



The Word...

Brothers and sisters: I, a prisoner for the Lord,
urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received,
with all humility and gentleness, with patience,
bearing with one another through love,
striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace:
one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call;
one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all,
who is over all and through all and in all
(*Eph 4:1-6*).

Pondering the Word ...

The word “unity” is being thrown around a lot these days, at least in the US. But I fear, in many cases, “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” is not what some who call for harmony intend. It is more the idea of unity on “our” side of the battleground, with no mention of humility, gentleness, and patience. No mention of looking forward to repairing breaches, working together to see the dream of the Creator “who is in all” come true.

This is the case, not just in politics (which has become for many the altar at which they worship), but in religious institutions that claim one Lord, one faith, one baptism. How in the hell will we ever see peace in and between nation-states if those who profess the same faith are at war with each other, sometimes with shows of violence? As I reflect on the writings of the prophets of old, I am always amazed how little has changed with humanity! How often it is “one step up and two steps back!”

It is high time for those of us who claim one God and Father of all to work towards preserving unity in the Spirit. In his book, *The Future of Faith*, by Harvey Cox (2009), Cox talks about the challenges of *intrafaith* dialogue, as opposed to *interfaith* dialogue, also necessary, but often less fraught with details than the arguments between those who claim Christ. He encourages all of us to reach out, not to those in other denominations who are of the “dialogue wing” of their practice (i.e., those willing to explore), but to those who hold beliefs and opinions diametrically opposed to your own. The purpose, of course, is not to evangelize the other but “to seek to understand rather than to be understood.”

Living the Word ...

“Take the Other to Lunch,” https://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_lesser_take_the_other_to_lunch). This TED talk, done in 2010, is exponentially more important today. It provides ideas and ground rules for an open dialogue with someone, maybe within your own congregation, with whom you disagree on issues of faith. It’s not about converting them, but instead to learn about who they are and how they think. It is also not for the purpose of becoming BFFs (!) but for fostering civility and peace. Is there someone who comes to mind with whom you are hesitant to dialogue? Reach out, be a person of peace, and begin the conversation.

Personal Reflections and Ideas ...

Mon, Jul 29: *“For, as close as the loincloth clings to a man’s loins, so had I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the LORD; to be my people, my renown, my praise, my beauty. But they did not listen”* (Jer 13:1-11). The imagery of the loincloth in this passage represents the intimacy God desires with the people. Scholars say the rotted loincloth represents how Israel will be exposed to shame, but the punishment aspect of these verses should not distract us from where it all starts: God’s passionate desire for closeness with each one of us. **Provision: Allow yourself to be close to God.** God is always at the ready, closer than the air we breathe, but many are put off by intimacy with God. Today is the feast day of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, intimate friends of Jesus. Put yourself in the role of a trusted friend and confidant to Jesus. Let Jesus share with you his thoughts, his hopes, his disappointments, his doubts. He is waiting for you. Allow yourself to come close.

Tue, Jul 30: *“The weeds are the children of the Evil One...The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his Kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers”* (Mt 13:36-43). Jesus has a special place in mind for those who cause others to sin. He mentions it again in Matthew 18:6. **Provision: Be aware of how you are leading others.** While this admonition probably refers to more serious things, there’s room for all of us to consider ways we unwittingly encourage others to sin. Do we pass prejudice and disdain on to our kids by avoiding, scorning, or judging those who don’t look or act or live like we do? Do we entice others to gossip or bully, or steer someone in the wrong direction for our own benefit? We know, even for the most egregious sin, God’s forgiveness is granted if our sorrow is genuine, and we strive to make amends. But pay attention today to those little, not-so-great things we do, to see if by our own failings, we might be leading others astray.

Wed, Jul 31: *“As for my God, may his mercy go before me; may he show me the fall of my foes”* (Ps 59). The psalmist portrays David’s plea for mercy and revenge as Saul plots to kill him. I wonder how Jesus would rewrite this verse: *“May my father’s mercy go before me so that I may show mercy to those who seek my life; and, through that mercy, may they find love and peace in my father’s embrace.”* **Provision: Revenge is not Christian.** I am thoroughly puzzled by rhetoric from people who identify as Christian, reveling that they will exact revenge against their “enemies” on the other side of the political divide, even to the point of bloodshed. Sorry, folks, but this isn’t anything that Christ teaches or represents. *“Repay no one evil for evil, providing things in good countenance with all human beings. Be at peace with all human beings. Do not exact justice for yourselves but yield place before anger; for it has been written: ‘The exacting of justice is mine, I will requite, says the Lord.’ Rather, if your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him drink...Do not be vanquished by evil, but vanquish the evil with the good”* (Rm 12:17-21).

Thu, Aug 1: *“Whenever the object of clay which he was making turned out badly in his hand, he tried again”* (Jer 18:1-6). The Book of Jeremiah is kind of depressing. He focuses a lot on the people following false prophets, and the book doesn’t have as much of the “yes, you’ve screwed up, but God will bring you back” encouragement we find in Isaiah. But this one little tidbit—the potter tries again and again—warms my heart. **Provision: God’s mercy is boundless.** God never tires, God will always remake us. We hear in the psalm today, *“Put not your trust in princes, in the sons of men, in whom there is no salvation.”* God alone is our source of renewal and rebirth.

Fri, Aug 2: *“Whatever I command you, tell them, and omit nothing. Perhaps they will listen and turn back, each from his evil way”* (Jer 26:1-9). The readings today are about the solitary and frustrating life of a prophet. I get a teeny-tiny taste of the real prophets’ frustrations in that I feel, at times, like a broken record. What new and true can one say to others so that they will listen? **Provision: “Preach always. If necessary, use words”** (attributed to Francis of Assisi); or **“Go in peace to serve the Lord by your life.”** What new and true “words” will I...will you...share with others today by the way we live our lives?

Sat, Aug 3 *“Mark well: if you put me to death, it is innocent blood you bring on yourselves”* (Jer 26:11-16, 24). The phrase “innocent blood” resonates with me. Most are not joining violent mobs like the ones Jeremiah faces (although some are!), but still, I am called to reflect: How do my actions, my purchases, my vote...how does my life add to the shedding of innocent blood through poverty and other societal sins? **Provision: Pray for enlightenment.** We don’t want to get into “analysis paralysis” by examining and condemning every little thing we do but pray today that the Spirit will shine a light on changes you can make for the betterment of all.