



Live a Life Worthy of Your Calling
Ephesians 4:1-16

4th in the summer sermon series on Ephesians

Sunday, August 5th, 2018 ~ 11th Sunday after Pentecost

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

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In Seward, Alaska on the 4th of July there is an event called the “Mount Marathon Race”. “Outside Magazine” bills it as “the toughest 5K on the planet”. Beginning on Main Street participants run along the base of Mt. Marathon before charging up 34% incline of loose rock and shale. At the 2,685 foot summit they run and slide back down to the finish line. All first time runners must run the course before race day AND attend a safety meeting. At the safety meeting runners are encouraged to wear helmets, gloves, goggles, knee and elbow pads. If injured, participants are responsible for getting themselves down from the mountain as there is no first aid station at the summit. Needless to say, the race is not for the faint of heart as runners cross the finish line scraped, bloodied and bruised.

The Rev. Mihee Kim-Kort wrote of a similar trail run, called “Dance with Dirt”. Slipping and sliding, getting banged up and cut, even lost from time to time as they tried to follow the little white flags that marked the trail she said that at times they felt like scattered sheep. In the midst of their misery and lostness there also developed a bond of fellowship as they began to introduce themselves to one another.

“I’m Mihee”, I’m Abby.” “I’m Heather.” and so on. They were a band of sisters and brothers trying to find their way.

Thinking back she reminisced, “I can’t remember the last time I had so much fun. ... We’re cheering each other, waiting for each other, (and) struggling along the path together. (In the midst of this), I’m thinking, “Why isn’t church more like this?”

That’s a good question.

I remember a small businessman in one of our first parishes who got caught up in the farm crisis of the early 1980s. Dean was active in the church and the Clerk of Session, the highest lay office in that denomination. A quiet Emerson cigar smoking man, he owned a feed store in the small town of 350 convinced several of the neighboring farmers to be co-investors in a grain elevator. Now some of you know the volatility inherent in agriculture, especially grain elevators. To make a long story short, the elevator failed and all of the investors lost their investment.

Dean quit coming to church in the face of the financial failure. When Sue and I visited him he said that he just couldn’t face his friends, his fellow church members because he was ashamed, embarrassed, and in his words, a failure.

Too often church members are quite judgmental. It's a shame that too often we in the church forget that the church is not a sanctuary for saints but a hospital for sinners. None of us come to church because we are worthy, but because we recognize our own brokenness. Jesus even told a parable about this.

PARABLE OF SAINT AND SINNER (Luke 18:10-14)

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In the letter to the Ephesians the writer says, As a prisoner of the Lord, I urge you to live a life worthy of your call. Be completely humble and gentle; bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

In other words, to live out your baptism!

Let's break this down and begin with humility.

At the time of Jesus humility was not a virtue. It was a weakness, something to be despised. As is so often the case, Christians took that which was despised by the world and turned it into a virtue. Christian humility is born of self-knowledge. In the words of St. Bernard, humility is the virtue “by which an individual becomes conscious of their own unworthiness”. As we saw in the sacrament of baptism we are made worthy not by works but by grace. To come face to face with our own shortcomings is humbling.

At my father's funeral I was given one of my life's greatest gifts. As many of you know, my mother died only a few days earlier. In preparing for her funeral their minister spent an afternoon with my father as they reflected upon her life as well as my growing up years. Except in very few cases, ministers only get to know a chapter or two of a person's life.

Anyway, in the course of the conversation my father must have told the minister that while I was never a very good athlete, I did have one shining athletic moment. As the minister told that story at the double funeral I was at first hurt but then I had an epiphany. My dad was right; I really wasn't a very good athlete. But I also realized something else; more often than not, our mothers see who we could be while our fathers see us as we are. In other words, as in the words of the Berenstain Bears, we aren't “such a much”.

William Barclay once observed that most of us dramatize ourselves. “Somewhere,” he wrote, “there is a story of a man who before falling asleep at night would dream his waking dreams”. Like a Walter Mitty he imagines himself as the hero of some thrilling rescue from the sea or from flames; as an orator holding a vast audience spellbound; or being able to dazzle a crowd with his athletic prowess.

True humility, though, sees our pettiness, our weaknesses, our selfishness, and our failures. True humility is achieved when we no longer make excuses for our thoughts, words and actions.

Gentleness comes from the Greek word translated as “trained” or “domesticated”. It is a description of someone whose passions and instincts are under control.

When Jesus said that if you have two coats and see a person who doesn't have a coat that you should give that person one of your coats, he was telling us to defeat the urge to be selfish.

When he said that we should turn the other cheek he was challenging us to give up our right to revenge.

When he said that we should walk the second mile, he was challenging those who take him seriously to not get sidetracked with issues of fairness.

Taken together all of this means that his disciples are to be “God controlled” rather than peer controlled or controlled by our insecurities. This is the true sign of spiritual maturity.

The element is Christ like love. This love is not based upon feelings or passions but upon will. It is unconquerable and benevolent. It means that there is nothing that anyone can do to us that will make us seek anything but that person's highest good. Though injured and insulted we do not resort to reciprocal behavior. Rather, we respond with kindness and respect. This love refuses to act on bitterness but rather upon the highest good.

In a society where the “self” predominates and insults are becoming increasingly accepted as acceptable, people cannot move beyond destructive individualism and selfishness. As Christians - followers of the risen Lord - we are called to illuminate a different path, a different way.

I go back to the original question; why can't the Church be more like the supportive camaraderie of the Mt. Marathon Race?

As we prepare to come to the Table of the Lord, I conclude with these words from the great epistle. As a prisoner of the Lord, I urge -- I beg -- you to live a life worthy of your call -- of your baptism. Be completely humble and gentle; bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.