because they demand that we seek solutions –
That we actually deal with the underlying problems –
And often that requires that we deal with conflict...
Dealing with conflict positively is how we all can grow into what God needs us to be
Together: Faster, Higher, Stronger.

Some of you will know that one of straplines for my work with interfaith marriages is:
'Working for world peace at the most intimate level'.
I have in mind a couple made up of an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian Arab.
They recognised that if they could live together peacefully,
There was hope for the world!
Indeed, working for world peace is an exercise in conflict resolution
That must begin with the relationships closest to us --
Marriages, families, siblings, parent and child.

A few days ago, I got an email from Sam, a marriage counsellor I had some years ago –
We've kept in touch and become friends.
In the article he forwarded to me,
he mentions that couples rarely come to his office unless there is a crisis –
And in that time of crisis, they're rarely able to even glance at each other,
Because the relationship has deteriorated so badly.
He says, "The atmosphere is generally unhappy,
and each person is relating largely out of negative assumptions about the other.
Both people have long since stopped learning new things about the other and,
therefore, neither one is feeling understood or important."
He gives them tools for working through their difficulties,
And most times, the immediate crisis passes.

But Sam says that's when the even more important work begins:
He calls it "ACT", That is: A-C-T: Appreciation, Communication, Time
So: Appreciation: once the immediate crisis is past,
it's important to concentrate on what is good in the other:
What is helpful, what is honourable about the other.
I remember times in the past when I really was not happy with my husband.
I found that if I went out to buy a gift for my husband, that made all the difference.
It made me focus on what would make my husband happy –
Rather than what was making me unhappy.
It made me appreciate him for who he was –
not just for the 'negative assumptions' I was making about him --
And, of course, receiving a gift made *him* happy!

Sam's second action point is Communication,
Finding ways to hear and be heard in positive ways.
Of course, the most essential part of Communication is not the talking –
Not making our own point in a louder or stronger way
But *listening* hard to what the other is saying – or not saying.

When I lead marriage counselling with couples myself,
I always insist that we stage a Fair Fight... and this can be great fun!
They're usually surprised that a minister would be encouraging them to 'fight',
But in fact I'm trying to give them some tools for resolving the inevitable conflicts.
As Bill Clinton has said about his own marriage: "If we always agree on everything,
Then one of us has stopped thinking!"

In essence, having a Fair Fight is about learning to listen carefully to the other.
As with many Conflict Resolution techniques,
One person is given the chance to speak -- without interruption –
To explain his/her perspective on a situation.
The other has to listen carefully –
Carefully enough to be able to report back what's been heard.
The first speaker can then clarify if s/he has been heard correctly...
And then the listener becomes the speaker and the same process is followed...

The exercise becomes an opportunity to hear past our own assumptions
So that we have a clearer understanding of the other.
The exercise also gives each of us an opportunity to be heard –
And so to be valued...
And sometimes, by hearing ourselves speak our own truth,
We begin to understand ourselves in a new way.

There are a few other rules for having a 'Fair Fight'—
Each speaker aims to use 'I' statements rather than 'you' statements:
Such as "I feel taken for granted when I find your dirty socks on the floor"
Rather than: "You're such a slob, making me do all the dirty work!"
So often we find that we hadn't recognised how our actions make another feel!
Framing our observations in 'I' statements, we can avoid the easy trap of blaming the other.
We can just state the problem as something we can work on together.
When we rely on blame, we hike up the defensiveness all around
So we blind ourselves to constructively working through the situation.

There is also a rule that 'feelings are facts' –
Which means the way I or my spouse *feel* about something is important.
It could be that my feelings stem from something very deep within myself
That I don't have adequate words for.
We need to accept those feelings as 'facts' – which means we need to honour them.
It doesn't mean that your feelings are the same as mine
But neither of us has the right to belittle or negate the feelings of another.

In a Fair Fight, violence is completely ruled out, including the use of physical force or yelling
We might have grown up with yelling and hitting and slamming of doors –
But did it ever really solve anything? Or did it just bury any chance of real reconciliation?

Likewise, threatening to leave or divorce can just become manipulative.
I'm not saying that separation or divorce is never justified,
But using the threat to get submission means the issue can never really be resolved.

One of the conflicts our Methodist church faces
is how we deal with 'contradictory convictions'
especially on the subject of same-sex marriage.
Some have been very upset with the results of last months' Conference decisions.
And when we get upset, we tend to assume the worst of each other –
Accusations of others being 'homophobic' vs 'denying scriptural authority'...
I'm very proud to be part of a church
that has taken a long, hard look at the subject of sexual relationships
because these are vital issues of how we love and honour each other.
We've been having these conversations for several decades now,
And as important as the conversations are,
What is even more important is that these conversations are framed with grace and love –
'Speaking the truth in love' is how Paul has described it.
Hopefully with the speaking has come abundant *listening* – to others, to God, to ourselves.
Indeed, if we were all the same or even all 'thought' the same,
then we would never learn from each other.
Our diversity has the potential to make us stronger.

Our founder John Wesley was well-known to be one with strong convictions,
But he is also famous for his conviction
that we do not all have to think alike to be able to love alike.
Methodism is thus strongly rooted in a respect for 'contradictory convictions'.
As John Wesley said, "If your heart is as mine, give me your hand."

I personally have gained much from hearing from others on this subject of sexual relations,
Including on the lived reality of those in same-sex relationships.
Indeed, my opinions have changed radically from those of 30 years ago.
It does sadden me that some have felt they can no longer remain within the Methodist Church
After the decisions last month to accept same-sex marriage in our churches.
One of the rules of a Fair Fight that I didn't mention earlier
Is giving each other 'time out' – to consider on their own what's been said,
What's been heard, what needs to be accepted, what needs to be negotiated.
Perhaps that's what we're being asked to give each other –
Time and space to reconsider how best we can resume our relationships –
Indeed, 'Time' is the third of Sam's words for couples recovering from crisis.
By that he means 'time' to reflect what has gone on,
As well as the importance of spending time with each other
To listen and reconnect effectively.

In the words from today's scripture, Paul has said:
"with 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."

I don't know if there are any listeners with us today
who have felt they needed to leave the Methodist Church –

Perhaps there are none because they have felt their voices will not be heard.
If there are a brave few listening,
I hope they will hear me say that the conversation is not finished.
We still have much to learn from each other.

This week I also came across a passage from Brian Keenan,
A Belfast journalist who had been taken hostage in Beirut some years ago.
Having grown up during the troubles of N Ireland,
Becoming a hostage in the on-going saga of Middle East conflict,
His life experiences taught him the importance of listening across the conflict –
To hearing – and embracing – the lived experience of the Other.
He says that *embracing the experience of the other*
Demands more of one than the armed struggle:
It is through resolving these conflicts that we have the potential
To move into our full maturity.

Yesterday, Alfred and I celebrated our 44th wedding anniversary.
I'd like to think we both have matured greatly over those decades –
And perhaps we've learned most because of the challenges
And a determination to use the challenges as opportunities to grow.
I think this is part of what the Apostle Paul means
when he talks about growing into the full Body of Christ,
with each recognising how they are connected to the other,
every ligament necessarily joined to the other
to enable full movement and working of the body.
When Paul speaks of 'speaking the truth in love',
I take that to also mean 'listening with love to each other's truth'.

With regards to the Methodist Church in Britain,
It is my hope and my prayer that our recent conflicts have been a spur
to remind us to listen more carefully to each other.
It is also my hunch that many others around the world –
Both inside and outside the church –
Might just be watching to see how we negotiate this conflict
and so be inspired as well to listen more carefully to each other.
Perhaps in this way we can inspire others to be their best as well:
Growing Faster, Higher, Stronger: Together in God's love. Amen.