

## Pushing Away God's Love

*By Linda Rex*

**August 11, 2024, Proper 14**—Last week I wrote about our role as members of the body of Christ, the Church (meaning the universal, all-encompassing, cross-denominational and cross-distinctives body of Christ). In our current culture, a group of people from all walks of life, backgrounds, and ways of being who live together in unity and other-centered love is in many ways a countercultural entity. People who have lived much of their lives in a very individualistic, self-absorbed manner may find it very challenging to be warmly embraced and invited into close relationship. In fact, it may feel invasive and even frightening to some people.

Over the years, I discovered that one reason we may push away such a welcoming, inclusive experience is because we are afraid that if we let anyone get close, they may discover what we are really like and reject us. What God has called his Church to be is the place where people are fully known, yet fully loved and accepted. The body of Christ, the Church, is meant to be a safe place for all God's children. Unfortunately, the Church too often has been the place where when someone opens up and begins to get real, they are condemned, criticized, and or rejected. We do this in our families and in our other relationships, but this is not the way God treats us—so we should not treat each other in this way either.

In the New Testament passage for this Sunday, Ephesians 4:25–5:2, the apostle Paul describes what it looks like when people live together in the union and communion of the Triune life and love. As they live in these ways, they imitate the being and inner life of our Father and his Son in the Spirit.

What does this way of living together look like? Paul says that people are honest with one another—they practice truth-telling in love. They do not allow anger or rage to rule, for they do not want the evil one to have a chance to cause harm or division. They work hard, rather than steal, so they can help others out. The words they say build each other up, and they avoid any kind of slander, malice, or bitterness. They are always forgiving and kind to one another, no matter what may be going on in their lives. Living and walking in this way does not grieve the Spirit, for it is a reflection of the very union and communion of the Father with his Son in the Spirit.

When we look at our relationships within the body of Christ, especially when we look cross-denominationally or across lines of distinctions, do they manifest this kind of unity and love? What about in our own marriages and families? And what about our relationships with people outside the Church—how do we relate to people who do not yet believe in Christ? When I am honest with myself, I have to admit that too often I have fallen far short from being a true imitation of the divine Being.

Thankfully, this is where grace through faith comes in. And this is where we are privileged through Jesus to offer grace to one another. The reality is that whatever our life is in Christ by the Spirit, it is grounded in the love of God in Christ and in the grace that is ours through what Jesus did in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We are so grateful that we are held in Christ in his own face-to-face fellowship with his Father in the Spirit, so that even when we miss the mark, our own fellowship with God is unshaken. The Lord ever draws us back into that place of union and communion, while by his Spirit, he works to form Christ in us.

Evil constantly seeks opportunities to separate, divide, disrupt, confuse, and destroy all that is good, holy, and unified. We are constantly pressed upon by people and circumstances whose sole purpose is to steal or ruin or kill anything in our lives that may reflect the divine Being of Father, Jesus, Spirit—Three Persons in One Being. Still, the Spirit ever works to bring unity and

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oneness, while, like a parasite on all that is good, the evil one ever works to bring division and discord. At times, we participate in either direction, and we reap the consequences of our choices in this regard. But Jesus continues to invite us to follow him wherever he leads, and by his Spirit, he always leads us down the path to unity, oneness, love, and grace. And he holds us, now and forever, in his own face-to-face union and communion with his Father in the Spirit. This is our comfort and our peace.

Like Jesus, our fellowships of faith are called by God to be places where the Spirit is not grieved, but joyfully shares with us the divine fellowship of union and communion which is ours in Christ. As we gather together to worship God in Spirit and in truth, may we mirror more and more accurately the life and love of our Father, Jesus, and Spirit, and may we welcome warmly, gently, and wisely those who enter in, seeking a safe place to participate in God's life and love.

*Heavenly Father, Jesus, Spirit, thank you for including us in your life and love. We are ever in need of your forgiveness, for we are so often poor reflections of you. But by your Spirit, you are ever working. We trust you to finish what you have begun, through Jesus in the Spirit. Amen.*

*"Therefore, laying aside falsehood, 'speak truth each one' of you 'with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another. 'Be angry, and' yet 'do not sin'; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma." Ephesians 4:25–5:2 NASB*

*"Faking it and lying to one another was part of the old life; now truth remains the constant inspiration in your every conversation. We are related to one another like different parts in the same body. (Which means that cheating one another would be cheating yourself! ...) Even if you think you have a valid excuse, do not let anger dominate your day! If you don't deal with it immediately (in the light of the likeness of Christ in you) the sun sets for you and your day becomes one of lost opportunity where darkness employs anger to snare you into sin. Any sin that you tolerate is an open invitation to the devil. Do not give him a platform to operate from. If you were a thief before, you are one no more. Find an honest joy where the fruit of your labor can be a blessing to others! Instead of cheap talk, your mouth is now a fountain of grace, giving encouragement and inspiration to everyone within earshot. The Holy Spirit is your signet ring from God to confirm that you are redeemed to live your life in the light of day; any conduct that belongs to the night grieves him. Take up the strongest possible position against every form of distorted behavior in your own life. Do not allow yourself to be spiteful; outbursts of violent emotion and rage do not become you. You don't have to shout in order to make your point. People must feel safe in your conversation; therefore, slander and hurtful words (blasphemy) are out! Be inspired by kindness and compassion; your forgiving one another when you might feel irritated and frustrated demonstrates the way God graciously treated us in Christ. Mirror God; you are his offspring. (2 Cor. 3:18.) This is how; let the love of Christ be your life; remember how he abandoned himself to us. His love is contagious, not reluctant but extravagant. Sacrificial love pleases God like the sweet aroma of worship." Ephesians 4:25–5:2 Mirror Bible*