

II Samuel 11: 26-12: 13a
Psalm 51: 1-13
Ephesians 4: 1-16
St. John 6: 24-35

Pentecost 11 2024.

“We 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...”

Whether we are sailors or not, we understand the dangers of a ship being at sea in a terrible storm – even more so, when there are no engines to drive the ship, as was true until the last century... Waves can crash over the deck, filling the hold with water and swamping the vessel (as might have happened to the freighter the Edmund Fitzgerald in the storm on Lake Superior in 1975)... In a storm, terrible winds tend to blow the bow or stern of the boat sideways, and if the boat is side-on in the waves, it is much more likely to capsize. This is true whether the boat is a canoe or a supertanker. Piloting a boat in a raging storm can be a terrible experience, even for a seasoned sailor...

St. Paul himself had bad experiences at sea. While listing all his trials in First Corinthians 10, Paul writes, “Three times I was shipwrecked, for a night and a day I was adrift at sea.” We can also read about Paul’s shipwreck on the Island of Malta in Acts 27 (although that experience might have been *after* Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians)...

It’s safe to assume that St. Paul had some knowledge of the dangers of storms while at sea, and that appears to be on Paul’s mind as he uses “storms at sea” as a kind of a picture, a metaphor, to write about our being faithful to Jesus Christ... Paul does not want his readers to be distracted by false teaching, false doctrine. He wants us to grow to be mature and solid in our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let’s re-read a selection of Ephesians 4:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...

All of us have given gifts by God the Holy Spirit to offer to God and to others in the Christian life. We are called to maturity. Paul continues,

until 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.

Here’s the metaphor of a ship in a storm:

We 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. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...

So, you and I are called to the process of spiritual maturity. A sign of this spiritual maturity is that we are not to be "blown about by every wind of doctrine..."

What is doctrine, anyway? What is Church teaching?... We also need to ask, What steps do we take, to ensure we aren't blown about, as St. Paul warns us against?...

Doctrine is simply a teaching – a principle about God or God's Church. Some Church teachings are core convictions about what we believe, such as the Creeds we say together week by week. These core doctrines are sometimes called "dogma," although that word isn't used too much in the Church these days... Some examples of core Church doctrines are "Jesus is risen" and "I believe in the Holy Spirit" and "I believe in the forgiveness of sins..." These doctrines are core convictions of Christians throughout the ages – norms of the gospel... These core convictions are not meant to be legalistic, but like a fence around the pasture, indicating the parameters within which the disciples of Jesus abide...

There are many more doctrines, which some Christians believe passionately. Yet, we're agreed that they are not like the content of the historic creeds. Some examples of other doctrines throughout the Church's history are "Women can be leaders in the Church" or "Women cannot be leaders in the Church;" or, "The spiritual gift of speaking in tongues stopped in the 5th century" or "The spiritual gift of speaking in tongues continues today;" and so on... There are different teachings about exactly how Jesus Christ will come again; what kind of robes the clergy should wear (or should we wear them at all?), and so on... We all take one point of view, or another...

Some Christians passionately argue for their own point of view; for many of these secondary doctrines... Most Anglicans – not so much!... For example, Anglicans agree that bishops can be a good thing in the historic church tradition, going back to the apostles' ministry ("*bene esse*"); but, most Anglians agree one can be a disciple of Jesus Christ as in most Protestant churches, without having a bishop. It's not an *esse* for most of us; one can be a disciple of Jesus without having a bishop...

Even for secondary doctrines, I believe we need to work together prayerfully toward discerning God's will, and a single unified position, but it's not as urgent on a relatively minor matter as it is about vital, central teachings...

Among the old Anglican articles, the authors make the point that we don't all have to be exactly alike! Article 34:

It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly alike... So that nothing be ordained against God's Word... [That is, we don't turn against the core message revealed through the Bible as a whole.] Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church... so that all things be done to edifying.

Let's note that last phrase, "done to edifying." The emphasis by the Anglican leaders is on caring for people – to make the good news clear; to help people follow Christ...

So, there are *core* doctrines, about which we all agree. There are secondary doctrines which we have. Worldwide and through time, we might not agree on all points, but on some points, we can allow a little more latitude...

Lastly, there are doctrines which I expect all of us agree are trivial, or mistaken in the first place... For example, everyone being able to *sit* during worship, and sit anywhere they like in the nave, is a relatively new historical development in the life of the Church!... Parishes used to generate income by charging "pew rents." If you paid more, you got your own seat, and you could sit near the front!... If you were poor, you either had to sit in the back, or you might not get a seat at all! "Pew rents" became a sign of status – richer people got better seats!...

Local churches got rid of the practice many years ago, thanks be to God. However, "pew rents" were a hot topic of debate in many churches, years ago... I'm sorry to report that there was a denomination in Canada – not Anglican, I hasten to add – in which there was a schism about the doctrine of pew rents... Some people felt so passionately about their view, they wouldn't worship next to people who didn't have the same view about pew rents... Surely we can all agree that this is a tragic misapplication of a church doctrine...

How do we get these teachings in the first place?... They are taken from the teachings in the Bible as a whole, as it's understood by Christians throughout the ages together (that is, tradition...) The Bible isn't an orderly collection of doctrines, of course. It's mostly stories; narratives... For example, the Parable of the Prodigal Son and his Brother isn't a collection of propositions, but it reveals the character of God, and our own brokenness and our need for God... We need to pay attention to the Bible, taken as a whole, and also, how other Christians have understood and interpreted the gospel message...

So we have this collection of teachings – some of them are core teachings; others less so... What do we do if we come across someone who has a confused view about some doctrines, or a view which is different from our own?... I suggest, the first step is to discern whether it's a core doctrine or not... If it's insignificant, then likely the best thing we can do is to smile and to ignore a petty difference...

Most people don't have bad intentions, but they can just be mistaken. Then, I suggest the right approach is to speak with them *in private*. Please don't embarrass someone by pointing out a mistake in public...

For example, in Acts 18, we read that there was a man named Apollos who was preaching in the city of Ephesus. He was a bit confused about the subject of baptism, so 2 church leaders met with him privately to guide him:

Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.

Above all, we are to be motivated by love. The 17th century teacher Richard Baxter popularized an expression: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity [love]..." "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

How do people get off-track in the first place?... Hmm... Well, I'm sorry to say this, but I do humbly believe that sometimes, church pulpits these days are not always shining examples of rich, wholesome teaching... If the preacher him- or herself is not well-formed, then that preacher can't do a good job of passing on the good news!...

For example, years ago, I met a man I'll call Jim, who really wanted to be ordained in the Anglican Church. Jim was a sweet guy, but he confused "ordination" and "employment." The Church wisely discerned that he was *not* called to ordination... However, Jim read an advertisement of a group in eastern Ontario. If you met them some weekend, then you could put "Rev" in front of your name, guaranteed!... Jim seized this as an opportunity, so off he went one weekend, and then began signing his name, "Rev Jim." Bless him; he was not a suitable candidate for teaching the faith... So, that's one way things can go wrong – by leadership in the local church which is less than stellar...

A second general way things can go wrong, I observe, is when people drift away from being close, in a local church themselves... We're meant to come together regularly for worship and the sacraments, and with an openness to learning and growing together...

In my last parish, I met a 12 year old girl, who told me, “I don’t need to go to church. I know it all already!...” She was a prime candidate for getting muddled about gospel principles!...

So, back to today’s second lesson. You and I have been given a lifetime not only to turn to Christ’s love and goodness, but to *grow to maturity* in Christ... We need to be patient and encouraging to one another. We are not to be blown about by every wind of doctrine, like a ship in a terrible storm... Let us keep close to Christ, under the gentle guidance of the Holy Spirit; now and for ever. Amen...