

Sunday 17 May 2020

Ephesians 4:7-16

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. 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. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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.

Let us pray: Lord, forgive our childish ways. We tend to fuss with each other a little too much. We try too often to make ourselves the center of attention. Thank you for all you have done to help us put away our childish ways. Thank you for all those you have used to teach us your ways and to develop our place within your own body. Now teach us to cooperate and coordinate so that we might continue to build each other up in Christ. This is the desire that we wish for you to inspire in our souls today. Amen.

"Growing Up"

Who do you want to be when you grow up? When I was real young I dreamed of being a farmer like my grandparents. I love the time I spent on the family farm. I loved working with the animals. Waking up early in the morning before the sun was up, to milk the cows. I like collecting eggs from the hens. I found tossing hay bails a challenge when I was little but I knew I would grow into it. Becoming a minister was not part of my plan. My father would rather I became a dentist. But God called me to be a pastor, and not just any pastor but a United Methodist Pastor. I was not too happy about that, but God was insistent. Who did you want to be when you grew up?

God wants us to grow in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. When God looks at us God wants to see the second coming of Christ. God wants you to grow into the fullness of your Christ-likeness. Methodists have always called this becoming perfected in love. God does not want us to become anyone else but Christ.

This is why God has gifted our lives with apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. These are the people who helped us awaken and experience the presence of God and God's calling upon our own lives. None of us comes to Christ on our own. God surrounds us with a great cloud of witnesses, because God wants us to hear our own calling and understand our place in the body of Christ. God also wants us to understand that we are all part of the same body of Christ. We are interrelated and interdependent.

As children we do not always see this larger reality. We often have a very narrow vision and live in our own little world and we understand little more. Just like Jesus in the wilderness there are forces in this world that seek to convince us that we should remain the center of the universe, that our comfort and our desires are the most important. They try to convince us that it is only right to turn stones into bread to feed our own cravings. They try to convince us that we can live reckless lives and that God will come to our rescue in the nick of time and save us, because we are so delightful. They try to convince us that we need to be in control of our lives and to hold the reigns of power at whatever the cost. They help us make up doctrines as we go along, and to change it as the wind blows one way and the next so we can always have our way and feel good about it. They encourage us to join in their trickery, and deceitful scheming, so all things work out to our own advantage. God however wants something completely different for our lives. God wants us to grow up and become the fullness of Christ.

When we grow up in Christ we learn quickly that life is not about us at all. Jesus' wants us to grow in love. Love is not about us and our needs and desires, it is always focused on the lives of others who are struggling and in need. Jesus was not looking to limit who he cared for. He was willing to sacrifice everything for them. We however are tempted to look for ways to limit our investment in the lives of others. This is what we do when we focus on the sins of others. It helps us decide who is worthy of our love and how is not. Jesus did not make this false distinction, all are worthy of our love, because all are worthy of God's love.

This is also why we are tempted to we judge others according to their political leanings. Those who will help my side win are worthy of love and those who are not going to help me, need to be punished or weakened or even destroyed. When Jesus called his disciples, Jesus chose to gather an extremely diverse group of people. Publicans who supported the Roman occupiers, and zealots who were sworn to assassinate all Publican traitors. Jesus put together working class fishermen with the wealthy educated upperclass. Jesus does not pick sides, Jesus breaks down walls of exclusion and mixes everyone together: people of diverse religious experiences, people of differing social classes, people of all gender expressions. They were not just worthy of Christ's love, but all of them were included in his body, each belonging in a very particular place. Everyone to Jesus had their own distinct and necessary calling.

Jesus did not divide people into saints and sinners, holy and unholy. Jesus instead died to redeem them all, so that all their unique qualities could be utilized in the body of Christ. Sin is not a reason for exclusion, but a call for redemption. Sin is harmful, so God wants us to work with Them to distract and refocus people away from harm to what will help them in their growth in righteousness. Jesus did not come into the world to bring judgement, Jesus came to bring healing and deliverance. Jesus comes to bring new life and so are we. As any good parent or older sibling Jesus seeks to teach and encourage us to grow up and mature. And God wants us to do the same for others. We want others to trust us and not fear us. We want others to feel loved not hated. We want to heal the trauma of others and not cause it. We want to understand others better, not ignore them and the burdens they think they must carry alone.

We are all part of the body of Christ. As we mature we grow in our realization that we are all in this together. What harms someone else, harms us. Whatever benefits someone else, benefits us all. When others of blessed and their lives better, it improves the lives of us all.

Right now during this pandemic those who have the least access to health care, those with more preexisting conditions are the most susceptible to receiving the Covid-19 virus. They might not live in our neighborhoods, but we live in the same county, the same state, share in the

same economy, the same environment. What happens to them does effect us and our well being. We are in this together, so by helping them stay safe we protect ourselves in the process. If we just think about ourselves we will just make things worse not just for them, but for ourselves.

In the body of Christ, conservatives and progressives serve different purposes, both absolutely necessary to the well being of the body. They have differing callings and differing purposes, that if we lost either we would be a less perfect reflection of Christ. In fact when Conservatives do not listen to the wisdom God has given the progressives, they will become destructive to themselves and others. This is only because they are acting out of ignorance, created by their shutting out the voice of God. When progressives do not listen to the wisdom that God has given conservatives they become destructive to themselves and others. This again is because they are acting on ignorance, created by their shutting out the voice of God. And those who live in neither camp are often forced to deny their own unique perspectives because they are forced to take sides when neither seems right to them. When we ignore their voices to pursue our own vested interests we ignore the voice of God and the whole body of Christ suffers. We are sinning against the body of Christ, to the great sorrow of God.

Maturity looks like the love of God in Christ Jesus. Mature thoughts are loving thoughts. It is thinking like God does of all the ways we can help make others prosper and succeed. Like God we are dreaming of new ways to cooperate and work together. Like God we are thinking of ways to expand inclusion and to make a place for those who have not yet felt included in the body of Christ.

Mature actions reflect the loving acts of God through Christ Jesus. They do not just behave like God's acts of mercy: feeding the hungry, providing shelter, finding a job. They also resemble God's acts of justice: as we seek to root out systemic racism, as we take stock of our privilege and find ways to use them to lift up those who do not share in our advantages. Just like we see God doing we find ways to use our power, our votes, and our collective voices to empower the powerless in our society, to bring inclusion to those who are not allowed to participate in the processes of our government, and to speak loud and clear for those not given a voice at all. Mature speech is Godly speech whose loving words help to encourage others and build them up in their faith.

For us maturity looks just like Jesus. Maturity is when we become fully integrated into who Jesus is right now in the world. Our maturity is becoming focused on accomplishing our father's will in the world. It is being apostolic, becoming God's good news in the lives of those who have not known such grace before. Making the love of Christ a reality inside the lives of those who have never experienced such love before.

Our maturity is being prophetic, sharing the vision of Christ for the world that we live in, in words that make sense in our own day and time, so others can see what the peaceable kingdom of God could look like now in our lifetime.

Our maturity is being evangelists, to be like Jesus and become good news to the lives of those who are struggling. To become those who cause the faces of others to light up with life and hope, and a sense of possibility, when before they did not believe that it was even possible.

Our maturity is being pastoral, caring for the flock of God, especially those who get lost, being one who is always looking for those who are struggling, sick, lame or lost. Willing to put our lives on the line for the well being of strangers we find robbed on the side of the road.

Our maturity is becoming a teacher, enthusiastically passing on the truth of the love of God that we have personally experienced in our own lives or in the lives of others in the body.

God wants the world to see Jesus in their midst whenever they see us. God wants us to embody the second coming of Christ. God wants us each to help the world to see the soul changing power of God's love through us. God wants us all to be who we are, with all of our special qualities that make our lives essential to the fullness of the presence of Christ in the world. This is what God wants us to be when we grow up: Becoming part of the trinity; Becoming the fullness of Christ.

Let us pray: We want the world to experience Jesus. We want them to experience his love and mercy. We want them to hear his voice of compassion and care and we want this to happen in part through our lives. Let this happen in some way today and in greater fullness every day to your glory and praise. Amen.

Remember to send in your tithes and offerings. Every gift helps us better weather this storm. Keep in touch with each other. Pray for one another. Join in on the Bible study, your participation will bless many.

Now may the love of God
which incorporates you into the very body of Christ
Make you one with the grace of the Holy Trinity
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
so that you will always be blessed to be a blessing
sharing grace throughout the world. Amen.