

Ephesians 4:29-32

**“Optimal Church Communication: Reach for Help”**

The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift  
Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA  
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*Introductory Piece:*

*Children and adults, please give attention to the Bible reading. It is instruction about how to speak with one another – what to say and what not to say when we are trying to help one another.*

*The Reading:*

*<sup>29</sup> When you talk, do not say harmful things. But say what people need—words that will help others become stronger. Then what you say will help those who listen to you. <sup>30</sup> And do not make the Holy Spirit sad. The Spirit is God’s proof that you belong to him. God gave you the Spirit to show that God will make you free when the time comes. <sup>31</sup> Do not be bitter or angry or mad. Never shout angrily or say things to hurt others. Never do anything evil. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and loving to each other. Forgive each other just as God forgave you in Christ.*

We recently bought a little rowboat for our future home, which is on a pond. My vision is to row across the pond for workouts, but I didn’t realize that this kind of rowing is done with one’s back to the destination, *not* facing it. (I know, how’d I not know that?) So when I gave rowing a try this week, I floundered. I got so mixed up about which direction to move my arms and the oars, where to put my legs, and how to row straight! It just did not come naturally – at least not yet.

**It probably doesn’t come naturally to follow all these exhortations in Ephesians either!** For example, it is not always *my* first instinct to speak with kindness. Let’s say, one is angry and hurt, it’s harder then to refrain from using words that harm. Who hasn’t let bitterness in? It also seems to come more naturally to say whatever is on *our* minds than to think about what the *other* needs to hear in order to become stronger, as Ephesians advises.

I think that the author of Ephesians wanted to mentor the early church and feared that it would not become a sign of Christ in the world around them. After all, if forgiveness were easy and natural, for instance, Ephesians would not have listed it in these dos and don’ts for Christian behavior! You don’t need an exhortation if you’re already and always doing the right thing, or a reminder if you never forget!

Ephesians was written as a general letter to churches in a Gentile, that is, non-Jewish context.<sup>1</sup> These Christians had not been raised in the rich soil of Judaism as Jesus was. They were like new plants; they had been “grafted in” to the faith – and were grateful for it. But surrounded by Greek and Roman values, it didn’t come naturally to them to speak to one another as would Jesus Christ. **It was a stretch. How could they comply?**

*Our* context is not necessarily conducive to following these verses either! The lazy, hurtful, and even violent ways that people speak to each other on social media and in person today seems to be gaining ground. I say that because just a couple of days ago in the grocery

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<sup>1</sup>Pheme Perkins, “The Letter to the Ephesians,” *The New Interpreters Bible, Volume XI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 353.

store, I crossed paths with an elderly couple. The woman was speaking into her phone, and I couldn't believe my ears when she called the listener an \_\_\_\_\_. (I'm bleeping it out.) She was oblivious to me, even though I was in earshot!

I can only guess what a stretch it was for Nelson Mandela, after his suffering at Robben Island, to emerge “from prison not spewing words of hatred and revenge.” As Bishop Tutu described Mandela: “He amazed us all by his heroic embodiment of reconciliation and forgiveness.”<sup>2</sup>

The letter writer of Ephesians knows that we need divine help to comply with these exhortations. So verse 30 re-introduces us to the Holy Spirit. The advocate and teacher that Jesus sent is also our helper in church communication. **Since it is a stretch to speak and behave like Jesus Christ, you and I need to reach for help from the Holy Spirit.** “Ask and it shall be given you, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing into your lap.”<sup>3</sup>

Prayer is one way of asking the Spirit in and reaching for the Spirit's help. I listened to a TED Talk in which the architect who designed the Ba'hai Temple for South America shared a relevant quote from a leader in the Ba'hai faith: “If you reach out in prayer, the pillars of your heart will become ashine.”<sup>4</sup>

It's *not* that when you and I reach for divine help, we will *suddenly* know exactly what to say and how to behave in every situation, instantly or completely. The Holy Spirit still works through *process* and in *partnership* with us. And the reason that the Holy Spirit might *grieve* or be sad, as verse 30 suggests, is not just because without it, the Church might not be able to keep these commandments and might even do harm; it is the disappointment that we don't invite it in to be a part of these tough parts of life, to help!

There's a nailbiting scene in the spy comedy, *True Lies*: Jamie Lee Curtis is standing up through the sunroof of a runaway car that's speeding down the Key West Bridge. Her husband, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, is trying to rescue her by standing on the side of a helicopter that is doing *its* best to get close enough for the two to connect before the car goes off into the ocean. He is stretching and reaching to her, and she stretching and reaching to him. They miss each other multiple times. It isn't until they lock eyes in love that their arms and hands clasp!

**That clasp is a sign that we belong to the Spirit.** Reach for help from the Holy Spirit. Lock eyes, and it *will* free us to follow Jesus and for this to become more and more second nature.

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<sup>2</sup>Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 39.

<sup>3</sup>Luke 6:38

<sup>4</sup>Baha'u'llah, shared by architect Siamak Hariri, “Siamak Hariri: How Do You Create A Sacred Space?” npr.ted.org, July 24, 2020.