

“THE GIFTS OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD”

Ephesians 4:1-16

September 11, 2016 – Rev. Jerry Duggins

One of the things that I've really enjoyed about preaching the last few years is working from a theme that carries through the year. One of the challenges, and not nearly as much fun, is coming up with that theme. Admittedly, Janet and I are not alone in this task. Last year's theme came from Eileen. With some refinement from the worship team and others, you'll recall that we focused on "Faith awakened, practiced and shared." Usually the process begins with Janet and I staring at each other with blank expressions reflecting the lack of viable ideas currently in our minds.

I've led enough brain-storming sessions not to panic when this happens. The blank look is often the dominant expression at the beginning of many idea-generating conversations. It does make one pause, however, to wonder where good ideas come from. There are some who encourage us to pray about it, to wait for the movement of God's Spirit. Sometimes this is very effective, but usually, I don't have the patience for it... and more often than not I don't recognize a good idea until I'm well into the execution of it. I think I actually like that good ideas have a bit of mystery surrounding them, that I don't always remember how they came about or who they came from.

This year's theme came to me in a dream... I think... or in that fuzzy world somewhere between waking and sleeping. For some reason I was remembering that Eileen had said that she planned to start Faith Formation exploring the sacraments. One of our parents had expressed an interest in this. So there I was in this dreamy state mulling this over when the words just dropped into my brain with a soft but sudden clarity: "The gifts of God for the people of God."

It's, of course, not my phrase. It belongs to the communion liturgy and I have no idea who originally penned it, but on another level I feel some ownership of it. It's my favorite part of communion, more loved even than the words of institution. The words signify that the talking has come to an end and the experience is about to begin. The words invite the people of God to experience the presence of God in receiving the elements of the sacrament. The phrase puts me in the place where God and people come together. They remind me why I do what I do.

It remains to be seen whether the idea proves to be "inspired" or the delusions of a tired mind, but I'm encouraged by the conversations with others as we discussed the phrase and considered the possibilities inherent in the concepts. Now that the theme is on the table, I'm excited about the prospects for the year and I can think of no better place to introduce this theme than the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the churches in Ephesus.

Let's begin with the part about gifts. Paul writes that "each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." It's not explicit, but it bears saying that at the junction of the gifts of God and the people of God stands Jesus Christ. It was his sacrifice that called into existence the community of believers. Jurgen Moltmann, a modern theologian well known for his "theology of hope," prefers the more descriptive phrase "messianic community" over church. We are a people of God who have come together in virtue of our relationship to a

messiah named Jesus. Jesus defines who we are and what we do because... he is like us and he is like God.

Paul has an odd way of putting it, which we often just ignore partly because we don't quite get it and partly because there is so much else in these verses that commands our attention. Paul talks about the Jesus who ascended far above the heavens and descended into the lower parts of the earth.

He starts the chapter out with beautiful words that capture the unity of the church which rests on Christ's gift, and we're all smiles. But then he interrupts the flow with this quote, or as commentators like to say, misquote from Psalm 68. I won't bore you with the details except to say that the blank look lasts for three verses until Paul returns to "the gifts he gave..." and we're engaged again. I have read this chapter many times, and every time I come to the bit about ascending and descending, I mentally snip these verses from the text and read the passage as though they weren't ever there.

Well, let's think about it for a minute. When it says that Jesus ascended, Paul must be referring to the story at the end of Luke's gospel or more fully told at the beginning of Acts. After promising his disciples the gift of the Spirit, he disappears into the clouds. Okay, so Paul goes on to say that this Jesus who disappeared into the highest heaven, must have descended at some point. Well, John says this in more interesting and classic fashion: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." But what's this about the "lower parts of the earth?" Some have suggested that this is a reference to hell, but the Greek of the original text doesn't really allow for this. More likely, Paul means that Jesus was thoroughly "of the earth," that his connection to humanity was complete. Likewise, his ascending "far above all the heavens" affirms his full connection to all things divine. In Jesus, the gifts or the things of God come together with the people blessed by God. The Christian communion can thrive only by "the measure of Christ's gift." And there is much promise in this because Jesus knows God and Jesus knows us. He's been places where only divinity can go and he's experienced the very depths of human suffering. He's been all the way up and all the way down.

In the coming weeks we'll talk about the gifts of God as they come to us in the sacraments. In Advent we'll explore the gift of God's physical presence. In Lent, the gift of Jesus' sacrifice, the meaning of the cross for the people of God. Today, I'm focusing on the gift that makes this gathering possible. But before I say more about that I want to make a connection back to our series on the Psalms. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*: "Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship... we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients" (p.28).

In our institutional life as a church, we sometimes forget how we got here. In a moment of displeasure, we forget the warm welcome, the joy we experienced when we first entered this particular community of faith. We forget about the many who came together before us to form this congregation. These are gifts that ought to recall us to gratitude, to a thankfulness that places hard truths in the context of love, that tempers anger, that moves us to act with gentleness and humility, and lay a path away from division toward unity. But more profound than the gratitude we have experienced among the people of God lies the grace we have received from God through the gift of Jesus; Jesus who left the comfort of God's presence and came all the way down to share fully in our life, and who descended a second time on Pentecost in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Referring to the day of Pentecost, Moltmann remarks: "In the dawn of the messianic era, there are no longer any periods devoid of the Spirit. But the Spirit can be 'grieved' and 'quenched,' his power can be 'hindered' and dispersed" (p.300). Moltmann, who by the way turned 90 this year, believes that many congregations today suffer from a "quenching of the Spirit," a failure to recognize and live from the gifts of God. Bonhoeffer's recommendation is still relevant. He wrote, "The more thankfully we daily receive what is given us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases" (p.30).

I'm looking forward to this year of focusing on the gifts of God for the people of God because it challenges us to live each day from gratitude. It sets aside the temptation to "grieve the Spirit" as Paul mentions at the end of this chapter. It holds our attention to the positive things that God is doing among us in this particular community of faith.

"But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." One of the ways in which we grieve the Spirit is by denying our own giftedness. We'll spend some time this year exploring biblical figures, both Old and New Testament, who were gifted by God. The point is not to see these individuals as special pillars in the community of faith, but to see the way in which God's gift to one person is for the benefit of the whole community. Paul is very clear that the gifts of God are not for raising one person above another, but for blessing the whole community of faith. He closes this section with the image of the church as Christ's body, emphasizing the importance of the individual parts as they contribute to the growth of the whole body "building itself up in love."

I hope that you will take time this year to consider your own gifts, realizing that God has gifted every member in the community of faith (and those beyond as well, I might add). But I don't want you to stop there. It's not uncommon for someone to exaggerate or underestimate the importance of his or her gifts. Gifts can be used to place oneself at the center, to build one's power and authority over others. In other ways, failure to use one's gifts may impoverish the community. Both undermine the church's effectiveness as it practices ministry in and for the world. Each is given grace, not one more and another less. Each contributes to the building up of the body of Christ.

New Testament scholar Markus Barth (not related to the more famous theologian Karl) wrote in his commentary on Ephesians: "No one among the saints can say he [or she] is not equipped or has nothing to contribute, for everyone is given a gift and an appointment" (p.452). The gift part I've talked about, but the notion of being given an "appointment" may seem a little odd. He's referring to verse 11 where Paul writes: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets..." The thing to notice here is that these are not talents, which is how we usually think of gifts, but roles necessary to the healthy functioning of the church. Gifts or talents suit us for certain roles or functions. The gifts are not simply things which we can possess. They are not just abilities; they also imply certain activities. A prophet, for example, understands the signs of the times, but until he or she prophesies, tells others what these signs mean, the ability serves no useful place in the community. We not only have gifts, but also a place in the community from which to exercise our gifts.

Another way to think about this dynamic is to remember that gifts are not as much about the ability as they are about the people. In Corinthians and Romans, Paul talks about gifts as things or qualities, but as Barth puts it, "The gift of the exalted Christ to the church consists, according to Ephesians, of persons" (p.436).

“The gifts of God for the people of God.” I’m excited about this theme because it invites us to be positive, to remember that even in a time when the church’s influence seems to be in decline, as Moltmann said, “no age is devoid of the Spirit.” I’m excited because it encourages us to live from gratitude, to see not only abilities and ministries, but people as well as gifts. I’m excited because it offers an image of the church that is both dependent on the grace of God and active in the world. According to Paul Marshall, the imagery in Ephesians, while suggesting that we are “in one sense waiting for Christ,” also tells us that we are “individually and corporately... moving toward and into Christ” (p.306).

I’m excited about this theme because it insists that we think about God and church in the same sentence. It reminds us that Jesus who we follow is one who has been all the way up and all the way down, one whose knowledge of God and humanity is intimate and real.

I’m excited because it offers a compelling vision for the church. Richard Ward says it this way: “‘Christ’s body’ is that place at the intersection of divine and human life where sovereignty, brokenness, and communion are held together in God’s grace” (p.307). I like how Barth summarizes this section of Ephesians. He writes: the church “has a promise to trust, a way in which to go, a commitment to fulfill, and an energy given to her, which are not her own. The church is as much as, but no more than, a happy migrating people moving forward to the day of redemption. She is a hard-working community of servants who accept their call into God’s witness stand for the sake of the whole creation” (p.497). An ambitious vision that could only be implemented by a church living from gratitude, acknowledging the gifts of God for the people of God.

Amen.

Resources:

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