

SEE HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER!

Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16

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Last Saturday night, Doug and I returned from a two-week trip to Israel and Jordan with two other couples in our family. I had been to Israel on a shorter trip three years ago with a group from our church. It was fun to go back and show some of my favorite sights to my relatives, and to see some things I hadn't been able to see before. One of my favorite places this time was the town of Old Jaffa, a town within walking distance of where we were staying in Tel Aviv. How old is old Jaffa? Documents prove that people have been living there for 7,500 years. Buildings are still standing from 3,000 years ago.

As we wandered through these alleyways, up and down cobblestone streets, we saw a sign for "Simon the Tanner's House." I then remembered what I'd read in a guidebook - Jaffa is mentioned in the book of Acts. Three times, in fact, Acts tells us that Peter stayed in the home of Simon, near the seacoast. So our group followed the winding signs towards Simon the Tanner's house. We first saw it from a bit of a distance, and were wondering if we would be able to go in - if it had been made into a little museum perhaps. As we got closer, we saw a sign on the door. No, we can't go in...why? Because people still live there! It was a thousand-year-old home when Simon lived there. Now it's a 3,000 year old home, still occupied. Amazing. Amazing how, in our world that seems so rapidly-changing, some things stay the same.

Some people call Israel the Holy Land, but I believe all places are holy, or can be. God is everywhere, and places become holy for us when we recognize that presence. Experiences become holy when we are aware that at every time and place, there is deep-

er spiritual meaning to be found. I know that for many of our 99 mission trip participants, Slidell, Louisiana will become a holy place next week. It might happen in the midst of a hot and humid work day, when a grateful homeowner expresses appreciation, or when a project that seemed impossible is completed thanks to the collaboration of many different hands working together. It may happen as laughter and food are shared around tables together. It may happen during evening worship as music is played and you sing and sway and join arms.

There are moments in each of our lives when we seem to be elevated, lifted above the normal concerns of daily life. A beautiful sunrise or sunset can be a transcendent moment. There are many holy places and holy moments.

But there is something particularly spiritual about being in the places where so many events in the Bible took place. When I looked at the Sea of Galilee two weeks ago, a place where we know Jesus spent time and a place he loved, I felt closer to him; I felt a connection to his time and place.

What was it, do you think, that caused the message of Jesus to spread? There were, in that time and place, many people who claimed to be the Messiah - it was a time of religious and political frenzy - a very unsettled time. Leaders would become popular for a while, and then fade away. But this small Christian movement, with no political power, very few people of economic means, all of them persecuted by Rome...this movement grew. If you read the book of Acts, you pick up a few hints. In the story of the day of Pentecost, you read that people were filled with spiritual energy. When Stephen, a leader in the early church, was being put to death, he still boldly proclaimed his faith.

There was something about the people in this community that caused other people to notice them and to be attracted to them. It wasn't that they were wealthy, or well-connected; it was their inner life that was different. They lived with a sense of joy and also with the ability to face with calmness the most fearful problems of life. I love how one writer puts it: "The way they lived together gave off a haunting spiritual scent which drew people to them, an unselfconscious scent of love."

Our Christian ancestors weren't perfect, we know, but they were intentional about creating communities of mutual love and support. One early reporter observed these communities, how they shared all of their possessions in common, how they looked out for each other and cared for each other, and he wrote down, "See how they love one another."

And this is how it happened, that the church began to grow. It wasn't only Paul's letters, it wasn't only Peter's preaching. It was the way people lived their daily lives. There was something about them that was different, counter-cultural. They treated each other, most of the time, with respect and kindness.

They were trying to put into action the words of Ephesians Beau read for us this morning -"conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness and patience. Accept each other with love."

What would it be like, in the times in which we live, if we kept these words at the forefront of our minds every day? What would it be like to "Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness and patience" while you are in the midst of a traffic jam on I-90? What would it be like to "accept each other with love" while the person in front of you in the grocery store line fiddles through her purse trying to find a coupon? Our culture is

permeated with rudeness. You can certainly find it on Twitter, you can certainly find it in airports. You may even find it in your own home from time to time. There's more to be Christian than being nice, to be sure, but it's not a bad place to start.

The writer of the letter of Ephesians goes on to say this: "God's goal is for us to become mature adults." What would it be like, in the times in which we live, for people who bear the name of Christ to rise above the childish pettiness that is so rampant in our culture? The name-calling on cable news, the ways in which people demonize those with whom they disagree?

We are called to be different, we are called to be counter-cultural.

And finally, Ephesians says this: "By speaking the truth in love, let's grow in every way into Christ...the body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love as each one does its part."

What would it be like for us to live up this high calling, this ideal purpose? To be our best selves with one another? To look for the best in each other, knowing that each of us, most of the time, is really trying hard despite many challenges and obstacles...

I speak to all of us, because I know that life is difficult, and we get so tired and we feel overwhelmed, and so much of the news seems bad, and we act impatiently with one another. We snap at each other, even those we love. We say things we regret, or we keep ourselves from saying words that would lift each other up. Today's scripture reminds us that we were created for better lives than that. We can tap into the spiritual well that never goes dry, we can be fed at the table and be deeply nourished. We can read scripture and we can pray; we can sing and listen; and all of these things will equip us to live our best lives, the life of maturity and humility, gentleness and patience.

And I speak specifically to those of you going on the mission trip next week - you will be hot and tired, it will be a long bus ride, you will feel irritated with those around you. You'll miss the comforts of home. But you can choose how you react. You can choose to give each other the benefit of the doubt. You can put yourself in someone else's shoes and remember that life is hard for that other person, too.

We can all choose to try to emanate the scent of love...that aura that attracts other people to the message of Jesus.

The harsh reality is that there are other people who claim the name of Christ who are spreading a message of hatred and intolerance. We don't hear about them as much as we once did, but there are still TV evangelists who are preying on vulnerable people and taking financial advantage of them. Is it any wonder that there are more people than ever before who have no interest in the Christian way of life? Most young people now claim "none" as their preferred religion.

We who believe that the way of Jesus is the way of unconditional love are called to proclaim that message boldly, and live it. If people look at us and see that we live no differently than anyone else, that we bicker among ourselves, that we hold grudges and worship money and power, that our youth divide themselves into cliques, then the scent of love will fade away.

In a world where people are bullied, harassed, and excluded, what can we do to embody the all-inclusive love of Jesus? In a world where meanness and childishness are epidemic, what can we do to show that there is a better way to live? Let's make this place a holy place, this day a holy day, this mission trip a holy experience, for God has equipped us to love one another...