



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH  
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Preached by The Rev. Sophia Ducey

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

## “Open-Hearted Habitat”

### Spirit Open My Heart

Today we have the opportunity to answer a call – the call of Spirit to open our hearts individually, and collectively as the spiritual community we call Canadian Memorial United Church. Last week, Dr. Amir Hussain shared his thoughts on how we can love our neighbors more fully by reaching out and engaging in dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters. Today’s call asks us to reach out and engage in loving dialogue with our brothers and sisters WITHIN our spiritual community.

In our reading today in Ephesians, the author calls forth from the Ephesians, and possibly many other of the early Christian communities, a sense of open-heartedness and open-mindedness, just as Canadian Memorial’s new vision statement is calling us to live into being an open-hearted, open minded community who teaches and practices evolutionary Christian spirituality.

There is a story in the Buddhist sutras:

Ananda, Lord Buddha's long-time personal attendant and monk-disciple, asks Buddha:

"Lord, is it true what has been said, that good spiritual friends are fully half of the holy life?"

The Master replied, "No, Ananda, good spiritual friends are the whole of the holy life.

Find refuge in the sangha."

Sangha is a word in Pali or Sanskrit that can be translated roughly as "association" or "assembly" or "community. Sangha is often referred to as a community of beings aware of the spiritual connection between all life, or a spiritual community where people come together to learn and to grow in their spiritual depth.

I just spent the past week on the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove, CA,

which breaks down to ASILO = Asylum or Refuge, and MAR = Sea. Refuge by the Sea.

It is the property that hosts an annual summer conference of over 700 people, young and old, coming together in Sangha – spiritual community. We share in deep spiritual practice, workshops, yoga, and play.

### Triple Jewel in Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha

Let me digress for a moment in an interfaith comparison to show how the message of community is central to both Christianity and Buddhism, especially in today’s world of busy-ness and isolationism. Deep spiritual community is

critical for the continued emergence of the ever-expanding presence of Christ, and the Buddha, on our planet.

Buddhists talk about taking refuge, **or finding a reliable sanctuary**, in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, the community of kindred spirits. This is called the Triple Jewel in Buddhism.

Buddhists have the Buddha, the enlightened being from whom the teachings of spiritual evolution in that tradition flow. Christians have Christ, the man, the consciousness, that allures us forward in our evolutionary process, and gives us internal guidance on how we might more fully express God in our lives. Buddha and Christ have been around for 2000 years (or forever, actually). We are called to find refuge in Buddha or the Christ, a loving companion on our journey of life.

Buddhists have the Dharma -- the Buddhists teachings and practices. Christians have the Bible, which includes great myth and story, deep inspiration, and the teachings of Jesus and his early followers. We are called to find refuge in the teachings, to immerse ourselves in these great Truths so that we might be uplifted, inspired and guided in our journey of life.

But do we truly have Sangha? In the Christian faith – we have this same jewel – we just use a different word – we call it “the Church.” We must cultivate the essence of a sangha community in the Church if we are to continue to have Christ and his teachings flourish in today’s world.

But what does it mean to cultivate sangha, or cultivate “the church”?

In **Growing an Engaged Church**, author Albert L. Winseman, says:

"At this time of deep spiritual hunger, it is imperative that faith communities *be* the Church. They must seize the day and make a wholesome commitment to engage the hearts of all congregants. In doing so, they will build a warm and embracing home in which faith can deepen, flourish, and bring forth new fruit for our communities and the world."

Cultivation of the essence of sangha is about engaging the heart. As we engage the hearts of all congregants, we build a warm and embracing home in which faith can deepen – a reliable sanctuary, for Spirit to bear fruit. This is what it means to be an open-hearted habitat. As individuals, we open our hearts and individually become the habitat, a safe haven, for each other. As a community, the container for our hearts, we become a habitat for open-hearted communication and spiritual evolutionary.

### **Open-Hearted Communication**

The author of Ephesians gives some insight in how he is asking those in Christian community to show up, how they should treat each other, how they might allow the Christ presence to flourish in their communication and their lives. There is similar guidance in the Buddhists texts which ask of its followers to share in loving kindness.

As Susan read from today's passage from Ephesians:

“Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Do not let the sun go down on your wrath. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”

Now we could think, OK – this is pretty basic, sounds like a Sunday School lesson. OR we could ask ourselves, what does this truly mean to me in how I show up in this community? If we are angry, how are we to let our bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor and evil speaking be put away? How do we cultivate kindness and tenderheartedness? Truly? What is our practice to be open-hearted and open-minded so that we might truly hear each other in our listening?

This is very important for us these days, especially when many have a tendency toward individualism, which we are so good at in North America and in particular Cascadia. Individualism can be a virtue, but, like everything, it has its shadow. From an evolutionary standpoint, we naturally grow up and become independent, but as we continue to evolve, we then become interdependent. Let's not fall into narcissism, falling in love with our

own image, as individualists, always being new and better and different. Let's recognize our common ground with all beings. As we recognize our oneness, a deep Love, a Christ love, or a Buddha love, develops in our hearts. The Sangha jewel as a refuge, as a container of love, can be the container for this next phase of our evolution.

We don't always get to pick who you intimately travel the journey with. We might think we do, but don't be deceived. No matter who ends up traveling with us in this moment or that, if we choose to evolve in our emotional and spiritual well-being as Christians, we start to realize that we can love anybody -- and must love anybody. As we find out that all these strange people gathered together, from all these different cultures and backgrounds, are all on the same team. After being together for some time, we all want and need pretty much the same things; that we are vastly more similar than different.

### **Anger & Love**

The author of Ephesians acknowledges – Yes, you will be angry. You will have differences. You will hurt each other. But do not let the sun go down on your anger, or your wrath. Feel it, work through it, and do not allow this anger to express itself through your communication with each other. This is an inside job. It's not about being publicly “nice.” My experience in the past three years Canadians tend to have that one down. It's about being real. First and foremost with oneself. Telling the Truth to oneself. What am I feeling in this moment? How is my communication expressing latent anger or disappointment, or expanding love and

harmony? Am I tenderhearted and forgiving? What is the story I tell myself internally; is it one of separation or oneness? Allow a level of self awareness to guide authentic communication. When we deny our feelings, we tumble down the evolutionary spiral and allow our emotions, our shadows, to guide our thoughts and our words. There is a Love greater than our anger, our bitterness, our wrath, that is yearning to be expressed in spiritual community. This Love, when expressed, allows for the fruits of the Christ to flourish in our sangha.

A tall order on some days, I know for me. It's always "wonderful" (*note the quotes around the word wonderful which implies multiple meanings of the word*) to live with the readings for a sermon throughout the week heading into a Sunday. I was held to the test in this one in the Sangha I was part of all week at Asilomar. I was partnered with someone who is very different than me in his style of leadership. We were to co-facilitate the young adult program together. I found my anger and my bitterness brewing as I entered the week, feeling a lack of partnership in our planning for the week. Since I had read this reading before arriving, I knew I was being called to a higher order in how I could chose to communicate with my co-leader. The more I tried to squelch and ignore my disappointment, the more it brewed in me and had the potential for "leaking" out with the person as well as with the young people we were there to serve.

And another energetic force was brewing as well – some of the young adults were volunteering with the younger children and with the big fundraising auction for

youth scholarships. They were tired, burnt out, and felt they had little time to connect with their peers. Bitterness and disappointment was expanding as the week progressed. The children's program became stressful and the auction chaotic.

What I came to realize, was the young adults didn't want a program filled with workshops or processes. They wanted an open-hearted habitat – a refuge from their lives where they could love and be loved, and deal with their feelings so that they could more effectively serve. We shared stories, fears, scares, and desires, and committed support to each other. We created a ritual of exchanging stones with a blessing and each person's name on the stone so that we might take each other with one another back to our homes, our schools, our lives. We came to realize that our Sangha – our safe haven, our refuge, lived in our hearts and was always with us.

Through open-hearted dialogue and sharing, new ideas, new ways of being together emerged. All were able to put aside their disappointments and anger and fully be there for each other and the new idea that was emerging through the group. New life was infused in our actions and our decisions.

This is the greater call of spiritual community from the beginning of Chapter 5 of Ephesians.

1 Therefore, be imitators of God as dear children.

2 And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us,

an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.

The call from our reading today is this:  
Enjoy the sweetness of each other, as we  
offer ourselves up to Love in all that we  
are and all that we do.

### **Listen to My Heartsong**

I leave you with the words of the song  
that the Young Adults sang each night as  
they completed their time together:

Listen, Listen, Listen to my  
heartsong.

Listen, Listen, Listen to my  
heartsong.

I will always love you, I will never  
forsake you.

I will always love you, I will never  
forsake you.

Let us all be Open-Hearted Habitats for  
each other. Let us love one another. And  
truly listen to each other's heartsongs with  
open minds so that we might cultivate a  
true Sangha – a Refuge in the City, a  
Centre for Peace. May it be so.