

AUGUST 2, 2009  
PENTECOST 10  
“CALLED & GIFTED”

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have called us in baptism to be your own special people, agents of your kingdom, and have gifted us by the power of your Spirit and equipped us with everything necessary to carry out the ministry you set before us. Make us faithful in that calling, O God, for Jesus’ sake—in whose strong and gentle name I pray.  
Amen.

Today I want us to focus our attention chiefly on the words of encouragement given us in our second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians—rich and compelling words that I think are especially suited for us all to hear at this juncture in the life of the larger church and this our .congregation

Our text begins with a kind of redundancy in which the author, who calls

himself “a prisoner in the Lord,” begs his readers “to lead a life worthy of the **calling** to which you have been **called...**” —different forms of the same Greek word that mean a “calling” from God, what we’ve come to call “vocation” —a sense of God’s purpose for our lives. A “life worthy of the calling to which you’ve been called,” Ephesians says, is a life marked by certain types of behaviors, virtues that mark the lifestyle of the “saints” as we’ll soon find the author referring to the Ephesians —and we latter-day followers of Jesus.

And these are these behaviors: “*humility and gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love*” —meaning “persistence in love” —to use an old-fashioned word being “steadfast” in love —and finally, “*making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” It sounds like a description of Jesus’ way of being in the world, doesn’t it: humility, gentleness,

patience, steadfast-ness in love—and peacefulness or peaceableness,” —or maybe better, remembering Jesus’ beatitudes, “peace-making.” The author of Ephesians reminds us that these are the marks of a life “worthy of the calling to which we’ve been called” —our baptismal calling.

But if one redundancy isn’t enough now we encounter a second in the reminder: “*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were **called** to the one hope of your **calling***, the author’s way, I’d guess, of emphasizing the centrality—the ground zero—of our baptismal calling. But here too we find ourself in the midst of another rhetorical redundancy where the phrase “**unity** of the spirit” —or “**oneness**” —is given seven—(count them!) **7** —successive instances or examples. “*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, **one** God and Father of*

*all, who is above all and through all and in all.”*

Do you get it? Do you feel the rhetorical force of all those “ones?” Do you get some sense of why Ephesians is called the Epistle of Christian unity? One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God—seven ones, the perfect number of fullness. Do you get the idea that being a Christian has something to do with oneness— with unity?

Unity is clearly God’s gift to the church and the mark of our Christian calling. But remarkably Ephesians quickly goes on, in the Spirit of both Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12 where Paul uses the image of the church as a body with many different members, to say: *“But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift,”* and goes on to begin this catalogue of different offices within the church as examples: *“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets,*

*some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 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.”*

Well, that’s a mighty dense passage, but I hope you get the clear sense of how unity is both God’s gift and the church’s task—or maybe, destiny—that “building up the body of Christ” is our calling—“body building” we might call it, which contrary to what we often assume, does not necessarily mean building up our numbers but, as the text itself goes on to say, “maturing” in faith and knowledge into the “full stature of Christ,” which it quickly goes on to explain means: *“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 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."*

I love that phrase “speaking the truth in love” which I think is a nice summary of what the Hebrew prophets we’ve been hearing from these past weeks knew their calling to be and as all of us are called to be in our baptisms—loving truth-tellers who practice honesty as a mark of our “maturity” and disavowal of “childish” behavior.

I’m sorry to say it but I can’t help but see the church’s long stalemate over homosexuality as a refusal of some folks to simply “grow up” in their faith, insisting on a way of reading the Bible that is simply childish, however sincere it may be. Just “grow up” I sometimes feel like saying—or just “get over it”, which I desperately hope our ELCA will begin to do by making some

hard but mature decisions this summer in Minneapolis—that while controversial for some within the church nonetheless, if made well and in the right spirit of truth-telling unity, give promise in the longer run of *“promotes(ing) the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”*

Unity, Ephesians makes perfectly clear, is not uniformity. It is a sense of oneness within diversity, unity that does not sacrifice truth-telling out of fear of conflict but that tells the truth in love, knowing that unity is always God’s gift as well as our destiny. Unity isn’t some kind of phony “can’t we all just get along” blandness that lives in fear of the kind of conflict that comes in the wake of truth-telling honesty. Because it is God’s gift and not our accomplishment, unity does not need to be protected like some rare hot-house flower.

And yet, our truth-telling needs always be pursued in love—with the goal of “building up the body” and not tearing it

apart. For as brother Martin never failed to emphasize, we live by a theology of the cross rather than a theology of glory—a theology of the happy face, as I call it. A theology of the cross, Luther said, “calls a thing what it really is” and faces the genuine negativity and conflict of everyday real life lived out in the midst of this world. A theology of the cross doesn’t “pretend” that everything is hunky dory and practice that cloying kind of superficial “niceness” that is the bane of so many well-meaning church folks.

“*What must we **do** to perform the works of God?*” the curious crowd who had pursued Jesus to the other side of the sea asked him in today’s Gospel reading. And do you remember Jesus’ answer? “*This is the work of God, that you **believe** in him whom he has sent*”. The Greek word translated “believe” here also means “have faith, but Martin Luther always held, it’s best translated as “**trust.**” For “trust” is not

some kind of “work” that we can decide to do by our own will or powers of decision. Trust can only be won from us by someone who has proven trustworthy—worthy of our trust—and to whom, Luther said, “our heart clings.” “This is the work of God,” Jesus said, not your work but God’s work, “to trust in the One whom God has sent”—sent, Jesus goes on, like the manna in the wilderness—the “What’s it?” as the people called the mysterious “wonder bread” that God provided and about which they so grumbled and complained, preferring their old slave food from back there in Egypt. “*For the bread of God,*” Jesus said, “*is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*”

“*The crowd*” John reports, “*said to Jesus, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’*” To which Jesus responded with resonances of the Voice that had called Moses out of the burning bush: “*I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,*

*and whoever trusts in me will never be thirsty.”*

That’s good enough for me. How about you? Come to the Lord’s banquet table.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.