

Eph. 4:1 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Eph. 4:7 But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore 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? 10 He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) 11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 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. 14 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. 15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 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.

## CHRISTIAN VOCATION

What should I do with my life? We answer that question our whole life. Should I go to college? Should I marry this person? When should I retire?

But, in each case we assume that the decision is ours. We decide what job we want. We decide about marriage and retirement and a myriad of other important decisions that face us each and every day. The stakes are high when we make these decisions.

Looking back on our lives we often regret the mistakes that we have made so we are determined that the decisions we make in the future will be better. But, there is no guarantee.

Would it surprise you to learn that from a Christian perspective life is not all about you and the decisions you make? When we talk about vocation or calling from a Christian standpoint, we are not talking about what we choose to do. We are talking about what God has given us. Vocation, God's call is an act of pure grace.

We have been saved by grace through faith Paul tells us in Ephesians. Therefore, none of us have a reason to boast about what we have accomplished, our works. (Ephesians 2:8-9) Instead,

we have been freed to live our lives with a sense of gratitude and hope. Christians are freed to live in a radically open way.

Who knows what God might do in our lives and in the life of our community in the future? There is hope because it does not all depend upon us. It depends upon the promises of God as revealed in Jesus.

Now obviously we all have to make decisions on a daily basis. That is the nature of life. But, we are encouraged by the fact that we are more than the sum total of our decisions. There is a plan and a purpose for our life that goes well beyond what we can see and do at any given moment. There is a layer of grace that undergirds and uplifts the person who is in Christ.

You may remember that this was the benediction for last week's sermon. God can do a lot more with you than you think God can. And so, as the Bible puts it, we live by faith and not by sight. We live according to the promises of God instead of living according to the tyranny of our fears and desires.

#### CALLED BY GRACE

This is what it means when Paul says that we are to live a life worthy of our calling. We are to live according to the grace that has been shown us in Christ Jesus. Since in Christ Jesus we are forgiven and freed to live a new life it stands to reason that that we should be gracious toward others.

Our vocation, our calling from a Christian standpoint is a calling of grace. Grace must triumph in our lives. And that means giving other people a break because God has given us a break.

This passage is about the much neglected trait of Christian tolerance. This passage is about bearing with and staying with people who are sometimes not so easy to live with. (I think that this describes all of us at least some of the time.)

What we often forget is that Christian unity does not mean Christian uniformity. There are very real differences in what Christians believe. And sometimes these differences cause us to have harsh disagreements. We treat our diversity as a curse.

But, this passage suggests that our differences need not lead to division. Instead, it is our duty, our calling, our vocation to be gracious toward others. Literally, verse one says that we should "walk" in a way that is in accordance with our calling. In other words, what we do must let others know what we believe and practice.

The evangelist, Dwight Moody and a friend were talking one day, and their attention was drawn to a man nearby. Moody said, "He must have been in the army or military school." His

companion who knew the man was amazed. He said, "That's right. How did you know?" And Moody replied, "By the way he walked."

We know that the early Christians "walked" in a unique way. Even those outside the faith noticed how they loved each other. The Christian community was a special community based not upon works but upon grace. And we are called to "walk" in a unique way as well.

In order for this to happen the grace of God as revealed in Jesus must produce in us certain traits, namely humility, gentleness and patience. (4:2)

## HUMILITY

Humility was not a virtue in the ancient world. (And to be honest I'm not so sure humility is really considered to be a virtue in the modern world either.) And yet humility is the foundation stone for those who want to be a disciple of Jesus.

Paul in his letter to the Philippians wrote that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Jesus "lowered himself" by coming to earth and dying for our sins and so we should humble ourselves for the sake of the gospel. We should cultivate an attitude of humility toward others. We should put the needs of others before our own needs. (Philippians 2:1-8)

Now this does not mean that we let people walk all over us. We are not a milquetoast. On the contrary humility as defined by the life of Christ requires a great deal of personal and spiritual strength. Putting the needs of others first may often mean speaking out when there is an injustice. And this can lead to significant conflict. Certainly this was true for Jesus, and Jesus quite frankly said that the same would be true for his disciples.

Humility at its heart is a willingness to humble ourselves before the call of the gospel. Just as Jesus humbled himself by coming to earth and dying for our sins and just as Paul was a prisoner for the sake of the gospel (4:1) so we are called to be forgo our wants and needs in favor of God's call.

This is a hard thing to hear.

Whenever I think about the call of God I remember the call of Moses. Moses wasn't qualified for the job that God had called him to do ... to go and demand that Pharaoh set God's people free.

Moses wasn't a good speaker. Moses wasn't a good leader. And to be honest about it, Moses was not so courageous. But, the call of God was not based upon what Moses could do. The call of God was based upon what God could do.

Moses was humbled by God's call, and I think that the same will be true for us.

The way to hear God's calling in our life is not to analyze what we do well and then try to fit those talents into some sort of plan. The way to hear God's call is to listen for a word that comes from above and beyond us.

We must be humble enough to realize that God has not chosen us for special privilege. God has chosen us for special service. And that might means living a life that is quite different from the one that we imagined for ourselves.

## GENTLENESS

The second characteristic of one who lives a "life worthy of their calling" is the trait of gentleness. Actually, that word translated "gentleness" is much more complex than the NRSV suggests. One church father translated the word, "the spirit which has the power to take revenge but which never does so." Lightfoot translates this word as "the spirit which refuses to retaliate."

Another possible meaning according to Barclay is a person who avoids extremes. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle defined virtue as the mean between two extremes. So, though we might want to avoid extreme anger, there are some situations that call for outrage. The "gentle" person is the person who tempers his or her emotions to suit the situation. The gentle person is a controlled person.

Another shade of meaning is very instructive. This word translated "gentle" could also refer to an animal who had learned to obey the reins or the command of his master. So, a gentle person is controlled by his or her heavenly Master.

We are not to be self-controlled. We are to be God controlled. A gentle person has learned to temper his or her emotions and wait upon the instruction of God. Again, this does not describe a person who is necessarily weak. It is a person who truly waits upon the Lord.

In my experience we don't want to wait upon the Lord. We have our opinion about some matter, and we want to pass judgment right away. We may try to find Bible verses to bolster the opinion we already have. But, in order to live a life worthy of our calling it is necessary for us to (as Jesus put it) judge not lest we be judged.

Leave room for God to judge in your life and in the lives of others. This is what it means to be gentle. We have been gentled by the grace of God. Since God has forgiven us so much we should be reluctant to quickly pass judgment on others.

## PATIENCE

The third characteristic of one who lives a life worthy of their calling is "patience." Patience is a word that is used in the Bible to describe God's salvation. In 2 Peter 3:15 we read, "Bear in

mind that our Lord's patience means salvation ..." In other words if God wasn't patient with us, none of us would have a chance.

The word translated patience means literally "long-tempered" (as opposed to short-tempered). C. Leslie Mitton defines this word as the ability to "deal quietly and courteously with people who are awkward, difficult and offensive."

Now that is a real challenge! How many times have people who are "awkward, difficult and offensive" made us "lose our religion?" Sometimes the most difficult people are those who continue to tear us down in little ways ... day after day. And the tendency is to explode with rage at some point and end the relationship altogether.

But, this is not helpful to us and it is very damaging to the life of the church. Paul suggests using patience in dealing with such people. He amplifies what he means with the next phrase "bearing with one another in love."

## FORBEARANCE

Forbearance is an old-fashioned word, but its one that we need to recover. We live in a world where people have no patience with even the slightest transgression. Witness the many incidences of road rage where thoughtless driving is met with deadly force!

In the church I have also seen cases of "road rage." People become so irritated at small faults that they "go to war" with each other over what seems like a small, petty matter. Churches have literally been destroyed because members have refused to show forbearance. The only way to prevent such meltdowns is to look at ourselves and the church in a very realistic way.

The Bible never paints a rose colored picture of the church and neither should we. The church is not a collection of perfect people. In the church there are people who have very annoying habits and irritating faults. And many of these people are not going to change!

So what's a church to do? Paul tells us that we can prevent the fellowship from being disrupted if we treat these people with forbearance. I think that a healthy church is a church with a good number of people who have a sense of humor. These deceptively strong people treat the difficult people with a sense of good natured tolerance.

There are several factors that help us treat others with forbearance.

First, we need to recognize that we too undoubtedly have some irritating characteristics and traits. If we are patient with others they are more likely to be patient with us.

Second, we keep in mind the greater goal, the proclamation of the gospel of grace. We cannot let that be derailed by petty problems.

And third, we are reminded that we are to “bear with one another *in love*.” Love is the key. It’s not just any love, but the unconditional love of God first shown to us in Christ Jesus.

When you read the story of Jesus and his disciples you see that they did indeed often act (to use a word that has been in the news lately) stupidly. They misunderstood and misrepresented his teachings. They argued among themselves about who would be the greatest. In some passages of Scripture we see that Jesus is clearly frustrated by his disciples’ lack of faith. (See for example, Mark 9:19)

But, Jesus loved them despite there many irritating faults and failures. He called them friends. And in his life he has given us a picture of what it means to bear with one another in love.

Given the many forces that threaten to divide us in the church what holds us together? What is the glue that keeps the Christian community together in thick and thin? What can bring us together and keep us together?

We sing a praise and worship song sometimes that gives an answer. “Bind us together Lord. Bind us together with love.” And that’s true. The love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ does bind us together.

## WORKING FOR PEACE

But, that does not mean we are absolved from any responsibility to keep the community of faith together. It’s not just about “letting go and letting God” as the saying goes. On the contrary, verse 3 in today’s lesson tells us that we should make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” When we ordain officers in the church we charge them to maintain the “peace, purity and unity of the church.”

The Greek word suggests a sense of urgency. We should spare no effort to maintain harmony and unity in the community of faith. Indeed, division in the church threatens not only our relationships with fellow Christians but also our relationship with God. If we are not united as Christians, then there are definite spiritual consequences.

We often talk about controversial subjects in the church and divide up into different camps based upon our particular viewpoints. In many cases we are unwilling to bear with each other in love. We want to maintain what we think is moral or doctrinal purity.

But, often I think we miss the larger issue. If we are not willing to bear with each other in love, if we are not willing to call a moratorium on political chicanery and dishonest dialogue in the church, we have a much bigger problem than just disagreement over a particular controversial issue. We have a spiritual problem. We have a problem that goes to the core of our faith.

What is the cure for division and disagreement? Paul suggests that instead of concentrating on those relatively minor points of disagreement we concentrate on those basics of the faith upon which we can all agree.

What do we have in common? What is most important when it comes to the life of faith?

## ONE FAITH

Verses 4-6 of our lesson for today spells it out with a series of “ones.” “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

One member of my Bible study rightly pointed out that this would be a good passage to use when preaching on the doctrine of the Trinity. You can clearly see the Trinitarian nature of this passage in the phrases one Spirit, one Lord and one God and Father of all. When we baptize we baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and this baptism forms the basis for entry into the community of faith.

One of my tasks as pastor is to teach the basics of faith to those who would want to join our church. In my confirmation class I ask, “What is most important about our faith? What must we know if we are to be baptized and received as a member in the church?”

And the answer to that question is that God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The one true God is revealed in his Son Jesus. This One God is the Creator of heaven and earth. And God’s Spirit abides with us even now.

Denominations of widely varying histories and beliefs can agree upon these basics. The Spirit of God in Christ binds us together and offers us hope not only for this life but also for the life to come.

And, according to this passage, the unity of God (which the doctrine of the Trinity seeks to preserve) should be reflected by a community of faith that is united in mission and purpose.

Paul talks about the fact that everyone in the church is given a spiritual gift by the risen Christ. (vv.7-11) But, all of those gifts are to be used for the same purpose, and that purpose is “12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 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.”

## MATURITY

The key word is maturity, and maturity is defined by Christ. If you want to know what it means to be a faithful disciple, look to the life and ministry of Jesus.

To be honest quite often we don't live up to that definition of maturity in the church. We don't forgive our enemies. We don't pray for those who persecute us. We don't care for the least and lost in society.

Instead, we are (as this passage puts it) "tossed to and fro" by every "wind of doctrine." We have become ensnared by the deceit and trickery of those who have an agenda that is at odds with the gospel.

It is hard to read today's lesson without coming under conviction. Unity in the local church and in the church universal is a hard thing to achieve. Quite often we do fall quite short of that lofty goal. But, this should not stop us from trying.

### BRINGING OUR CANDLE

I am told there was a church in England where at the end of each pew there was a tall candlestick. Each family, when it came for vespers, brought its own candle, lighted it and sat under its mellow glow during the evening service.

If a family was absent from church, its pew went unlighted, and to that extent the light of the entire church was diminished. As the candles shed their soft light across the church, the darkness was pushed back. Each family felt that his light was necessary, and so the members of the little church were faithful in attendance, always remembering to bring their candles.

Take that as a parable of what the church is called to do today. We can't do everything, but we can bring our candle. We can bring our light of peace and tolerance to this community of faith. We can do our part. And together we can bear witness to the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Incidentally, that's why we call the sacrament that we share today communion. We are indeed bound together by love.

Amen.