

“Worthy of One” GPPC 10-2-16
Psalm 133, Ephesians 4:1-6

When we’re making a case for something, there are, of course, different ways to try to convince people. We can use threats. “If you don’t do what I’m suggesting, then this terrible thing will happen to you.” Or we can try to flatter people. “Because you are so smart and good-looking, I know you’re going to want to do what I’m telling you.” We can even try reason. “We’ve done a return-on-investment study on this project, and you’re really going to want to participate.” There are all sorts of ways to try to convince people, aren’t there? You could even ask them questions, couldn’t you?

Scholars say the writer of the letter to the Ephesians was probably a student or follower of the Apostle Paul. And here in the fourth chapter of the letter he is trying to convince the church at Ephesus, and the church at Guilford Park Presbyterian, and the Church in every time and place about something important. So he uses a variety of strategies to make his argument.

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He begins, “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord.” So we imagine the writer shackled into some dark, cold, damp subterranean prison cell. Lice crawl around his bedding and into his hair. Rats scurry over his feet when he tries to sleep. He waits for the jailer to bring a drink of water for his parched throat and a crust of bread for his growling belly. And he is in this predicament purely because he has been faithful to Christ, a “prisoner in the Lord.”

Don't we just hate this image? We're all ready to blow off personal prayer and Bible study, and there's this man in the prison cell. We're all set to skip worship, because, after all, it's inconvenient and we're busy and it's our only time to relax and be with family, and the sermons are sometimes irritating, and there's this man in the prison cell with lice and rats. And don't we just hate it? Trying to make us feel guilty. We didn't ask him to go and get arrested. But then again, we suppose he does have a point. Jesus did say to each of us, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

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And the writer does have some street cred, doesn't he? So we'll listen a little, but we really don't appreciate the guilt trip, thank you very much.

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, *beg* you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you've been called.” Okay. So not only is this writer a “prisoner in the Lord,” but he is *begging* us. He's begging us to lead a life worthy of our calling. He's begging us to live up to our calling not merely as human beings but our calling as Christians, people who follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

In a book he wrote a few years ago, seminary professor David Bartlett said, “I was watching one of the innumerable television programs that put commentators of quite different political viewpoints around a table and then invite them to yell at each other for half an hour or so. In this case the commentators were Mark Shields and Robert Novak, who have been yelling at each other in such contexts for many years. I forget the precise topic, but I know that at one point Novak said something to the effect that the poor people of Appalachia were poor because they were losers and had neither the ability nor the ambition to make it in our great American competitive society. Shields stopped him

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in midsentence with a very Pauline phrase: ‘Stop that. You’re a better person than that.’ [As Bartlett concludes] Paul is always telling his fellow converts that they are better persons than they think they are.”

(David L. Bartlett, *What’s Good about This News?: Preaching from the Gospels and Galatians*, 20.)

Paul’s student, the writer of Ephesians says, I “beg you to lead a life *worthy* of the calling to which you have been called.” Live as the better people you actually are. Live as the people you were called to be.

“Sounds good,” we say. “Can you be more specific?”

“Yes,” he answers. Live “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love...”

With all humility. I apologize in advance, because I may have told you the following story before; I can’t remember. If so, I’m hoping you’ve forgotten too.

A number of years ago, I attended a national preaching conference in Atlanta. About a thousand preachers gathered to share worship, hear beautiful music, and, of course, listen to great preaching. The conference was particularly special that year because it was in honor of Professor

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Barbara Brown Taylor and South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu (who is also a Nobel Laureate). One evening a couple of the weekly music worship leaders gave a concert. And before the main performer sang, a lesser known singer (who was still excellent) was the opening act. She was a young woman, probably in her late twenties or early thirties, gorgeous and a terrifically gifted musician. She sang a couple of tunes and we clapped. Then, out of the blue, she pointed to several empty chairs on the front row and with a touch of bitterness she said to us, “So, where is Desmond Tutu? We saved these seats for his people and for him.” That’s when we heard a few quiet voices from the back of room say, “Oh, he’s here. He’s sitting in the back.” Rather than accept the honor of front row seats, Tutu had sat in the back.

With all humility. To be humble is not to be a doormat who never speaks up for truth (Heavens knows, Desmond Tutu has spent a lifetime speaking up for truth!), but it is to remember we are all equals. Each of us was created by God “from the dust” as Genesis puts it and “to dust we shall return.” Certainly some people are more faithful and successful and

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brave than others. But we are all still children of God who ought to be humble before God and before each other. With all humility.

And with gentleness and patience.

A character in one of Rebecca Wells' novels is dealing with exasperating family relationships frustrating enough to make a saint consider calling in a tactical missile strike. But then in an instant she sees truth and thinks to herself, "I have been missing the point. The point is not knowing another person, or learning to love another person. The point is simply this: how tender can we bear to be? What good manners can we show as we welcome ourselves and others into our hearts?"

(Rebecca Wells, *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*.)

How tender can we bear to be? What good manners can we show each other?

As we relate to each other as the people of God, how gentle can we be with each other? Surely we will not ignore each other or snub each other or avoid each other. Definitely we will not gripe or gossip about each other. Instead, we will reach out to each other and when our feelings are hurt (which will happen to most of us eventually) we will

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Speak directly to each other, work things out, and forgive each other.

How much can we listen to each other and show respect for each other?

In a world where people quickly end relationships over small disagreements, can we even be a witness for people outside the church walls as we live in ways that are worthy of our calling? Of course, we can.

And with patience. The Greek word for patience means to have forbearance with each other, to have the endurance to put up with each other, to bear up under provocation.

Barbara Brown Taylor served as an Episcopal priest at Grace-Calvary Episcopal Church in the country outside Atlanta before she became a professor. She says, “In a big city they might have found homes in five markedly different parishes, but in a county with only one Episcopal church they learned to live together—the Yellow Dog Democrats, the National Rifle Association boosters, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the League of Women Voters. Once, when I asked a newcomer what had brought him to Grace-Calvary, he shook his head, ‘I know people who come to this church,’ he said, ‘and I finally

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had to come see for myself how they got through a Sunday morning without assaulting each other.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 66.)

With patience.

So we expect people in the church to have different opinions and even sometimes to have vigorous debate. But patience means putting up with each other, especially when we disagree. And it does not mean a false peace created by insisting that some people are allowed to express their views, but others are not because somebody might disagree.

A number of years ago, Christian psychiatrist Scott Peck said, “After visiting the United Nations Meditation Room, which is unfinished so that offense is given to none of the world’s great religions, Marya Mannes wrote: ‘It seemed to me standing there that the nothingness was so oppressive and disturbing that it became a sort of madness and the room a sort of padded cell. It seemed to me that the core of our greatest contemporary trouble lay here, that all this whiteness and shapelessness and weakness was the leukemia of noncommitment sapping our strength. We have found, finally, that only nothing could please all....The terrifying thing about this room was that it made no

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statement whatever.’” (M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*, 20.)

So we do not silence dissenting voices, but we practice patience with each other.

We do all these things, says the writer, as a way of leading a life worthy of our calling as Christians. And we do all these things “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” In other words, the church’s unity is a gift from God. It is not something we create. But it is something we are called to maintain with our behavior as a community of faith.

Each one of us has a responsibility for leading a life worthy of our calling, a life worthy of our oneness with all humility, gentleness, patience, and love. We are all part of one body of Christ. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God and Father of us all who is above all and through all and in all. Each of us has the opportunity and the responsibility to lead a life worthy of our oneness.

There’s a video circulating online. I’ve watched it several times. If you haven’t seen it, I encourage you to watch it. And if you’ve already

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watched, maybe you'll watch it again. It's a video posted by *The Washington Post* newspaper <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2016/live-updates/arts-entertainment-news/the-african-american-museum-opens/favorite-little-moment-michelle-obama-hugging-george-w-bush/> and taken at the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture last week. In one clip, we see First Lady Michelle Obama hugging former President George W. Bush and he kind of leans his face back against hers. And in the second clip, we see President Bush tap President Obama on the shoulder and ask him to take a group photo with his cell phone. In both clips there's a kind easygoing familiarity between the two couples. And the astonishing truth is that the Bushes and the Obamas have become friends. They don't agree on everything, but they are Christians who have served our one great country. And they have put aside their differences in order to focus on their agreements and on their friendship.

If they can do that, imagine what we, part of the one Body of Christ can do, and are called to do. We are called to live lives worthy of our oneness, worthy of the diversity within our unity. With humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, making every

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effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Because there is one body. One Spirit. Just as we were called to the one hope of our calling. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal