

Church on the Mall  
September 20, 2015  
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill  
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12  
Ephesians 4:7-16

“Building up the Body of Christ (part 2/3)”

This morning we continue our reading in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ephesians, where the author is framing for us what it means to be the church. As you may recall from last week, the letter to the church in Ephesus is not addressing a particular concern or problem, as so many of Paul’s letters to the early church do. Instead, this letter is a step back, shaping the identity and purpose of the church. And while the church has probably changed over the past 2,000 years, the world certainly has. Yet, we still have that same vision: to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in a way that is relevant and meaningful, while still maintaining the integrity and truth of the Gospel. We still have the same calling: to build up the body of Christ.

The New Testament letters often refer to the church as the body of Christ. This description points to two things – one, that Christ himself is the head of the church, the one who is always calling us to follow him and to continue his mission and ministry in the world as his disciples; and two, that we are united together as one body, rather than a disjointed scattering of separate faith groups or sects. While we clearly have human divisions among the church of Jesus Christ, the true church is one, the true church is united. This is often described as the visible and the invisible church. While the visible church seems separated by denominations and beliefs and practices, the invisible church

of Jesus Christ is wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in word or deed and wherever the kingdom of God is being revealed.

The portion of chapter 4 that we are reflecting upon this morning has a lot of talk about calling. We heard this last week, too, that we are called into the one hope of our calling. While the word, “call” or “calling” is not actually used in our reading, this entire passage revolves around the understanding from last week, that we are called. Our decision to be disciples of Jesus Christ and our decision to be brothers and sisters together as Church on the Mall is first an invitation offered to us by Jesus Christ and we are here because we answered that invitation or that call.

This concept of being called can seem very, well, religious; perhaps something that is reserved for clergy – we pastors throw the term around all the time. We are looking for a call, we are answering a call, we have been called to serve a particular church. I attended a lecture given by Rev. Dr. David Lose, president of the Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia and he discussed his research investigating the disconnect between church and the world. While we pastors are always immersed in the church, he noted the large gap that often exists between peoples’ experience of church and the rest of their lives. He shared the drawing of one church-goer who was asked to portray his experience of church and his life. On one side was life – city buildings, schools, work, a house, with a dark cloud above. On the other side was the church, with a huge, yellow, sun shining, joyful light spilling from its windows. In between was a

huge, deep gorge and the church member himself was spread across the giant gap, trying to keep contact with both sides.

God was clearly in the church – bursting from the windows and shining brightly from the sky. But the rest of the world: not so much. The challenge, Dr. Lose claimed, as clergy and as the church, is to help erase the disconnect between the church and the world; to help people see God everywhere, not just in places we can expect it. Sure, we expect to experience God in the church, but how do we see God in unexpected places throughout the week, out in the world? Sure, we feel called here in the church, but how do we translate that calling to be part of our everyday lives, out in the world?

Do you remember the story of the classical violinist who opened up his violin case and played at a busy D.C. subway station? Joshua Bell played a \$3.5 million violin at a Metro stop during morning rush hour. He played six Bach pieces for 45 minutes. And barely anyone stopped to listen for any amount of time. An estimated 1,000 people passed by on their way to work. He ended up making \$32 in tips from 20 people. Notably, the one person to stay the longest was a 3-year-old boy who was eventually hurried away by his parent. Overall, it was the children who were most interested and wanted to listen, but they were always nudged along by a rushed parent. Mr. Bell the weekend prior, played in Boston to a sold-out theater where the seats averaged \$100. But no one seemed interested in this free concert at the Metro station.

Dr. Lose recalled this social experiment, relating it to this gap between church and life; between Sunday and Monday through Saturday. Just like the light and the sun

shining only on the church in that congregant's picture, he wonders if we have lost our capacity to see God and experience God in unexpected places. Just as those people in Washington, D.C. passing by Joshua Bell who missed the beauty because it was in an unexpected place and at an unexpected time, we, too, may find it hard to see God out in the world.

One way that we work on mending the gap and shrinking that divide between church and life relates to calling. Reading passages like this one in Ephesians affirms that we each have a calling here in the church – we serve as elders, deacons, committee members; we help with coffee hour, we sing in the Ensemble, we visit our home bound members. When we hear the passage, we are most likely thinking of gifts we have been given to serve the church. But we also have a calling out in the world; each one of us. Your calling is here in the church, and your calling is out in the world.

We each have been given different gifts that enable us to answer our unique calling in a way that will make that response successful. Christ does not call us to do something we are incapable of doing. We are given the gifts and the resources to live into that one hope of our calling. Our variety of gifts allows us to contribute to the one body of Christ: some of us being the heart, others being the hands, others the feet; some the ears, some the eyes. We each have been given gifts to do our part, so we can work together as a unified body: both as the gathered disciples here in this congregation, and as the scattered church, out in the world working to build up God's kingdom.

There's a great scene in my favorite Christmas movie, *Elf* that speaks to this diversity of gifts. Buddy the Elf, played by Will Farrell, is a human growing up in a elfin world, but he thinks he's a normal elf like everyone else. As a human, he struggles to make toys as quickly or accurately as the other more efficient elves. In one scene his elf supervisor is asking about his Etch-A-Sketch production that day. After his shockingly low number of completed toys, he gets upset about his lack of talent. "Why don't you just say it?" he says, "I'm the worst toy maker in the world. I'm a cotton-headed ninny-muggins." "No, buddy, you're not cotton-headed ninny-muggins," his supervisor elf says, "We all just have different talents that's all." Elf responds, "Seems like everyone else has the same talents except for me."

Unfortunately, many Christians may feel the same way. Perhaps we are not that sure of our faith and evangelizing is too hard and we're just not that good at it. Perhaps we are really busy at home and can't contribute the way we wish we could to the ministry and mission going on here at church. Or maybe we don't feel we have the skills to be a leader and serve on session; or we're too shy or introverted to be on the board of Deacons, visiting and calling those who are homebound or ill. We may feel like Buddy – that there's a disconnect between our gifts and the gifts that are really used to build up the body of Christ.

But all of these examples are just ways that the body of Christ is built up here; they are ways that we answer our calling here in the church. We also answer our divine calling out there in the world. Dr. Lose posed this question to us pastors – imagine if

we commissioned people for their calling out in the world the same way we commission them here in the church? We bless and pray over our elders as they volunteer to serve on our session. We commission deacons to serve the needs of the congregation. But how about everyday teachers, out in the world guiding the next generation? Why not bless and commission them, too, in September? Or come March and April, how about commissioning the CPA's challenged to work out our taxes so our society runs smoothly. Maybe in the spring we should be blessing our nurses and doctors, our social workers and psychologists who are an extension of Christ's healing ministry to a sick and struggling world?

We get the concept of call here in the church. We are called to be pastors, deacons, and elders. We have been given gifts of teaching, preaching, sharing our faith with others in order to build up the body of Christ. We have also been given gifts of nurture, and care for our children and grandchildren. We have been given the gift of cooking, providing nourishment for our loved ones. We have been given the gift of business acumen and run companies with integrity, providing needed services, as well as jobs for others to support their families. We have been given the gift of math and numbers, working for banks that help people with their finances. We have been given gifts of ingenuity and creative problem solving, working for pharmaceutical companies that strive to help people heal and live better, healthier lives.

Our calling as Christians takes place both here in church, and out in the world. God uses us to build up this place, this congregation, and God uses us to build up the

body of Christ out in the world. We have been given gifts to build up the body of Christ, not just one day a week, but every day of the week. When we feed hungry people (even when they are our own family members), when we teach younger children (even when that means reading a bedtime story to our grandchildren), when we use our intellect to solve problems (even when those problems are taking place at profitable corporations): we are using our gifts for the building up of the body of Christ! We are living into the one hope of our calling!

So what is our calling? How do we discern what it is that God wants us to do here in this place and out in the world? We all know the children's sermon with someone hidden, calling the pastor, who tells the children it's God quite literally calling on the other end. Or perhaps we read the Bible where hearing God's direction seemed, well, simpler and easier to discern and discover. Our calling as a church seems pretty clear: to continue the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. We can decide how that exactly looks in our context, but at least we have a start. Our personal calling is a bit trickier. The author of Ephesians warns us in verse 14, "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind and doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming."

When we are together, engaged with one another as the body of Christ, we help one another in this process of discernment of discovery of what God is calling us to do both within the church and beyond the church. As we read Scripture, as we spend time in worship, as we pray, as we think about what brings us joy, we discover where it is

that God is calling us: as brothers and sisters in Christ, we help one another figure out how God needs them in the world. We point to one another's gifts and talents and abilities. We encourage one another to look at the places and situations that bring them joy and see how God may be using them there. When we "speak the truth in love" to one another, we are able to point out one another's gifts and find ways to use those gifts. Theologian Frederick Buechner claims that our calling is where our greatest joy meets the world's deepest need. As a church family, we are able to help one another see where it is God needs our particular abilities and talents out in the world.

Our Nominating Committee may call you and say – you have a lot of energy for the church, or, you are a natural leader, or, you have a lot of interest in worship – would you consider being one of our session elders? Or you may see someone approaching you with a clipboard and reminding you of that great casserole you can bake or the homemade coleslaw... Or perhaps you are thinking of changing jobs or are underemployed and a church friend asks you about a special passion of yours and encourages you to find ways to use that gift in the world. One of the blessings of being part of a church community is that we help one another see the gifts we have been given. And we help one another find ways to use those gifts, whether it is building up the body of Christ here in the church or in our day jobs.

While we all agree that we would like to have more Christians join us in here as part of our body of Christ, the place we really need more Christians is out there. If our faith and devotion to God and our commitment to following Jesus Christ is limited to

this church and this place, we are missing a great opportunity to be the body of Christ out in the world. From being a faithful friend, to showing your grandchildren love and belonging, to working in the healthcare field, to cleaning houses, to cooking dinner for your family: our calling takes place throughout the week.

We have each been given gifts; not all the same gifts, but each one of our gifts is important and crucial to the body of Christ. We cannot function alone; we need one another, unified, as one body, living into the one hope of our calling. May we as brothers and sisters in Christ help one another discern and discover the gifts and talents with which God has blessed us for the building up of the body of Christ both in the church and in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen!