

Sermon Reading: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

Sermon Theme: United We Build

It was a cold day in January 1961 at the height of the Cold War with the accelerating arms race and threat of nuclear war at the time, when John F. Kennedy gave his inaugural address. With it he challenged the American people with his now famous line, “*Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.*” In a way he was putting the power and responsibility of the welfare of the nation in the hands of the American citizen. His challenge was that each individual contribute in some shape or form to the public good.

What if that same type of focus was shared by everyone in the church; that being, it’s not about how I am served, but how I can serve? Instead it seems we see the opposite: “I don’t get anything out of the service. My church doesn’t do anything for me; doesn’t have the programs that I’m looking for. My church doesn’t have the right age groups—not enough families, not enough kids. This person did this thing that hurt me and so I don’t want to go anymore. My church doesn’t care about me. My church doesn’t serve what I need.” Ouch. While I have heard this said about other churches, it’s not just them. In some shape or form I have had heard each of these said about our church, Zion Lutheran. Ouch.

If this were a regular place of business, you can’t really blame someone who has those feelings for not wanting to come. If this were a regular business, it makes sense: you don’t feel your needs being served, you aren’t getting what you want out of it, so of course go somewhere else. But the thing is, church isn’t a regular place of business. It’s not only about you being served. Yes, that is definitely part of it. But reading and hearing these words from Ephesians 4 and then to borrow and change a little bit from what JFK had to say, I challenge you, “Ask not what your church can do for you, ask what you can do for your church.” And by church I’m not talking necessarily about this brick and mortar building. It’s more like the picture in the back of the sanctuary: the individual people who make up Zion Lutheran, what can you do for them?

Paul encourages us to **live a life worthy of the calling you have received.** Why? Think of your calling. Out of love for you, God called you out of the darkness of sin and unbelief, saved you from certain damnation and eternity in hell, he has freed you from the chains of the devil, you who were dead and made alive by him, declared you to be his own child who has heaven as your own. And so how you live should reflect what you are.

To do this we are to make every effort and strive **to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace** (v.3). Paul even gives you a how-to-do this: **Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.** Be humble means to lower yourself. Don’t look to put yourself ahead of others, but be humble, putting other’s needs and wants first. Be the gentle person who is slow to insist their own rights. Be patient—bear up when things don’t go your way. Have your emotions and your actions in check. Bear with one another: put up with each other’s quirks, things they do or say that might rub you the wrong way. Don’t ignore or

condone sinful, wrong actions but also understand that no one is perfect. We are a group of sinners who do and say things that hurt each other; be patient as God is patient with you and quick to forgive as God forgives you. And when we are humble, gentle, patient and bearing, this leads to peace and from the peace there is unity.

Sounds great, when it works. All too often we see the opposite and feel the trouble that comes with it. Instead of being humble, we seem to put ourselves, our needs, our wants before so much else. Instead of being gentle, we harshly put others down and complain behind people's backs when things aren't being done the way we want. We drag names and actions through the mud as we speak poorly and complain about them. Instead of being patient, that personal pride is so easily injured, offended, and we get upset. Instead of bearing with one another, we get fed up and tired of dealing with it all.

Why? We can come up with all types of excuses and reasons. But pushing those aside the root problem is that we do not love as Jesus has loved us. Instead of forgiving we hold against. Instead of selflessly serving we have loaded expectations and demands. I too easily down-play my own sinful actions and attitude while taking personal offense when someone has said or done something against me. There should be little to no surprise when there is disunity, division, and lack of peace when we individually do not love as Jesus loved us.

So Paul reminds you and me: You have been called **to one body and one Spirit**. You might say, we are fighting for the same team. **You were called to the same hope**: the hope that all you have done wrong has been really forgiven; the hope that your time on this earth isn't all there is: Jesus won it for you on the cross and guaranteed that it is yours with his resurrection. **There is one Lord**, we share the same faith that is rooted, trusts, and believes in one God. **We have been baptized with the same water and the Word**, we have One God and Father. We are united in all these things; therefore, make every effort, strive to keep that unity in faith and teaching so there are no divisions but instead peace and unity.

Understand also that this doesn't mean we ignore when there is division, when there is difference in teaching. God's Word tells us to keep away from those who cause divisions because it keeps his people from being united with each other and with him.

But when we are united, we build. And in order to build v.7 says that **"to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it."**

This grace in verse 7 is not talking about saving grace because that is given fully to every believer. Rather, Paul is talking about different gifts which Jesus graciously gives out to his people. For example, Paul explains how Jesus gave some the gifts to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. These are just a few examples of how God gives some the gift to be public servants for his church. We see good examples of that today where we are installing two new teachers who have been given the gifts to teach and to lead. We are installing a director for our preschool who has been led to want to see where her gifts might be used in

another way. Their gifts, talents, abilities may very well be different from the teachers that we have had in the past; and that's okay. Because in his perfect wisdom God has given them to this group of Christians in Valentine, NE. It's not a competition because he gives them ultimately for the same reason, and that is in v.12 **to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up**

Yes, God gives the public servants, called workers, to equip the saints, his people. But it's not just them who have been given gifts and the responsibility to serve. Each individual who has been called by God, every believer, each of us it says in v.7, has the responsibility to serve God. From the baby who has been recently baptized to the oldest individual; each one does something so that the body of Christ might be built up. Obviously at different points in your life you are able and capable of doing different things. Obviously there are things that one person is able to do well that you cannot. But God promises that to each of his people he has given a gift for works of service so the body of Christ may be built up. Ask not what your church can do for you, ask what you can do for your church.

But when was the last time you did that? I think sometimes the thought is unless you are in Ladies Aid or serving on the church council, there's nothing you can do or even need to do to serve in the church. "Just let me sit here and let me be; isn't that good enough?" one might feel. But think about the talents you have, the time that is yours, the money that is in your bank account; those are all gifts you can use in some way to serve God and his people. Are you using them to build up the body of Christ first, to serve God first? Or, are you building your own body and life up first? All too easily we wait to see how well the year is going to work out, how blessed you will be at the end, how much time you will have left over, and then God gets his share. Are you ignoring that God demands the best, first? Are you struggling to trust his promise that when we do he will give you even more later? When was the last time you sat down and seriously, thoughtfully considered how much you put in the offering plate, how you could use your gifts and abilities? Is what you give in accordance with your income and careful budgeting? Or, is it what you always gave or whatever's in your pocket at the time? No one but you and God know the answer to those questions and they are good questions to ask your entire life. But don't try and lie to yourself, God knows whether or not you are being faithful with the gifts he has given to you.

Some of this may have made you uncomfortable. Some of it you are pushing against. But take a good long look at yourself, your motivation, and attitude. You know how you haven't always been perfect, so repent with me. While we are on this earth, we continue to struggle with sin and each day we want to repent of how we have not made every effort to strive for unity and peace but instead were selfish and self-serving.

And then, with me, grow in the peace of that forgiveness. As God's people, you individually have a role to play and it's an important role where if you do not carry it out everyone suffers. It

shows you how thoroughly and completely God has forgiven your sins. When someone fails us, we don't quickly trust them to help again—they broke that trust. But, that's not what God sees when he looks at you. The word for "people" in v. 12 in the original language is "holy ones." This is what God sees you as: holy and without sin because with that baptism we share we put on the perfect robes of Jesus who came and served perfectly where you and I have failed. He faithfully and perfectly used his gifts to serve God and his neighbor, humbly, gently, patiently putting up with sinful people. He did all this so that when he died on that cross he would pay for all your sin. Having been raised from the dead you have peace with God and are united to him. You are declared his holy people who God now calls to work for him. He gives you a role to serve and then, through Jesus, he gives you the gifts you need to carry out that role.

This serving doesn't come from you digging deep and tapping into some hidden will-power. It doesn't come from you. It's in Christ alone. He works in your heart through his Word so that you have and grow in his love. And as we grow in his love, we grow in our love to serve. Using your gifts faithfully doesn't come from trying harder. It's a result of you growing in Jesus' Word and his forgiveness so we are not infants, but united with each other and Christ we fend off the schemes and temptations of the devil, this world, and our sinful natures. Whatever it is, whatever gifts God has given, he wanted you to have so that we would be united and he works through you to build the body of Christ. And so, ask not what your church can do for you. Ask what you can do for your church. Amen.