**Many Gifts, One Mission**

**Text: Ephesians 4:7, 12-13**

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Our media providers like to bundle things for us. You’ve got your internet and your t.v. and your cellphones and maybe even a land line bundled together in a package, and Comcast or Verizon or whoever it is has convinced you that it’s a real bargain. Of course, when the bill comes, it still costs too much!

There’s nothing new about bundling. And sometimes it really *is* a bargain! The Letter to the Ephesians is about how God has bundled together all things in Jesus Christ: things in heaven and things on earth; and even things under the earth. Within the Church and indeed throughout the whole cosmos, God has taken all manner of divergent things and bundled them together in the unity of the Spirit. God has done this, God is doing this and God will do this. That is the affirmation and the hope of Ephesians and indeed of biblical faith. As one preacher put it, “Ephesians outlines God’s grace-filled plan for the salvation of the universe.” The grace of God, poured out to the whole universe through Jesus Christ, embraces all things and offers the hope of unity; even though we might see only division and conflict.

Last week we reflected on the way in which Jesus Christ is the Firm Foundation in which all things hold together, and the way in which we celebrate and point to this unity through the symbols and rituals of the Church. On some fundamental level I think we intuitively know that there is a unity to all things. The way that physicists talk about free-floating sub-atomic particles jumping around and banging into each other, you’d think that the cosmos would just fly apart in all directions. Yet we experience the universe as – well – the universe. The word comes from the Latin and it literally means “turned into one.” The word by definition speaks of unity. Scientists try to discover the laws and principles and processes by which all things in this divergent universe hold together. Biblical faith posits One Holy Reality who is ultimately the Ground in which all things are rooted and through which all things adhere. One Holy Reality, whom Christians see most clearly, and experience most intimately, in Jesus Christ.

But this Ground of Being – to use Paul Tillich’s way of speaking of God – this Ground of Being is shrouded in mystery. So we use symbols and rituals and stories and spiritual disciplines to point to and participate in this Holy Reality. That’s what worship and the Bible and theology and prayer are all about. And engaging in the life and work of the Church is similarly about participating in the One who binds all things together. That’s what spiritual gifts are all about. And that’s the aspect of unity within Jesus Christ that is developed in these opening verses of the 4th chapter of Ephesians. “There are many gifts, but one Body of Christ,” Paul says over and over again. Many gifts, but together they form one calling and one ministry, just as there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5).

But listen again to the peculiar way in which the author of Ephesians speaks of the gathering together of these gifts. Speaking of Christ he says, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.” And then he somehow connects spiritual gifts to Christ descending into hell, where he is traditionally understood to have rescued or recaptured those belonging to him who’ve been held captive there. Somehow spiritual gifts are connected to captivity. Really? What’s going on here?

I think the point is that the very different spiritual gifts that one finds in the Church can be a source of either captivity or liberation. We have within the Church prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. We have administrators and helpers and encouragers and healers. We have those who lead, those who follow, those who comfort and those who confront. And we know from both Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians and from our own experience that there is a temptation to think that my gift is the most important gift; anyway, it’s better than *your* gift! We’re tempted to use our gifts to compete and dominate, rather than complement and cooperate. When we do so, we hold the Church captive. If I lord my gift over yours, I’m holding the Church captive to my own ego. If I lord my ideas over yours I’m holding the Church captive to my own need to control. But Christ has made captivity itself a captive. Christ has gathered up all of these very different spiritual gifts and given them to the Church – given them to us all – so that they might work together for the common good; so that they might work together in a way that brings liberty to the Church and liberty to the world. Our gifts are meant not to captivate but to liberate! It’s not a matter of “I’ve got my gifts and I’m going to do my own thing over here and show how good and righteous and virtuous I am.” No! Christ has given you those gifts so that you can work together with folks who are *differently* gifted to show how awesome *God* is! The whole point is not to be held captive by a bunch of little egos, but to be set free by the Great Soul who is Jesus. The whole point is to be liberated ourselves, and to bring liberation to the world, by using the gifts that God has so graciously given to us and to the Church through Jesus Christ. This is the work of ministry: making common cause with others in the Church and with allies in the world in order to build-up the Kingdom and give glory to God.

It’s kind of like the way in which Helen and I use our different gifts to navigate when we’re in the car. I handle the macro stuff, and she handles the micro stuff. You see, I love to study maps, and drive, and figure out how to get from here to Montana. But I lose my bearings in shopping malls. This use to mystify Helen. She’d say, “I don’t know how you can navigate across country from memory but get lost in a parking lot!” So I do the bulk of the route planning and driving, but once we get off the highway, Helen’s in charge. I attend to the big picture, she’s better on the local level, and together our gifts are complimentary. Now she could argue with me when I claim that such and such a highway is the better way to go, and I could argue with her when she tells me where the exit to the parking lot is, but that wouldn’t do either of us any good. That would be holding each other and our vacation captive to our own egotistical need to be right. Instead, we experience the joy and freedom of getting somewhere when we use our gifts together.

So it is on the journey of faith. So it is in the life of the Church. When we use our various gifts together, we are liberating the Body of Christ to do the ministry to which it has been called. That’s when, as Paul puts it, “each part is working properly, promoting the Body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16).

But the powers and principalities want to hold us captive. What Ephesians calls the rulers and authorities; they don’t want us to use our gifts in a complimentary and liberating way. They recognize the creative power that’s set free when communities come together and pool their gifts for the common good. So when Christians fail to work together within a congregation, or when congregations fail to work together within a community, or when congregations and community organizations and local governments fail to work together in cities like Bedford, I think the Devil smiles.

But when we do work together; when we break the bonds of fear and egotism, when we stop protecting our own turf, when we seek partners and allies in the community around us; when we do all this – or, better yet, when the Spirit does this *through* us – amazing things can happen. Like when a diverse group of Christians in Bloomington – Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics – a diverse group of Christians got together and invited Wheeler Mission to come to town and address the serious problems of homelessness and addiction that have plagued that community for some years. None of those partners could’ve done on their own what they all did together.

We need to remember this as we craft our Future Story. We need to remember this as we listen to our community study teams on Tuesday night and begin to think about the new mission in this community to which God is calling us. We don’t have to do it on our own. We don’t have to re-invent the wheel. There are friends and neighbors and fellow citizens who’ve already organized around issues related to unemployment and housing and addiction and loneliness and despair. There are folks and groups and organizations out there with whom we can partner; folks and groups and organizations whose gifts will complement our own: churches and social service agencies and governments and all sorts of potential partners. The trick is being focused on common goals, not trying to claim the glory. As someone said,   
“You can get a whole lot done in this life if you don’t care who gets the credit.”

The gifts are varied; the mission is one. The gifts are many, and the Body of Christ is one. The gifts are put to good use and the work is done to the glory not of the individual or even the Church, but to the glory of God.

Let me conclude by telling you a tale of two churches. In 1980 they were both shrinking and both seeking a new mission. They both understood that their new mission involved engagement with the surrounding community. Both remembered when they had several hundred in worship each Sunday. Both had large and impressive buildings. By 1980 the one church had a Sunday attendance of 90, the other was down to 45.

So, both churches said, “We need a new mission, we’re going to get involved in our communities.” But…what the first church really wanted to do was attract new members. That was their *primary* goal, and they viewed their new mission in the community as merely a means toward that goal. The second church was *genuinely* committed to a mission in the community as a goal in its own right. The first church went out on its own and tried to promote itself in various ways. The second church looked around for partners and engaged with them in a number of projects that served the community. The first church experienced one false start after another and continued to struggle. The second church got excited about its new mission and started to thrive.

Fast forward 37 years. Both churches are still around. The first one is now down to 50 in worship and still lacking in a clear mission. The second one still has an average attendance of 45, but it’s a very *different* 45, and they are full of life and enthusiasm and they are engaged with their community in the ministry of Jesus Christ, according to the particular gifts that God has given to them and to their mission partners!

God “gave gifts to his people…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” (Eph. 4:7,12-13). We’re all bundled together in Christ’s mission. Building up the church is not necessarily about numbers. It’s not about giving ourselves the glory. It’s about the work of ministry. It’s about seeking the Kingdom. It’s about using our gifts to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus. Amen.