

Sermon Title: **“But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way”**

Bible: **Ephesians 4:1-16**

Where & When: at Gilroy UMC on Sunday, August 23, 2020

Audience: about 25 YouTube Live-streaming viewers

### **Opening Prayer**

Gracious God, thank you so much for being our God in this world. During this difficult time, O Lord, please protect us. Please guide us in your way. Please be with my lips in your love and grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### **1. What I learned from Summer Academy**

Two weeks ago, I needed to attend Summer Academy for my continuing education as a pastor, and for my ordination process. In order to be ordained in the United Methodist Church, I need to attend four Academies, and this Summer Academy was the third one. Last year, I went to Lake Tahoe for the 2019 Summer Academy, but this time, it was done virtually. For four days, there was a guest speaker, Dr. Carmichael Peters, a professor of Theology at Chapman University. I learned about our theological tasks, three perspectives of the relationship of God and world, centering prayer, and three perspectives of mission and justice.

Among what I learned, I would like to share three perspectives of the relationship of God and world. It could reflect my faith journey. In this journey, my relationship is with the living God. I am still thankful for this relationship. I really enjoy this relationship. It makes my life meaningful and joyful!

### **2. Paul's Prison Epistles & Ephesians**

I choose today's scripture reading from one of Paul's letters. The Apostle Paul wrote many letters. Among them, generally speaking, 13 letters were chosen to become part of the New Testament. Among 13 letters, 4 letters were called Paul's Prison Epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. These four letters were written, while Paul was in prison, probably under house arrest in Rome, like we are under a shelter-in-place order. Because these four letters are not that long, it would be a good opportunity to read them and see how Paul spent his time during his shelter-in-place order. For example, in the letter to the Philippians, Paul expressed his joy and encouraged others to rejoice in the Lord always. How could he rejoice in spite of suffering and anxiety? Don't you want to know what his secret was? When you have time, I highly recommend you to read one of Paul's prison letters.

In today's reading of Ephesians, Paul mentioned the gifts that Christ gave, and the unity of the faith, and maturity. A popular passage from Ephesians is about the Armor of God: "Take up the whole armor of God" (Ephesians 6:13) I hope that today's message could be one of the armor that we can equip ourselves with.

### **3. Three Background Understandings**

Dr. Peters shared three background understandings about the relationship of God and world: Religious Dualism, Pantheism, and Panentheism (or incarnationalism). In the understanding of Religious Dualism, God is outside and independent from the world. God is absolute and perfect, and the world is the "fallen world." To God, there is no more world, and to us, there is no more God. Our human responses should be only obedience and submission rather than love. In its

most extreme forms, we cannot take any medicine or treatment, because diseases are God's plan or God's purpose.

In the understanding of Pantheism, God is not transcendent, but absolutely immanent. In some forms of this, the word "God" is a comprehensive term for the universe itself. Because there are no real differences. For example, there is no difference between a tomato and my mother. In its most extreme forms, the individual is left totally indifferent before the world, and the relationship of God is regarded as illusion.

While religious dualism focuses on transcendence and difference, and pantheism focuses on immanence and sameness, Panentheism focuses on intimacy and dialogue. The world is neither Godless nor illusion, but a real symbol of God. God became a human being. God passes into the world, which is the divine self-emptying, or God's incarnation. When we accept this divine self-emptying with our faith, our self-emptying, it starts the dialogue and the relationship between God and human beings.

#### **4. Our faith journey & Deconstruction Theology**

Even if this topic might not be familiar to you, I hope that you got something out of it. In your faith journey, how do you understand these three perspectives? To me, it is like a human development process. While I have the third perspective of Panentheism, I have experienced the first two perspectives in my life. I am not sure if my analogy of the relationship with my mother works well, but I will try. When I was a baby, my mother was everything. She was my superhero. She was perfect and absolutely powerful! Without her, I could not do anything. This is my understanding of religious dualism. After my adolescence, I realized that my mother was

not THE mother, but A mother, a woman, and a human being, like me. She was not perfect, but vulnerable. There is no difference between my mother and me. This is my understanding of pantheism. And then, after my identity crisis at college, I know that she is still MY mother. I have built up the relationship between my mother and me, upon the relationship from when I was a baby and a teenager. There is a new relationship with my mother with respect and love. This is my understanding of panentheism. Does my interpretation make sense to you?

When we read the Bible, especially the Old Testament, we might discover all of these three perspectives. In its extreme forms of religious dualism, God does not look like whom we hope. Some images of God in the Old Testament sound brutal and harsh, unlike Jesus Christ, for example, when God killed all the people in the Flood, and when God sent Israelites to exterminate all of the other foreign people. But at the same time, we still see the love and mercy of God in the Old Testament. What could enable us to understand and accept God's images in the Old Testament?

Have you heard of the concept of deconstructive theology? When I learned theology at the seminary, my first year was really tough and challenging. It felt like the seminary destroyed not only what I had believed, but also my whole world, or myself. But it was the process of constructing my theology. I am not sure how you understand my theology and my ministry style, but they are the results from this deconstructive process. Like the phrase, "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater," I am still in this process of deconstruction. I take a bath not only physically, but also theologically and spiritually. I try to discover my unhealthy theologies,

wash them, and throw them out. But I do not want to throw the baby out. I want to keep the grace and love of God. I want to bring the Bible, even the Old Testament, for my faith journey.

I know that sometimes our faith journey could be rough and challenged. It is not easy to face our own unhealthy theologies. But please remember that our God is the living God. Let us remember that the living God is with our lives here and now. In spite of suffering and challenges, the living God is with us. God sent us Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, God gave us Gilroy United Methodist Church as our faith community. Maybe, I worry about something, but I am not afraid. As a body of Christ, we pray for each other, embrace and support each other. In the end, we will grow up together into Jesus Christ.

### **Closing Prayer**

Gracious God, in our faith journey, please be with us. You are our companion in our faith journey, and our Lord in our lives. And you gave us this faith community. Please pour out your love and grace upon us. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.