

A Life Worthy of the Calling

Ephesians 4: 1-16

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Today we read on in the letter to the Ephesians. As we uncovered last week, the letter is calling disconnected churches and people in Ephesus to unity. Immediately preceding the text we read today, Paul writes a prayer that the Ephesian churches would know God's love, and be filled with all the fullness of God. We do this by knowing God through Jesus Christ, and being rooted and grounded in a Christ-like love.

What follows is this, listen to these words that we might hear the Word of God.

Ephesians 4: 1-16 (NRSV)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore 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? ¹⁰He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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. ¹⁴We 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. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from 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.

Y'all have been called, says Paul. English doesn't have the right word to translate the Greek scriptures here, but Southern does. Y'all, the whole church, everybody, all y'all have been called. Y'all have been called to know God through Jesus Christ, to be rooted and grounded in the kind of love revealed in him, and to be filled with all the fullness of God. I implore y'all, says Paul, to live worthy of this calling, to live a life that measures up to the grace given in Jesus Christ. Live humbly and gently and patiently and lovingly, bound together by the Spirit of peace that Christ came to give. Be one together, as the God who calls us is one. Y'all have been called by a God of grace and unity, make a life for yourselves worthy of the calling.

It's beautiful theology, but I'll be honest, a little tough to practice. It's tough for me to get cut off dangerously on the road, and then gaze at my transgressor lovingly, and say, "brother of my same spirit, we have been called by Christ's love to live in a bond of peace, therefore I humble myself before you and celebrate our loving peace." And let's see, this week in my life there was also the very understandably distracted and thoughtfully delayed checkout guy, love you sir. And Amanda asked someone this week, "Excuse me, can you tell me where the art fair is?" And she replied, "Um, it's where the art is." Unity of the spirit, unity of the spirit. And then my beautiful loving sister in Christ who glared and huffed at me when my children fussed and interrupted her day. No, peace be with YOU, my perfect sister my friend, peace be with YOU.

Okay, so the life worthy of the calling isn't always easy, it wasn't easy for the Ephesians either. But we're given something to measure up to the challenges, according to Paul, we're given grace and gifts. We're

given grace, freed from the captivity of sin and brokenness, so that we might embrace the divine life that God wants us to live. The grace given to us is that we may shake loose what Tozer in *The Pursuit of God* calls the “heavy burden of self-love,” which we bear according what others think of us, and how it influences what we think of ourselves – it is restless. A burden like this is not necessary to bear, says Tozer, for “Jesus calls us to His rest, and [humility] is His method.” Jesus embodies the very spirit of humility and gentleness and patience and love for us to see our potential if we but trust in God. In Christ, we may replace our exhausting and fruitless quest for self-love with the effortless and powerful assurance of God’s love.

In addition to freeing everyone to live the godly life, the text also says that when he ascended he gave gifts to the people. Christ gave gifts so that some would be missionaries, some preachers, some evangelists, some pastors and some teachers, equipping us all for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ on earth. We are, as Paul indicates, all differently equipped to do the same work of ministry, building up the experience of Christ and Christ’s love on earth.

There is a wonderful story that comes from Jewish tradition about a man named Simon. And Simon wanted always to be more like Moses. That was his constant worry. And he kept going to the Rabbi and saying, "Rabbi I must lead my life so that I live more like Moses did." The Rabbi told him once "Simon God will not ask you why you were not more like Moses? God will ask you why you were not more like Simon?" God made you Harold, you Lois, you Sue, you Nancy, you Mike, you Carly, you Matt, and every one of you to be you. Not the you or the me who pops off at aggressive drivers, but the you who is clearly giving and loving in a way worthy of Christ.

Discovering our gifts, and acting upon our gifts for God’s purposes of relationship and love, and seeing the giftedness in others, is the secret to the divine powered life. Gifts for ministry don’t just reside in the visibly talented members of the congregation, or the church leaders or clergy, EVERYONE has a gift for growing the community. The church that operates out of the giftedness in every corner of the congregation, no matter their age or education or background, is the church that starts to look Christian.

Back in Atlanta I was teaching a Sunday school class about building community out of gifts, Asset Based Community Development it’s called, and ended up getting taught a big lesson about what I was supposedly teaching. The first Sunday, the class consisted of about a dozen people you might see at any church, and Marshall, a recovering crack addict who periodically experiences homelessness. ... I’ll teach that class for you, Marshall said. I paused, “I believe you will,” I said.

Y’all have gifts for Christian ministry. You. Me. Everyone who will ever walk through those doors. Everyone y’all’ll ever meet.

Y’all are called, and y’all are gifted, says Paul. English has a word for that (unlike second person plural pronouns), VOCATION. Our vocation is what we are called and gifted by God to do with our lives. It’s a little different that talent, though it includes your talents and passions, but your vocation is what you are empowered to do for God’s purposes of love in the world. Frederick Buechner, the German preacher and theologian, claims that your VOCATION, the place God is calling you to, is where your deep gladness and the world’s great hunger meet. It’s the intersection of where your inner fire, your giftedness, meets with the world’s yearning for you. Jim Fowler states it this way, “To be in vocation is to find a purpose for one’s life that is part of the purposes of God.” Find a purpose for your life that is part of the purposes of God.

The Greek word for church is ECCLESIA, meaning “those called out.” That’s what we are, here. Those who acknowledge we’re called out by God to something else, something more, something far greater than we could have ever dreamed possible, were it not shown to us in Jesus Christ. When we each and together act upon our vocation, says Paul, we live into our vast unimaginable potential that is from God.

You all know the story of Jason McElwain by now. If you don’t, then you need to get on the internet and watch his story, because it is one you’ll never otherwise believe. Jason McElwain was a typical high school kid with some special needs at Greece Athena High School. Jason struggled in school and in life with his

special challenges, but he LOVED basketball. He was a gym rat, and the varsity coach Jim Johnson invited him to be the team manager, organizing the equipment and supporting the “real players.”

One day coach decided to add McElwain to the roster for the team's February 15 game against Spencerport High School, so McElwain could be given a jersey and sit on the bench for the team's last home game of the season. Although the game between Greece Athena and Spencerport was for a senior night at Greece Athena High School, Johnson planned to allow McElwain to play a few minutes if Greece Athena got a comfortable lead. Toward the end of the game, the fans started chanting Ja-son, to try to get him in the game. With four minutes left in the game, Athena Greece had a double-digit lead, and coach Johnson called out, “McElwain, get out there.” Jason rose instantly, and the place went nuts. When teammates first passed the ball to McElwain he attempted a three-point shot and missed. McElwain got a second chance to score with a lay-up which he also missed. Then the magic happened. McElwain then got "hotter than a pistol", raining threes from everywhere, just as so many players dream about, and scored twenty points before the game ended. In four minutes! As soon as the final buzzer rang, fans from the stands stormed the court in celebration.

Many of you know that there is no way you can watch what happened with a dry eye. Jason McElwain touched people like you and me so deeply, not just because a kid with a disability did something extraordinary, that is awesome, but because it touches on something deep inside us, at our very core, that knows what it's like to sit on the sideline your whole life, struggling with our own disabilities and challenges, dreaming about playing on the court of our greatest passions, dreaming about getting the call that we are wanted out there, being cheered on. It reminds us of the deepest possibility, the deepest hope we hold, that maybe even little old we could do something that would bring the house down.

Hear the call of the apostle Paul in the words of a coach, “Hey ya’ll, get out there!”