

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

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

⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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. ¹⁴We 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. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from 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.

Pastor and Teacher

A sermon preached at First Church in Malden on the occasion of the installation of Rebecca (Reebee) Kavich

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Text: *Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16*

What a celebration of the life of the church the Letter to the Ephesians is. Most of Paul's actual letters are addressed to particular problems that particular churches are experiencing. They often have an argumentative and defensive tone. Apollos is trying to steal Paul's followers in Corinth. Paul has to defend himself against the Jerusalem Christians in Galatians. And in First Thessalonians the outside pressures on the church were causing members to think about leaving the faith.

But Ephesians is different. If scholars are right, Ephesians was written later and probably not by Paul himself, but by his successors. Indeed, there is evidence that Ephesians was a circulating letter. That is, it wasn't written to specific church about specific problems, but was instead written for the churches in general, and the letter was circulated among them to offer wisdom and instruction. Therefore, its advice is more general, less problem oriented and more celebratory than the more occasioned letters of Paul.

In this afternoon's passage Ephesians gives us a beautiful and layered notion of what the church is called to be. Relying on metaphors from Paul's own letters, Ephesians thinks of the church community as the body of Christ. Ephesians urges the church to live up to its calling, which is to be a well ordered, harmonious organism, a body functioning with the coordination of a fine athlete. Ephesians calls on the church to demonstrate humility and gentleness, love and unity, things that would make the body run like a top.

As anyone who has any experience in the church knows, even now after nearly 2000 years of trying to get it right, the task Ephesians sets before us is elusive. Humility, gentleness, love and unity are our goals, but in every church I know they remain a strived for reality. They aren't as simple as they sound to realize. Indeed, simple versions of them are apt to be disingenuous and dangerous. For humility, gentleness, love and unity to be more than veneer, more than a thin pretty layer that covers over a lesser kind of wood, for humility, gentleness, love and unity to be the kind of thing Ephesians aims us toward, it requires more than sentimental affection, and it requires more than simplistic concurrence.

That said, Ephesians seems to start its theological argument simply enough. If the body is to function well, all parts of it have to be respected and understood to be essential. It would be a mess if the whole body were one big eye or one big brain. Fingers, toes and the like are all important. If you've ever had your finger slammed in a door or stubbed your toe, you know how important it is to your comfort and well-being to have even these extremities working properly. So far, so good. All members of the body are important and are to be respected. Not much to argue with here.

Ephesians, like Paul, then goes on, nonetheless, to pay special attention to certain gifts or roles within the life of the church. Our passage today focuses on these: The gifts that he [Christ]

gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. Ephesians is very clear that every part of the body of Christ is essential to the whole of it. Nonetheless, in one way or another these positions on which Ephesians focuses are all leadership positions in the church. Is there any good reason to set leaders apart? Is Ephesians playing fast and loose with equality? Is this the church's version of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, where some pigs are more equal than others? It's a fair question. And today, since we are installing a leader in the church, we have some obligation to answer it.

Some of you will know that the Congregational Church, one of the antecedents of the United Church of Christ, delineated the form, organization and theology of the church called Congregationalism in the famous Cambridge Platform of 1648. This august document of our heritage lists these very positions mentioned in Ephesians – apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers – in its chapter entitled, “Of the Officers of the Church, especially of Pastors & Teachers.” Today in the UCC in we continue to use this language for ordained positions. We may refer to them as ministers, but officially, we call and install pastors and teachers. We are heirs to a grand tradition. And we turn to that tradition today as we install The Rev. Rebecca Kavich here at the First Church in Malden as one of its Pastors and Teachers. Today, then, like Ephesians and like Paul were, we are particularly concerned about the leadership of the church.

And so the question presses in on us. How do we understand leadership in the church, and how do we understand its relation to other members in the body of the church? The question presses in on us today, and to be truthful it is a question in the foreground whenever questions of ordained ministry are on the table. Any of you who has sat before the Committee on the Ministry, that formidable body that decides, among other things, who can be ordained ministers and who cannot, any of you who has sat before the Committee on the Ministry knows that this question is always on the tongue of the examiners. In a cheery voice that hardly betrays the complexity of the question a member of the committee will inevitably ask, “Well, since we are all members of the body of Christ, and since we believe in a priesthood of all believers, why do you need to be ordained to do ministry? Doesn't everyone in the church do ministry?” As a hint, at that point the committee is looking for an answer more weighty than that's how you become eligible for the Pension Board. But what is the Committee looking for? I will not be so cavalier as to speak for the Committee, but I do think this section of Ephesians we are considering today may be of some help to ministry candidates, and I hope it is some help in understanding in what we are engaged here today.

Ephesians, like Paul before it, is bold to acknowledge that the church is less than perfect. Paul, you may recall, was sometimes patient about that fact. He said, “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.” (1 Cor. 3:2) But Paul is always aiming the church toward solid food, and Ephesians is doing the same. It says we must no longer be children. We must grow up into Christ. And it says that the leaders of the church, the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers have a special role in equipping the saints, equipping the members, to come “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” The Cambridge Platform describes a similar role. It says that pastors and teachers are to administer wisdom and knowledge for the perfecting of the saints.

In an era when we bristle at any idea that would lower our self-esteem, it is unpopular to suggest that we may be childish or immature in our faith. And yet, of course we are, at least to some extent. And Ephesians points us to some of the reasons it is so difficult not to be childish

and immature in our faith, even as it exhorts us to grow: “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.” Though I might want to say it a little more gently, Ephesians here identifies two poles that ultimately serve the same master and both of which ultimately serve to keep human beings immature in their faith and in their theology.

The great theologian Paul Tillich (Now, I realize that for those of you who were at the First Church in Somerville for last week’s installation in that church, this will be the second time in eight days that Paul Tillich’s name has been invoked, which by my lights may be something of a record.) In any case, the great theologian Paul Tillich understood that there are two very common, but very bad ways of doing theology. They are common, because they are relatively easier. They are bad because they keep us on warm milk, not solid food.

Paul Tillich claimed that true theology walked the ground between what he called kerygmatic theology and apologetic theology. Roughly, he characterized the former as the uncritical application of supposed eternal religious truth to the current situation, and the latter as the uncritical identification of current societal norms with eternal truth. Tillich understood the un-tenability of both poles and opted instead for what he called “the method of correlation,” which put the questions of the day and the Christian message¹ into interdependent conversation. Tillich said that kerygmatic theology understood eternal truth to be obvious and unambiguously available in the Christian message. Kerygmatic theology, he said, simply spouted answers, unrelated to the questions being asked, indeed, often hostile toward the questions of contemporary society. Tillich argued that true theology should, in contrast, find within the Christian message truths that inform and converse with the questions of the day. But he took the questions of the day as just that, questions, which also were illegitimately decided by the simple application of current opinion. In the interdependent conversation Tillich envisioned it becomes obvious that whatever truths the Christian message contains, its tradition and scripture bear the marks of their own historical situation, and thus separating eternal truth from contemporary non-eternal norms and influences is as much an historical project as a current one. Simply said, proof texting from the Bible is bad theology. Tillich understood that our ultimate concern was the point and that kerygmatic theology missed it as easily as apologetic. Tillich’s process would call us, through this conversation between the questions of the day and the Christian message, to find relevant truths that depend, as much as is possible to know it, on eternal or ultimate truth, not on its more shallow prestenders.

At the end of the day kerygmatic and apologetic theology both allow us to believe what we want to believe, and very often to maintain things the way they are. The former simply grabs convenient doctrines or Biblical passages out of the air, and calls them the immutable will of God. The latter, looking quite different on the surface, simply assumes that the wisdom of the day is the wisdom of God. Ephesians identifies similar theological poles. It says we must not be “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine.” I like the image – wind of

¹While Tillich himself insisted on the supremacy of the Christian message (at least until late in his life), his “method of correlation” does not depend on that supremacy. However, for the sake of not putting words in Tillich’s mouth, I use his language when referring to his argument.

doctrine – where we grab whatever doctrine or Biblical verse that suits us as it blows by and call it eternal. On the other hand, Ephesians also says we must not be tossed to and fro and blown about by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. That is, we must not be thrown off course by the maneuvering of the day, especially thrown off course when the maneuvering claims to be done to protect God’s will, when it is, in truth, done to protect what people want to believe.

One does not have to look very far today to find both bad kinds of theology, and both employed in the service of maintaining things the way they are. Think of the angry religious rhetoric at the State House these recent days. How much of it begins with an understandable discomfort with our changing times, but then goes on to clothe that discomfort in shallow theological objections? The discomfort caused by the questions of the day is indeed understandable. Change in such basic areas as human sexuality is not easy. But what an opportunity it is to do good theology, to genuinely and honestly put the questions into conversation with the Christian message to discern what a proper theology might offer the debate. Instead, what we find are angry slogans born out of fear rather than faith. How much more genuinely theological would it be to honestly place the questions of the day, even our discomforts with the questions of the day, into conversation with the Christian message. The risk and the problem, of course, is that our Christian faith often asks us to face our discomforts and to change our minds. It was one of the things that made Jesus so unpopular among those wanted to keep things the way they were.

In a real sense, one called to be a pastor and teacher is called to help a congregation to do good theology. And that is rightly a leadership role within the church. By that I do not mean it is a role of lording oneself over the congregation. But it is a leadership role on two important counts. To lead a congregation in doing good theology requires theological education on the part of the pastor and teacher. It’s not that the pastor and teacher is smarter than everyone else, but it is acknowledge that the pastor and teacher bears a special responsibility for guiding the conversation toward correlation of which Tillich talks. A good theological education is required both for the content and the form of the process. And that leads directly to the second reason why pastor and teacher is a role of leadership in the congregation. At the end of the day, what the pastor and teacher thinks or wishes for has far less importance than does the theology it has helped the congregation to do. That is, being pastor and teacher is not about the pastor and teacher; it is about the congregation. I like to tell my students, remember, it’s not about you. Ephesians says that the pastor and teacher is to equip the saints for the work of ministry by speaking the truth in love. That’s not as simple as it sounds. And it’s not what often passes for speaking the truth in love. To bully the saints either with the winds of one’s favorite doctrine or with one’s personal creeds is not to speak the truth in love. In the final analysis, as pastor and teacher, the work is not about you. It is about whatever promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love. That is, the work of pastor and teacher is about building up the body of Christ to maturity, building it up so that it is able to handle solid food, building it up as Ephesians boldly says, so that it has grown into Christ. It is for these reasons and but few others that one is called to ministry. And it is for these reasons and but few others that both the pastor and teacher

and the congregation exist. Amen.

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