



The Westminster Pulpit

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To and Fro

A Sermon on Ephesians 4:1-16

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Ephesians 4:1-16

¹I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." ⁹(When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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. ¹⁴We 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. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from 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.

Do you know who you are? We have our definitions: white male, and single black female. We have our definitions: artist, social worker, teacher, preacher, and musician. We have our definitions: Southerner, "Yankee by birth, but I got here as fast as I could," Christian, Muslim, Mormon, and Jew. Do you know who you are? MBA, Harpeth Hall, Ensworth, private, public, Tennessee, Auburn, Tar Heel, and Vandy. We have our definitions. Do you know who you are?

If you had to write a paper about yourself – one-inch margins, single spaced – a paper that would be placed in a book for the ages, what would you write? A paper that people could find if they wanted to know more about you than what is on your gravestone, one they could read and discover the story behind the name – what would you write? I'd love to have that for our Memorial Garden. Not just a name on a wall, but a book that one could leaf through to discover and remember who these saints are that have gone before us. If such a book existed, what would you write about yourself? Would it read like a resume? "I went here and did this." Would the page contain some story of a day that you held dear? What would you say? Do you know who you are?

This man named Paul must think we don't know. "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you've been called." I beg you! Imagine if anyone said that to you. "I beg you to lead a life worthy... Please! I beg you! Please!" Well, it sounds like you're not measuring up. Now, if your head coach begs you to step up, that's one thing. If your parents tell you to live into something greater, that's one thing. If a close friend says, "Don't you see your potential? You can be so much more." And then comes along a convict telling you that you're not measuring up. When was the last time you weren't sure about your life and thought, "Maybe I'll go down to the jail and get a little advice from a convict"? Can an authoritative word come out of a prison cell?

When I was in Morganton, North Carolina, I was asked to be the preacher at a Christmas party that the Yolk Fellow Ministries put on for youth offenders there. They were a bunch of kids who had not lived into a life worthy of their callings, young kids who were 18, 19, and 20 years old. All that potential wasted. "Will you preach to the prisoners?" For some reason, I said, "Yes." But, after saying "Yes" I thought, "What do you say to prisoners?" The only thing I could think of was the Great Judgment scene from the Gospel of Matthew, with the sheep and the goats (*Matthew 25:31-46*). "I was in prison and you visited me." So when that evening came, and after a songfest that included everything from *Silent Night* to *Frosty the Snowman*, it was my turn to stand up in front of that captive congregation dressed in orange jump suits. I said, "I don't really know what to say to you, but the scripture says that when I go to prison to make a visit, I'll find Jesus. Which one of you is Jesus?" The focus of the sermon was, "Do you know who you are?"

After I sat down, they sang a few more carols. And then it was time for the party, which was probably the sole reason they came. We had brought ice-cream, cake, sprinkles, and syrup. They formed a long orange line, and as I scooped out the vanilla ice cream, the 3rd or 4th man in line stuck out his hand at me. I wiped my hand off, and shook it. He said, "Let me introduce myself. I'm Jesus." The man behind him laughed. And then the next man said, "What? No! Lord! I know he's not Jesus. Hey! He thinks he's Jesus!" And from there, it just kept going on down the long line. "My name is Mohammed, I know I'm not Jesus." "I think Jesus deserves a little more ice cream than that." And so on, and so on, and so on.

What I learned from that experience was never to preach to a bunch of teenagers in a prison again. No, not really. What I did learn was this: "I was in prison and you visited me." I never knew He was so young, and laughed in so many ways, and came in so many shapes and colors. Good news comes out of a prison cell. Paul extends his hand out between the bars of the prison door and says, "I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling." Do you know who you are? Paul is inviting us to take out a piece of paper, one-inch margins, single spaced. But Paul pushes the assignment a little farther. It's not a resume. What if the first line had to read, "My name is ... and I am striving to live a life worthy of the calling to which I've been called?"

What if the assignment is to put your life into a much larger narrative? A narrative that begins, "In the Beginning was the Word." A narrative that falls in between the beginning and that time that says, "When we've been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun, we no lest days to sing God's praise than when we first begun."

"My name is Paul, a prisoner of the Lord, and I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you've been called." Do you know what that calling is? Paul is begging us to live into the Body of Christ. You see the assignment isn't for the individual. Your assignment is to understand your calling as the corporate. We are to live together. In his words you hear the call to unity. Live a life of gentleness, patience, bearing with one another. Unity. Living into the "one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. All! "Joined together." "Knit together." "One body."

"I beg you...." "I beg you...." You have to grab the hand of the prisoner. The Alabama fan. The single black female. The Hillary supporter. The Trump supporter. One. Impossible! Especially in a culture that wants to toss us to and fro. A culture that says, "You can say anything." Do you hear the language of the

social media? Do you hear the language of the people running for office? How harsh! How divisive! "Grab my hand!" Says Paul. "We need to be one in Christ!"

"I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you've been called."

Unity. One body. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One. We don't talk about unity. We are in the age of individualism. My individual rights. Even in the Church! Unity in the Church? It is impossible. Because we're supposed to be about justice. And justice issues cut like a knife. We know this. I find it interesting that inclusiveness can be so exclusive.

A colleague of mine shared with me a story about a same sex wedding that he conducted in a large Presbyterian Church. The session struggled with the issue. Not everyone agreed. But they agreed to be the Church, and my friend conducted the wedding. He told me, "Not long after the wedding, one of the women he married came up to him and said, 'My partner and I are leaving the Church.'" He said, "What do you mean you're leaving the Church?" "Well," she replied, "This place is too liberal." "What?" He said, "I had a lesbian couple leave my Church because we're too liberal." My friend was quiet for a moment and then revealed, "She's an oil executive and was all tied up in knots about the denomination's decision about divestment in Israel." He continued, "Look! I don't agree with the denomination's stand on that issue."

You see! We can't all agree on what we're including. The issues of today divide us in half, and then in quarters, and then in eighths and then in pieces.

"I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling." Be the Body of Christ. "One faith, one hope, one baptism, One Lord." Paul, it's impossible. With God, all things are possible. In the Body of Christ, there is justice. "Speak the truth..." In the Body of Christ, there is unity. "Speak the truth in love." Justice is not at the expense of unity, which is absolutely counter-cultural. "Let us not be tossed to and fro" by a culture that seeks to divide. "I beg you, I beg you. Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you've been called. With all humility, patience, and bearing with one another in love...making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

I've said this before. Aren't you glad that when we are called to the table, we are not asked to arrange ourselves according to worthiness? Can you imagine if I said, "As you come forward, come according to your worthiness to partake in the supper. Those who are most worthy come to the front." Where would you put yourself in line? Would you find someone you know and think, "Well, there's John. At least I know I'm better than John, but not as good as Elizabeth. I know I'm in front of that murderer, King David, and the guy in the orange jumpsuit. Maybe, I'm not as good as the guy in the orange jumpsuit. Maybe I just haven't been caught yet." Aren't you glad we don't separate ourselves in terms of what is just when we come to the table? No. We are the one body. There is some unity in grace. "Let me introduce myself. I am the Body of Christ."

Take out a sheet of paper and write down these words, "My name is ... and I am living into the calling to which I've been called; that is, the Body of Christ. With humility, with patience, with gentleness, I live, making every effort to maintain the unity. This is who I am, and this is how I have lived my life."

Will you do that? I beg you to do it.

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