

Sermon
“A Life Worthy of the Calling”
February 16th, 2020 – First Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday after Epiphany
Based on Psalm 145:10-21 and Ephesians 4:1-16

Old Testament: Psalm 145:10-21

10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you.
11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, 12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.
14 The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down 15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. 16 You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing. 17 The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. 18 The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. 19 He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them. 20 The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.
21 My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

New Testament Reading: Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.
7 But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." 9 (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) 11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. 14 We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. 15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Prayer: Loving God, fountain of every blessing, open us to your life-giving word, and fill us with your Holy Spirit so that living water may flow through our hearts – a spring of hope for a thirsty world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Sermon: A Life Worthy of the Calling

Last week, you might recall that I turned to one of my favorite passages of Scripture. It's Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus...a church he knew and loved and a church that found itself in time of transition. And so, Paul wrote them a letter, which we now call the book of Ephesians.

And in it, Paul encourages those believers by reminding them of who they are in Christ...chosen, called, adopted and blessed.

And then, at the end of chapter 3 Paul offers a prayer for the church in Ephesus...it's a bold prayer that the church might know and understand the fullness of God's love in their heart and soul and mind and then that they might be transformed by that love. It is a daring and ambitious prayer to say the least. But Paul stands confident that God will indeed answer because Paul knows the truth that it is God, and God alone, who is able to answer such a prayer.

Because as Paul affirms in the closing of this prayer, by God's power at work in us God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ask or imagine.

And so, because God is able we are invited to imagine the possibilities of what God might do in and through us as we grow in our knowledge and experience of God's love.

Having ended his prayer for the church, Paul shifts his attention to teaching the church in Ephesus about how they are to live in response to being called and chosen and adopted and blessed by God even when they face uncertain and unpredictable circumstances.

And that's where our text picks up today. Paul begins his instructions with the one over-arching statement that will shape everything else he says...“I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1).

It is a bold statement to say the least, because really how could any of us, left on our own, lead a life worthy of the calling that God has given to each of us. In fact, it's our unworthiness that we claim every week when we enter a time of confession. Left on our own, we aren't worthy; we are actually just the opposite, unworthy.

But Paul understands the Gospel truth that even in our unworthiness, God is still working. And God is still calling us to be active participants in the world, and particularly in the church. And Paul is challenging us to live into that calling.

And so, Paul immediately outlines for the church what a life worthy of the calling might look like. He writes, a life worthy of the calling means “bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:2-3).

In other words, to live a life worthy of God’s calling means that we make every effort to be united...because as Paul points out, we share one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and one Father.

I don’t have to tell you that being united is difficult; it is easier to let divisions drive us apart. But the only way we will ever be united is if we bear with one another in love. To bear with one another is to sacrifice for the other. It is to help carry the other’s burdens. And to do it all in love.

We just celebrated the great Hallmark holiday of Valentine’s Day...the day where the typical person spends an average of \$150 to express their love for their significant other. Now, there’s nothing wrong with setting aside time, and perhaps money, every year to tell those closest to us that we do indeed still love them.

But, for anyone who has been married for any amount of time, or who has survived the terrible twos or teenage years with their children, or who has cared for aging parents or a sick spouse, or who has simply chosen to be committed to a friend through difficult circumstances, we know that love is far more than emotion. Love is a choice.

And so, Paul isn’t calling the early church to feel warmly towards one another, though that would be a nice effect, but Paul is calling them, begging them actually, to live according to their calling.

And God has called them to be a new community...a community, based not on the divisions that define the rest of the life, but on the new thing which has been created in Christ.

In other words, the social hierarchy, or the norms of the day, were replaced by being the church together, or as Paul puts it, the body of Christ.

And in this new order, this new thing called the Church, every person was essential...no matter their age or gender, no matter their social status or income level, no matter their race or ethnicity, no matter their job or lack thereof...every person who was part of the Church was essential.

And they weren't just essential, they were actually connected to one another, much like our physical bodies are connected...our hand does not work apart from our arm, our feet don't work apart from our legs...and, even more, every part of our physical body is beautifully held together by tendons and muscles and ligaments and nerves that allow our body to function at its best.

And so, for Paul, love wasn't a theoretical or abstract idea, but it was literally the glue that held a community together. Or to continue the analogy of a physical body, love is those tendons and muscles and ligaments and nerves that hold the body together. Love is the thing that knits the body of Christ together and sets it apart from every other institution or gathering of people.

And because we all need a little help with love, God gives to the church, to the body of Christ, the tools of humility, gentleness and patience.

Humility keeps us grounded in the reality of who we are as creatures formed from the dust of God. It reminds us that we have all been created equally before God; we are equally unworthy, but we are all also called by the grace of God.

Gentleness reminds us that we are called to do this thing called being the church together. We need each other; no one person can be the Church alone.

And finally, patience because, well, when it's more than just you, we all need a little patience.

And so, if love is the thing that binds us together, then the gifts that God gives to the people of God are the functions of the body parts...the hands and feet and eyes and ears and even the stomachs. Paul reminds the church that every gift it needs has already been given to its members.

So here, Paul names what we might consider the "professional" gifts... prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

But in his other letters, Paul names countless other gifts such as giving, hospitality, joy, welcome, administration, wisdom, and knowledge to just name a few.

And just as a body needs all of its parts, so also does the church need all of its gifts. In other words, to be the body of Christ, to be the church that is living worthy of its calling, is to use every gift that God has graciously given.

At a time like this, with so much hope and expectation and anticipation, it would be easy to sit back, to think you have nothing to offer, to leave the work of being the church up to the professionals.

But the reality is, it doesn't matter how gifted or talented Neeley is or I am, or what a great team we will make; we need every person sitting in this room, every person who couldn't be here today, and every person who God is going to call to be part of our community.

We can't be the church that God calls us to be without all of us. And we all have a role to play, whether you know what that is today or not. God has graciously given gifts to every believer and calls us to use those gifts to build up the body of Christ.

Many of you use those gifts every single day, but as we enter a new season of life together, I believe this is the perfect opportunity to try something new or to get involved for the first time.

And so perhaps you have the gift of music...join the choir or the handbells. Perhaps you have the gift of hospitality and welcome...volunteer as an usher or greeter or help with the next church potluck. Perhaps you have the gift of being a handyman or woman...join the facilities team. Perhaps you have the gift of teaching...volunteer to teach children's, youth or adult Sunday School. Perhaps you have the gift of public speaking...volunteer to be a lay reader. Perhaps you have the gift of organization or counting or typing or answering phones...volunteer to help Peni in the office. Perhaps you have the gift of cooking...sign up to be part of Family Promise. Perhaps you have the gift of photography...help us take pictures for the website and social media.

Perhaps you have a gift that I haven't even thought of yet, find a way to use it! And if you have no idea where your gift might fit, talk to me, we'll find a place for you to use the gifts that God has given to you.

And so, whatever gift you have, use it. For that is what it means to live lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called. Because the body can't exist without all its parts. And so, we need you to join in, to offer your gifts to the body of Christ. It won't be the same without you.

Last week I quoted from a speech Theodore Roosevelt gave in 1910 where he is quoted saying, "It is not the critic who counts; not the one who points out how the strong one stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the one who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but they who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends themselves in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if they fail, at least fails while daring greatly."

Tomorrow we enter a brand-new season of life for this church. And my friends, it is going to be good. It is going to be exciting. It is going to be fun.

And we want you to be part of it. I know it would be far easier to sit back, to watch from the sidelines critiquing the work that is being done...and whether those critiques are positive or negative, the fact would remain that you were sitting on the sidelines observing the things happening in front of you.

And my friends what we need, what this church needs, and what God calls us to do, is to jump in. To be doers. To be the ones in the arena whose face might be marred by dust and sweat and blood. To be those who might make mistakes, who might fail. But to also be the ones who get back up and try again. To be the ones who are willing to dare greatly.

And it will be an adventure! But, just as God has graciously given this community every gift it needs, so also does God give us nourishment for the adventure. It's why we gather here at the table that has been prepared for us. For it is here that we are reminded of the love offered to us by God in Christ...it is here that we are challenged to love one another and bear with one another, even when it is difficult...it here that we are fed so that we might go about our calling.

Thanks be to God. Amen