

Called, United, Equipped

Ephesians 4:1-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I know a few of you have some Baptist in your religious background. I think you'll especially like this sermon. Not necessary because of its content, but in its style. Yes, today we're going to have a good old fashion Bible study sermon. I plan to walk through today's Epistle reading verse by verse, sometimes word by word. But for those of you who prefer a more Reformed style of sermon (you know, the kind with three points and a story), look at today's sermon title. *Called, United, Equipped*. These are the main take-aways I hope will make an impact on your life, and on our life together.

So, let's jump in. Ephesians 4:1 begins, "I, therefore,..." Let's stop right there. Any time a thought begins with "therefore," it indicates that what follows is predicated on what has come before. In this case, the first three chapters in Ephesians focus primarily on theological doctrine, especially that which emphasizes our being adopted as children of God into the realm and kin-dom of God. The "therefore" at the start of chapter 4 moves from the theological into the practical, moral, and ethical implications of being and living as a child of God. This focus continues through the end of chapter 6, the conclusion of this letter.

As children of God, the author begs and pleads that we "**lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called**" (v.1). In the Greek, the word "you" is plural, thus the entire congregation (individually and together) is being addressed. Also, in this scripture verse being "called" doesn't refer to a specific call, like feeling called to a particular profession. This calling is broader, referring to an open invitation to live and be a member of the family of God.

We, therefore, are to live a life worthy of this high calling. That implies we step back now and then from living life stuck in automatic. We need to reflect upon and evaluate the thoughts and behaviors that guide us. The best measuring stick, of course, is summarized by Jesus when he commands, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's a tough measuring stick. But we are also given more specific guidance in this passage from Ephesians. We are to lead a life worthy of our calling "**with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love...**" (v. 2).

Let's look at that. Question: How **humble** are you? Am I? How modest, unassuming, unpretentious? A fuller definition of being humble involves more than simply not thinking more of ourselves than we should. It also means not to think less of ourselves than we should. After all, **we are nothing less than children of God, infused with God's Sacred Presence within us.**

Next, as a child of God we are called to be **gentle**. Question: How gentle are you? Am I? This can mean having a mild temperament, being kind, considerate, tender, not harsh or severe. Are there some rough edges that could use some smoothing down? We probably all know someone who looks like the toughest person in the world, yet we find he or she is actually quite gentle.

Next, a life worthy of our calling should also be marked by **patience**. Oh well. Two out of three isn't too bad, is it? How patient are you? Am I? The word for patience in Greek carries the connotation of endurance, perseverance, or steadfastness rather than just a passive kind of waiting. This kind of patience withstands adversity without quitting. It endures opposition without striking out at an opponent with physical or verbal abuse.

Next, in addition to living life with humility, gentleness and patience, we are called to **bear with one another in love**. At one level or another, every relationship in life (whether personal, with friends, at work, and at the church) requires an element of bearing with others. Within our Presbyterian denomination, one of our foundational principles is grounded in what is called mutual forbearance. Written back in the 1700's, as our denomination was expanding and facing differences in theology and practice, this principle states:

"We believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men [and women] of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to **exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.**" [*Book of Order* F-3.0105]

At the very least, this is a call to tolerance. But as our denomination today continues to become more inclusive and welcoming (theologically and socially) there are those who simply could no longer tolerate remaining in relationship. They, therefore, left the denomination. Ultimately, though admittedly things are running smoother, it was nevertheless a tear in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Saying that, we are not being taught in this scripture passage to bear with one another in every circumstance. It will always be the case that victims of abuse will need to escape from the situation, or relationship, when danger dictates that course of action. Also, bearing with another does not mean to become an enabler. Yet when possible, we are called to bear with one another in love.

(Just a quick note at this point. Hang in there, we're almost through with the first sentence in this passage.)

Where is all this heading? Here's the entire sentence. "I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace**" (vv. 1-3). It all leads to unity.

How **united** are we? We've already taken a look at the recent history in our denomination. Currently, the United Methodist Church denomination is in a deep struggle to remain united. And unfortunately, **we are witnessing the debilitating effects of disunity within our nation**, perhaps more so than at any time since the Civil War. In the political realm, there appears to be very little humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another, let alone in love. We are not living up to our high calling as children of God. It has become evident that our disunity is now equating to dysfunction. And that can be just as true within any organization, including within religious denominations, within individual congregations, and yes, even within families. **Disunity contributes to dysfunction.**

As Christians within the church, we are reminded that any unity is possible only because of the Holy Spirit working with and within us. For we are told of the oneness from which we come: "...one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (vv. 4-6). That's a lot of oneness – seven of them, in fact, in this one sentence. That's a lot of reasons for unity, our unity.

A primary call, as children of one God and Parent of us all, is a call to unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It is in and through this unity that we then recognize, **by the grace of God, we have all been gifted in different ways. From this singular oneness we are able to acknowledge and affirm our diversity, that which makes us distinct.**

There are several lists in the New Testament of God's gifts. One is called the fruits of the Spirit, found in Galatians 5:22-23: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." The list in Ephesians primarily addresses gifts for **church leadership**, that some would be prophets, or evangelists, or pastors, or teachers. It is possible to read this list, however, as a recognition that **good leaders are necessary for the church's unity.**

When I was checking references before accepting the position to be the called pastor here at College Hill, I visited with the General Presbyter of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, the Rev. Greg Coulter, who by the way, will be retiring at the end of this year. I asked him to give me an honest assessment about the health of this congregation. He immediately responded, "College Hill, over the years, has always been blessed with strong leaders." I found that to indeed be the case when I arrived 10 years ago, and it is still the case now.

If you are currently serving, or have ever served as a ruling elder on the Session of College Hill, will you please stand. Let us thank God for these folks and their gifts! It is in and through their calling and gifts, and your calling and gifts that God has been able to do so much good in and through this congregation. **By God's grace and a lot of hard work, we have indeed been blessed to experience genuine unity, which we know is not the same thing as uniformity. We are yet again reminded that it is unity through diversity.**

And the purpose of good leadership and the use of a variety of gifts, according to this scripture passage is, **"to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ"** (v. 12). **That goal is ever before us.** And it includes equipping you for ministry by helping and encouraging you to turn your gifts and abilities into practices, and your passions and concerns into actions. The Greek word translated here as "equipping" is also at the root of the word for "mending". That means dimensions of healing, wholeness, and restoration in each of our lives is also involved and necessary to equip us for the work of ministry. As a community of faith, working to build up the church and one another, we can and must help each other in this regard.

Well, I'm out of time and I only made it through verses 1-12. So, I'll simply read the rest of this passage, verses 13-16, and you can do your own Bible study. "...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the 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 knitted 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" (vv. 12-16).

Therefore, lead a life worthy of the calling with which you have been called as a child of God, so that together we may mature in our faith, using the variety of gifts of which we all have been blessed, to build up one another in love within the realm and kin-dom of God.

Called, United, Equipped. This is what it's all about. Can I get an Amen?

Amen.