

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God, our Father, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

“¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

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Dear baptized Christians;

There was a time that the church represented everything that was good with society. The church stood for something; its teaching had a positive influence on people. The members of churches were thought to be good people, and its leaders and pastors were held in honour and esteem.

But today, the church, too, is rocked by scandals. Pastors and priests have been accused of sexual abuse and molestation. Many times the message of the church has been watered down to the point where people do not know what the church stands for, or what it believes - and sometimes, the message it proclaims today is a contradiction of its past teaching, and definitely a contradiction with the true word of God.

And its members—they are no different than the rest of the world! They exhibit the same sinful lifestyles as non-Christians have. And even within the church, there often appears to be a lack of peace and harmony among the very people who are supposed to be the perfect example of a loving, caring, unified group.

Maybe the church does have its problems. After all, the church is made up of sinful people like you and me. But at the same time, we need to remember that it is God who brings sinful people together to be His church. He forgives our sins and He gives us His Holy Spirit, so that we can be the church that He wants us to be.

And as God's word speaks to us and guides us, I know that this congregation of God's people can grow to be all that God calls us to be through our faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church.

Friends, what is the church? The word used for "church" in the New Testament means,

"Called out" or "called together". The church is really nothing more than the people who are called out of the world of darkness and sin through faith in Jesus Christ to be the people of God, people called and empowered through the forgiveness and new life He gives us in Christ. So anyone who has faith in Jesus Christ, wherever they are, they are part of the Church of God.

The Apostle Peter, in speaking of the church say: ***you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.*** (1 Peter 2:9)

But there are times when people look at the church and wonder if there really are any people of God in it any more. God has called us to a wonderful life of peace and harmony in His church. But all too often, that peace and harmony seems to be missing.

I feel very blessed in being part of this congregation. For the last 11 years I see God at work here, bringing us peace and harmony as His family. And I know that there are many churches where that harmony does not exist. There are churches filled with the very things that James speaks about in our text, with the envy and selfish ambition that keep God's people from enjoying the blessings of life that He wants them to have in His church.

They have voter's meetings where the bickering and selfishness is so evident in the people that you would wonder if God had anything to do with that church. There are churches where the congregation is divided—not over important doctrinal issues, but over petty differences, like whether the basement of the church should be carpeted or covered with cement.

And while we may not have those problems, we also need to be honest and realize that there are the times when we do not see the peace and harmony God has called us to enjoy among us, either. It happens in all churches. God calls us together and He calls us to a life of peace, the peace that begins with the forgiveness we have in Christ.

But something seems to get in the way. James talks about this in our text today as he makes a comparison—a comparison between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God at work in His church.

The wisdom of the world is the very thing that creates the problems of the world and, yes, the problems that come up in the church. In speaking of the wisdom of the world, James says: ***For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*** It does not take much to see how true this is in our society. You can get a record of that in the bad news of any newspaper or tv news broadcast. But it is sad to see

that same envy and selfishness finding a place in the church. And yet, it can, and does happen in the best of churches. It even happened among the disciples. We see the disciples in the gospel lesson today, arguing about which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, as if that really made any difference. Friends, greatness is not found in being first, but in living last. Humility does not focus on self, but serving.

God wants something more for His people. He does not want the hurt, the disorder, the evil that envy and selfish ambition cause. He wants His church to experience the blessings that peace and unity bring.

Jesus, on the night before His crucifixion, prayed for His church and said: ***Father, I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*** (John 17:22-26)

And God makes it possible for this to happen in giving us what James calls the ***wisdom that comes from heaven***. That wisdom is found in the Holy Scriptures, but it is also found in the Spirit-filled, faithful hearts of God's children. James said: ***the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.***

Friends, is not that what we want to see happen among us? We want to see our church and its members raising a harvest of righteousness as we live together in peace, in consideration for one another and in mercy towards one another. We want to see in our speech, in our attitudes and in our actions the peace and togetherness that Christ brings to His church.

And that happens when there is forgiveness for one another when we fall; when there is acceptance of each other for what we are as new creations in Christ, when we do not judge one another or think too highly of ourselves and our rights and opinions, but when we work to make the church all that God wants it to be—a family of faithful children, who listen to their father and seek to work together, live together and pray together for the good of each and every member of the family.

Thankfully, it is possible for us to be that kind of church, for we have the forgiveness and life that Christ has earned for us through His death and resurrection. And God, the Holy

Spirit works in the Word and Sacraments to lead and guide us into the peace and unity that come through the wisdom which comes from above.

At the same time, we should remember that the devil still is at work, trying to destroy that peace and unity among us—typically from inside the church itself.

No doubt, there are in the Christian church people who are double agents —Christians in name, who really seem to be on the side of the devil. But we need not work with them or support them. Instead, we want to be faithful to our God and enjoy the blessings of peace and unity He has bestowed upon us through His love for us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Epistle to the Ephesians 4:4-6 say, “**There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.**” Paul contrasts those two words “one” and “all” over and over. Over against all of our individuality, something which we so prize in our culture, there is this divine gift of oneness and unity in Christ.

Again, this is not something which we create, but it is God’s gift to us in Christ. We can only recognize, affirm, and guard this unity. The One who creates this unity is the One who descended among us, as we confess in the Creed, and having lived, suffered, died, and rose again for us and for our salvation, He then “ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things” (Ephesians 4:10; Psalm 68:18).

This is Jesus, who works unity in His Body, the Church, and builds it up through gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers (Ephesians 4:11).

Friends, as we come together this morning in worship, as we come together in the oneness of faith, God is at work among us to strengthen the peace and harmony we share.

May this gracious God who has called us to be His people, give us that wisdom from above which is ***pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*** And may He bless our church with peace and unity until the day of Jesus Christ, when we will enjoy perfect peace and oneness for all eternity. Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen