



“A Life Worthy”

Acts 2:1–4; Ephesians 4:1–6, 14-24

Leading a life worthy of the calling

Ephesians 4:1 is the hinge point in Paul’s beautiful letter. The first half of the letter is primarily focused on what God has done and is doing to rescue his creation. Now, in 4:1, we turn to the outgrowth of God’s work. We have been called to the Spirit-filled fellowship that is the Church and we are to live lives worthy of this calling. I suspect that many of us shy away from

the idea that we can lead lives worthy of anything that God has done for us. Isn’t that the point underlying Paul’s insistence that it is God who has saved us, so that none of us can boast (2:8-9)?

Yes, it is God, and God alone, who has saved us from sin and death. It is God and God alone who has given us new birth in Christ. It is God and God alone who dwells in every believer, in the person of the Holy Spirit. This is all true. But it is also true that we must live out this new life, as new selves. The Holy Spirit dwells in us, but actually living as new people calls for our cooperation in the work of moral renewal. We must live as the people of God, we “must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (4:15). Jamie Clark Soles at Perkins Seminary writes:

What would our author have us do? In a phrase, “Grow up!” Growing up may require standing down because mature Christians are more concerned about unity than personal triumph. Notice all of the ways the author makes this point. First, he uses the language of “unity” (*henotēs*) and “one” (*heis*) extensively throughout the letter, with the heaviest concentration appearing in our passage. Twice he speaks of the “unity” (*henotēs*) of the spirit (4:3, 13). Through the cross, Christ has unified ethnic groups so that peace should ensue and hostilities cease (2:14), creating what Ephesians calls “one new humanity” (2:15), which has singular access to God through one Spirit (2:16). The author borrows liturgical language to express eloquently this unity: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God who is the parent of everyone.¹

How we understand the world around us and how we live are inextricably bound. They cannot be pulled apart. How we understand reality, the stories we tell about ourselves and our world, inform and underly all that we do. It is those core convictions again, our most deeply held beliefs, that drive our actions. Thus, Paul’s call to action, to change, is grounded in God’s work of new creation. “If anyone is in Christ -- New Creation -- the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

So, we who have given ourselves to Christ, must ask again, “Who are we?” and “How then should we live?” The place to begin is grasping your and our true identity.

Who am I? Who are we?

We live in a time when the question of identity is increasingly thought of as an inward journey. We, or at least generations younger than mine, search for “the real me,” “the inner me,” “the true me.” Here’s a few quotes that illustrate the present-day challenge of identity:

- “I’m a stranger in my own life.” — Lang Leav, from *Sad Girls*
- “I don’t know who I am right now. But I know who I’m not. And I like that.” — Amber Smith, from *The Way I Used to Be*
- “Your identity is not in who you can be. It is in who you always have been” — Ricky Maye

¹ Jaime Clark-Soles, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B, 2009*, 3, 303–305.

- “What matters most is not 'what' you are, but 'who' you are.” — DaShanne Stokes

As I read through a lot of present-day quotes and passages about identity, I was struck by the thought that ancient peoples had an easier time with this. For the people of the ancient near east, there was no belief in an “inner me” or a “real me” that they had to discover. A person’s “identity,” their “self,” was seen in their actions and in their social position. They weren’t worried about “finding themselves” or discovering their “inner spirit;” their actions revealed the truth about their true self and others were always ready to tell them what they saw.

To this day, I suspect that for many of us, our “identities” are bound up with what we do and how others see us. For example, my identity could be centered on my marriage, “I am Angee’s husband,” or my children, or my work, or my hobbies, or . . . and the list goes on. But, there are also possibilities that are more immutable. I am also white, male, 55 years old, kinda chunky . . . and that list goes on too. Somehow, out of all this, we end up with a sense of who we are, an identity. We might be comfortable with this identity, or we might be desperately anxious to change it.

Paul’s Plural “You”

We are individualistic people living in an individualistic society. When we come to Paul’s letters it’s natural that we’d read the many “you’s” as being directed at each of us individually. Thus, we read today’s passage as Paul saying to me that I am to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which [I] have been called.”

But that isn’t really Paul’s point. His “you” in verse 1 is plural, not singular. He is speaking to the community of believers, as a body, not as a bunch of individuals. It is the community’s calling that he is speaking of. If Paul had been a Texan, the passage would read this way: “I beg y’all to lead a life worthy of the calling . . .” For Paul, everything began and ended with the community.

In Paul’s letters, nearly all the “you’s” are plural. Paul’s work is focused on starting and growing communities of believers. Do what builds up the community he writes. Do what is a good witness to others. Avoid what tears down the community. Avoid what is a bad witness to others. Those four instructions pretty well summarize all of Paul’s teachings about what believers should and shouldn’t do.

The new way, befitting a new life

Wherever we’ve landed in the past as to our identity, all that is transcended by our identity in Christ. After all, as Paul wrote, “Do you not know that your body [your whole self] is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body [with your whole self]” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Some price...God on a cross.

And so we put away our old self and don the clothes of our new self. There can be no going back. Who would want that? Who would purposefully come out of the shower and put on the smelliest old rags you could find?

No...clothing of humility and gentleness, clothing that bears one another in love, clothing that speaks the truth in love—all aimed at our unity in the Spirit—must be our way. Anything less denies our birth in a new human race. Every community of believers is a colony of this “new humanity” (2:15). We are all given different gifts and talents and interests, but God has knitted us together into one body, namely, the Body of Christ (4:16).

Who or what makes us one?

Zygology. Be honest, you never knew there was such a word. Neither did I until I looked it up. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, zygology is the branch of technology dealing with fastening and joining things together. An expert in rivets or post-it notes would be a zygologist. In today’s passage from Ephesians 4, Paul is a spiritual zygologist of sorts.

We at First UMC are a congregation within the larger body of Christ. We now have more than 500 members of our congregation and a whole bunch of visitors and children. What holds us together? What binds us into the community we’ve named First UMC? Is it our political affiliation? Our race? Marital status? How about our pastor? The warm welcomes we extend

to one another on Sunday mornings? Perhaps our doctrine or our sacraments? No, none of those are the glue

that holds us together. We are one body, of one faith and one baptism, empowered by one Spirit. Our unity, our oneness, arises from the unity of God. There is one God—Father, Son, and Spirit—who is “above all and through all and in all.” In the Triune God (God united in three persons) lies our unity.

We are all very different people, with different backgrounds, given differing talents and skills by God, but we have been called to the unity of the Spirit in the knowledge of Christ. I have been part of many churches and never before have I encountered the strong fellowship and harmony that characterizes First UMC. It is important to hear Paul’s plea that we preserve our fellowship. That we be patient with one another, humble and gentle, lovingly giving one another the benefit of the doubt. It is our strong connection to one another that Paul describes as the ligaments in the body of Christ. We grow in love when we are well-connected, one to another. Jesus has torn down the walls of hostility and we must never try to rebuild them, for he is our peace (2:14). As one body, we press ahead bearing fruit, making disciples, striving to always be the people Jesus has called us to be...to lead worthy lives.

“Joined and knit together by every ligament”

But such purposes and perspectives stretch us and challenge us to keep the larger and longer view before us. It isn’t easy to understand, defend, and pass on the faith that was passed on to us. It isn’t easy teaching our children to serve and to care for others. It isn’t easy reaching out to the world with the good news of Jesus Christ. Indeed, all this requires our collective efforts. It takes not only unity, but unity of purpose.

We are a diverse bunch, bound together by God into one body, sharing one baptism and one faith. Paul wants us to understand that God embraces this diversity, as he should, since he is diversity’s creator. Indeed, God has compounded this diversity by giving us a variety of gifts to use in bearing lasting fruit. Ephesians 4 has one such list: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. But this is only one list of several in Paul’s letters. None of these lists are meant to be complete, all are meant to drive home his point that we may be diverse people given diverse gifts, but we are all one body. Each of us is like a ligament in the body. Different jobs, different tasks, yes. But the Spirit knits us together so that we may bear lasting fruit. It takes us all to, as Paul puts it, promote the body’s growth in building itself up in love, namely, the works of love that are Jesus’ fruit of the vine. May it be so!