

SERMON: August 11 2024 - Worthy of the Calling

[RCL] Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

With these words, the Pauline writer begins a well-known discourse attributed to the church in Ephesus, comparing it to a well-knit body that comes together amid their diversity of ministries and callings, as it grows into a new identity in Jesus Christ. The Church is being challenged to grow – in the face of many teachers who are apparently telling them otherwise – and to leave behind their old ways of seeing themselves as separate or different, embracing a new identity as the body of the risen Christ. In other words, the author is calling the church to renewal and transformation, and for that, they are reminded of the gift of grace they have received according to Christ's eternal and life-giving offering, and also of the responsibility, the task, the work we take, when we listen to Jesus' call and become his disciples.

Like Jesus in today's Gospel, that challenges the crowd that follows him to not work for the food that perishes, but rather for the food of eternal life. The writer invites the Ephesians to strive for holiness: to commit to lives worthy of the calling that they have received.

The invitation to holiness in the church is not one that is offered to us as a requisite to be accepted or loved by God – Paul tells us that God demonstrates his love in that we were loved while we were still sinners – but rather as an attitude expected of those that have experienced God's love. This invitation is not about God's need for control, but about inviting us to a place where we can live fuller and happier lives. If we have experienced the love of God, if we have received the calling and the gift of grace, with full hearts we are expected, as an act of praise and thanksgiving, to live lives that share with others the love that we have found in Jesus.

What then are the works of holiness? As the people asked Jesus: What must we do to perform the works of God? Jesus' response is not individual actions, examples, or commitments; Jesus simply invites them to one thing: Believe in him, whom God has sent.

Holiness, as every act of renewal and transformation in the church, begins and ends in this simple returning: Believe in Jesus. In the end, the call to holiness is not about accumulating “good works” in our heavenly bank account to be counted as worthy when we come through the pearly gates, but instead, it is about being madly in love with Jesus, in a way that all our actions become signs of Christ’s presence and love in the world. Because if we truly love Jesus, good things come out of it.

And what sign do we have? Where can we look when seeking Jesus, where can we fall in love madly with our Lord and Savior? Jesus points to his own presence among us, in the Eucharist, in the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. In the Eucharist, as often as we can take it, we meet a God that became flesh for us and invites us to live embodied lives that value simplicity, humility, and presence. In broken Bread and poured Wine we meet a God who offered his life at Calvary for us, and who from the cross and the altar calls us to offer our lives so that others may have abundant life. In the Eucharist, we meet a God that rose from the dead, that breathes life into simple bread and wine, inviting us to believe in life, to trust in a nurturing God as we go through the deserts of our lives, to believe that with God all things are possible.

Around this table, in this place, our divisions cease, and we are no longer Gentile or Jew, rich or poor, conservative or progressive, but all seekers of Jesus, who has fascinated us. Not tossed to and fro by the trickery of division or by every wind of doctrine, but keeping our eyes on Jesus alone and striving to grow in holiness and love, offering our lives for the sake of others, into the full stature of Christ.

Like the church in Ephesus, we at times are overwhelmed by people, companies, and media, constantly trying to sell us ideologies that separate us and divide us. In our highly polarized reality today, division is profitable, and groups try often to take advantage of the situation to increase their wealth. Sometimes, too, we face hardship inside ourselves: after listening to so many different ideas, we start questioning everything, and we do not really know what or who to believe anymore.

Together with the people of God in the desert, we at times grow anxious and desperate to see God's liberating action in our lives. Eager to listen to God's voice in our daily challenges, we raise our demanding voices to God, asking for a quick response. Like them, we want to arrive at that promised land, to that rest, to that goodness we have prayed about for so long.

Like the people who followed Jesus, sometimes we go behind him after our own short-term benefit and gratification, a quick response in an emergency. At times, we seek God just to fulfill our needs. In challenging economic situations, we seek God to bless the work of our hands, in times of conflict, we want God to give us peace and concord, when our church gets smaller or struggles to pay bills, we ask Jesus to bring more people in, like the crowd that day, when we are hungry, we seek for Jesus because we know that Jesus can multiply bread and will give us our fill of loaves.

And true, Jesus will fill our bellies and supply our need, but he also challenges us to seek him not for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures: eternal life. If we want to be transformed, if we want to never again be hungry or thirsty, if we want our lives to change so that we are not constantly jumping from need to need, if we want to experience the joy of the saints, we are invited to grow our relationship with Jesus, the bread of life, our sustenance, and our food for the way.

We are called to lead holy lives, lives that go beyond mediocrity and that challenge the status quo of our society which seeks instant gratification above everything. Lives that go beyond the loaves and that seek the Master who multiplies the loaves. Lives that are not willing to go back into subjection in Egypt at the first sign of hardship, but that trust the God that has liberated us. Lives so focused on Jesus that all our actions and even our needs begin to be the same as those of our God and Master, who became flesh and walked this earth feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and raising them upward. Our lives are made holy in Jesus; our lives find meaning, direction, and ultimate fulfillment only in the Son of God, and in our relationship with him, feeding on him in our hearts, by faith and with thanksgiving, that he may dwell in us, and we in him. Amen.