

Christ, Kingdom, *Church*: Building Up the Body of Christ

Our Scripture today is from the Book of Ephesians, chapter four. I'm going to read selected verses:

4 I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner 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.^[a]

7 But each of us was given [a gift] according to the measure of Christ's [generosity].

11 He himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, 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,^[e] to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Let's pray.

-This summer we're braiding a threefold cord with biblical texts that speak to the three priorities of the Christian faith.

So, I know. There is a visual aid behind me, but... What are the three priorities of the one would follow Jesus? [Progressively growing relationship with and commitment to Christ, Christ's work in the world, and Christ's Body the Church. Or Christ. Kingdom. Community of believers.]

Say more. What do we mean when we speak of *growing relationship with* and *commitment to*

Christ? – In the first three chapters of Ephesians Paul proclaims that the dynamo at the center of the universe is God's reconciling love, revealed in Jesus Christ. He's the one who has knocked down the walls erected by our sin, healing our divisions from God and one another. He's the one who has welcomed outsiders into his kingdom family to be built together in his love.

To grow in Christ is to make him first priority, our one thing, to stick close, to live under the waterfall of his grace, to let his truth shape you to be a 10-foot shark, to follow in his way, to stay connected in prayer, to be his, to know him as Master and friend, to bear the fruit of his faith and character

The Work of Christ? –to push back against the dark, to heal what's broken, to overcome evil with good, to participate in what Christ is doing to thread together what's been torn apart, to advance his kingdom values, to be salt and light, to pursue his flourishing, wholeness and delight – his shalom for all creation, to make disciples, to do justice, to love neighbor

The Body of Christ? – to prioritize life together with other believers; to commit yourself to relationships that matter for the gospel; to be authentic; to worship together, pray together, eat together, share burdens; to pursue Christ and kingdom for the good of the world, *together*

-As you heard in our Scripture, Paul begs us ‘to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called.’ That is, ‘live in a way that is on balance with or in congruence with what God has done for us in Christ.’ It’s a high calling. A life in response to the reconciling love at the heart of it all.

Calling. It comes from the Latin word *vocare* from which we get the word ‘vocation.’ It speaks to the *work* a person is called to do by God and the *way of life* a person has been created to lead when they come fully alive.

As Frederick Buechner says, ‘There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Super-ego, or Self-Interest.’

And what is our calling? Christ. Kingdom. And. Priority three: Church. Life together in Christian community. In connected discipleship. (Which is not to suggest life apart from those who do not follow Christ, but to emphasize that our life for others draws fuel from our life together in Christ). We’re called to be together in the reconciling love of Jesus: one hope, one Lord, one baptism, one faith. A fire whose flaming warmth can only come from sticks of wood stacked up together in the spark and oxygen of Christ’s love.

I remember when I was a small kid running around the church foyer in San Angelo, Texas. Carol Hall would get down on her knees to look into my eyes and talk to me like I mattered as much as the gospel itself. In my college Christian fellowship, I recall how I wanted to become more like Chris Hiller, a kid whose authenticity and generosity were inspiring. And I’ve been shaped by how James B Notkin, of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, made Christ-centered relationship the heart of his leadership in our Christian ministry to students. And how in pursuing relationship with me, in believing in me, I got a taste of Jesus’ love.

Pastor Brianne invited you last week to consider the blessings of salt and light we can be to one another:

Blessed are you Sister who made me laugh
Blessed are you father for advocating for kids
Blessed are you Vivian for making me happy
Blessed are you who teaches us about Jesus
Blessed are you my friend for caring about God and creation
Blessed are you who loves me when I don’t love myself
Blessed are you who entered the eternal kingdom with grace and peace as an example for all of us

It’s so often in one *another* that we experience the Holy Other. It’s so often in Jesus followers that we have a taste of Christ. And it’s our calling to surround each other with the sweetness of this humility, gentleness, patience, and loving forbearance that marks his grace.

You know, in puzzling through the disturbing rise of mass shooters, the best article I've read was one Ron Righter forwarded me by David Brooks of the New York Times. The diagnosis of such despair is probably not so simply attributable to mental health struggles or gun access, though that's not to discount them. But when we think about these young men, we would do well to consider the ugly effects of chronic loneliness. To think of those who have found no community of grace. Those who have lost hope that others will see them as valuable. Who then seek notice and oblivion in one last unconscionable act of violence.

Which makes the good news we have to share not only good, but urgent. We have been called to *be* a community that undoes despair. We are – not alone, but together – a family for those who might be otherwise left out, sustenance for those who might otherwise starve for affection. We are, not alone, but together, soft landing, the balm of belonging, disarming hope, for one *another*. How hard would it be to take on the despair of the world by ourselves? But together we are the Body of Christ. And Christ has overcome the darkness with redeeming light.

We are blessed to be One in this gracious calling. One hope. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. And. We are different. We have different gifts. That list of roles: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. Speer-headers. Truth-tellers. Hope-sharers. Soul-tenders. Life-instructors. All textures and colors of faithful personhood. This is only one of Paul's lists. We have different gifts. Different roles we play within the community of faith.

It would be valuable to consider what particular gifts you've been given: Are you an entrepreneurial leader? An advocate for justice? A sharer of good news? A shepherd of hearts? A mentor of wise teaching?

But more importantly, did you notice what our different stripes are for?

Paul tells us that Christ gave each of us a particular – more accurately, the Bible says that each of us was *given* as a particular gift – quote '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,^[a] to the measure of the full stature of Christ.'

Our differences are by design. By the creative, good God's beautiful, practical design. For the purpose of *each one of us coming fulling alive in Jesus*.

Your particularity and passion within the Body is meant to be used to help equip the saints – that's the church - for the work of 'ministry.' That is, *diakonia*. Deacon work. Skilled servanthood. You are meant to use your gift to help folks become their true selves. To grow up to maturity in humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearing love. As part of your progressively growing commitment to Christ's Body the church, you're meant to help others become Christ-like. So that we might be a taste of Jesus' love and laughter to a hurting world.

One of the images I love for the Church is of a puzzle. Everything fits together to reveal the face of Jesus. He is the one who holds all things together. However, you have been gifted with a piece of that puzzle. A piece that is essential to depicting the fullness of Christ's face. And his is the face that our world so desperately needs.

Are you growing progressively in your commitment to the Body of Christ?

Are you discovering your gift for others? Giving yourself to build others up to maturity?

What would it *look* like if we saw ourselves as a taste of Jesus to one another? If we saw the church as a taste of Jesus to a hurting world.

Might it look like the Body of Christ, blessed, broken, and given to all who hunger for a blessed belonging that free them to come fully alive?