

## Christ's Gifts to His Followers (Ephesians 4:7-16)

The other night Teresa and I landed on a television program that turned out to be the second part of a first part we hadn't seen. It took us a few moments to realize this and we had to guess at what had already happened to make sense of what we were watching. That's a bit of how I feel in approaching our scripture text today. We're picking up Paul's thought mid-stream that began with the first verse of this chapter that Kimberly helpfully unpacked last week. She helped us to see that there is a shift in Paul's thought as chapter 4 begins—in light of all that Paul laid out in the first three chapters, he now moves in the direction of what this means for who we are as a community of Christ followers—in other words, Paul begins laying out the practical dimensions of the grand vision of God's idea.

Remember back to chapter 3 where we understood that the purpose of the church is wrapped up in making known the manifold wisdom of God—the church is the instrument God uses to display what was in God's plan from before the foundation of the world. Meaning that the church is not an end unto itself, but a means of demonstrating God's wisdom and by that, compelling the world's attention so that it can hear God's call to life, love, and well-being. This is the end game—that the call is heard and the opportunity for response to it is open.

So the church lives into its purpose when God's hope for it is realized as Paul described it in vs. 13 of chapter 4: when we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature—that's the point of our effectiveness—and maturity is defined here as attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. This isn't a picture of who we are in eternity, this is who we are in the present amid the reality around us because Paul goes on to say that when this happens, we'll no longer be infants in faith, but rather those who speak the truth in love ever growing into Christ the Head, whose body we are, working together with all the parts of the body to accomplish God's purpose.

Now this is a tall order—a grand and glorious vision, an ideal, we might say, but it is not unattainable. In fact, this is the point of congregations—Christ followers gathered in local community—congregations are formed in service of that goal and Christ has given gifts to the church so that it can become what God envisions. To be clear, these gifts are not material goods, per se, like a building or an endowment, but people: specifically, as Paul describes in vs. 11, they are apostles and prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers. Apostles and prophets are Christ's gift to the church universal for in their writing they have conveyed to us the foundations of faith—the truth about God and what God desires by preserving the teaching of Jesus. Adhering to apostolic teaching brings us to unity in the faith, and attention to their description of Christ's teaching and ministry informs our understanding of Christ so that we can hear Christ lead us in our moment of time. Evangelists are Christ's gift to the church worldwide who announce the gospel of the kingdom where it isn't presently known. This corresponds closely to the role of missionaries in our day, but it isn't limited to them alone. There continue to be Christ followers who have a heart for and the ability to speak directly and effectively to those who do not yet know Christ and are unaware of his love for them. They too are Christ's gift. Pastor-teachers are Christ's gift to the local expression of the church whose call is based in spiritual formation—leading in the formation of disciples, learners who are learning from Christ how to grow in the grace God gives for the life we've received in Christ. All of these gifts are given to equip the saints—all Christ followers—for works of service so that the church is built up, really the term is edified—it refers to quality of life rather than congregational size.

In other words, the gifts of Christ to the church are given so that followers of Jesus will attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, and this primarily means that we will be able to carry on the ministry of Christ in the world. The Ephesians receiving Paul's letter would have known this, for this would have been the primary content of Paul's teaching among them during his ministry there. In the same way my hope is that this resonates with us as we have invested time in understanding Jesus and his ministry. But just to be clear, because this goal is a community effort—we're all charged with doing this together—let's briefly review the major features of Christ's ministry. While much could be included under that heading, consider these

four features as summarizing the whole: First—Jesus announced the arrival of the Kingdom—arrival meaning the present availability of living in the realm of God’s love, care, and rule. There is, of course, a future and eternal dimension to this, but for the most part Christ emphasized the right-then element. Second—Jesus came to bring restoration. The ultimate expression of this was the cross, and that was his to do and has been done needing no repetition. But apart from this, Jesus specialized in restoring people broken or separated or victimized. He healed bodies, and relationships, and communities as he practiced and promoted peace grounded in love. Third—Jesus modeled justification meaning that his way of living, or his approach to life showed what it meant to live in union with God. This is justification—being joined to God, and the proof of this is in the living, so justification is an ongoing element rather than simply an initiation into the family. The fourth feature—Jesus welcomed, he invited others into the family of God. His was an inclusive posture that was radically different from the norm of faith leaders in his day. Jesus offered the opportunity for whosoever will to receive the fullness of life God was making available.

So these four features captured the essence of Christ’s life, and we might note further that he did speak the truth in love—in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said in several instances, “You have heard it said...but I say to you...” And then he spoke to the heart of the issue, the real-life soap opera dynamics that people wrestle with: anger, rage, malice, adultery, hypocrisy. His truthful speaking exposed the harm that self-centered lives visited on others, not for the sake of judgment, but correction, for repentance—a change in mind and posture that directs different actions based in love rather than spite. His works of service we already considered in his acts of restoration, but again they were summarized by Peter in Acts 10 who described Jesus as having a reputation for going around doing good. (Mission statement?)

Now then, these features that summarized Christ’s ministry are to be the features that characterize our life together as a congregation—a local expression of the church, the body of Christ, the instrument of the mission God is still pursuing in the world. And would you note where these features play out? They occur in the course of our daily life among the communities in which we live and they are directed outwardly to people, persons in the world living apart from union with God. Announcing the arrival of the kingdom, practicing restoration, modeling justification, and inclusive welcome are to be the focus of our life together—this is why we are formed, to embody and express these features as we speak the truth in love and perform works of service in the world around us. Speaking the truth in love for us means exposing the false narratives that define life in the world by disclosing true narratives that offer an alternative that springs from the wisdom of God. It could be as simple as following Jesus’ example: You’ve heard it said...but what if there is a better way? You can cover a lot of ground with that alone. What are the values society or culture pursues? What are the outcomes of that? What do these accomplish in the long run? What about “this” instead? What works of service could we be known for? Jesus provides a good list in Matt. 25—meeting the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the impoverished, the outsiders, marginalized, immigrants, those imprisoned. What does going around doing good look like against that list?

And if we would seriously attend to these features, the questions with which we concern ourselves as a congregation would consider how we are structured to engage in carrying out that continuing ministry of Jesus. How are we encouraging each other to participate in these features? How are we connecting to the place of need and suffering in the community around us? How are we set up to form people spiritually so that we live from a different perspective in a different approach to the world? How do we deploy the congregation for ministry to the world in service of God’s mission to bring peace, well-being, and agreement with Christ’s wisdom for life in God’s creation?

I wonder if one of the blessings this pandemic brings is an honest appraisal of what is absolutely essential for the church to be the church in this extraordinary moment. Rather than wondering when we can get back to doing worship service as a gathered congregation again, perhaps it would be more fruitful to reflect together how the Spirit might be leading us to consider alternative forms of congregational life that have us asking one another: how do you find your life conforming to the life of Jesus? In what ways have you been engaged in the

works of service? How do we foster and encourage spiritual maturity? How are we modeling justification? Is our collective life as a community of faith in Christ compelling?

And then, perhaps when we are able to gather together again, our services will be comprised of testimonies shared about how these features are happening among us. Perhaps we'll invest time speaking about places of need and suffering we've encountered and considering how we together might respond to this. Perhaps we'll share how we're living out our justification and the difference that's making in our interactions with those around us—our families, our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors. Perhaps we'll discuss how to practice inclusive welcome and who might benefit from this. Perhaps then we'll be an oasis of refreshment in a dry and thirsty land where people tired of the oppression they experience in the world will find relief and discover the life they were made for. AMEN