

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/AUGUST 2, 2009

FINEST WINE/EPHESIANS 4:1-16

REV. DR. LYNN CHEYNEY

I. THE TEXT

On the sixth day of creation – as Sharon/Dorothy read for us a bit ago, the human creation was handed a job title and an identity – we, all of us, are stewards. A steward, simply, is someone who is responsible for what belongs to someone else. And in our case, what belongs to someone else is everything – it all belongs to God – our time, our homes, our children, our talents, our money, our bodies, our relationships, our earth, our very lives – God holds title to all of it. Our lectionary text this morning invites us to consider together what it means to be good stewards of the gifts and graces for ministry residing in each of us. Hear the word of God as given to us in Ephesians chapter 4...

I 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. ⁸Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." ⁹(When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) 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.

II. PRAYER: O God, tell us what we need to hear, and show us what we ought to do to obey Jesus Christ. Breathe life into these words, bring hearing to our ears, grant grace in our doing of your work and will. Amen.

III. STEWARDSHIP OF GIFTS & GRACES

More than any other, the Apostle Paul's words have given shape to the nature and identity of the church. In the first century, Paul worked rather like an itinerant church doctor – traveling from church to church to fix things that were broken, writing letters that often prescribed remedies for whatever was ailing a particular church. In order for a faith community to be healthy and whole, says Paul to the Ephesian church in this morning's text, "It takes everyone... bringing their best." Paul's central concern is that, to use his words, we

grow up into Christ – the Christ who offered the best, by offering himself. On this communion Sunday we remember that from water he made not just wine but the finest wine. From his own flesh and blood Christ offers us the fine wine of new life, both now and the life to come. Paul challenges us to do the same... to offer our finest wine in return.

One of the things Christ has done for us, Paul points out, is to shower us with gifts — gifts that make life together possible and good. In our faith, counter to the wisdom of the world, by its very definition, there is no Christian life without life together. Christianity is a community thing. We do it together. Folks who tell me the Christian life can be done without the church simply do not understand our faith. There is no such thing as Lone Ranger Christianity (*you know, I always wondered why he was called the Lone Ranger when everywhere he went he had his faithful sidekick Tonto, helping him*). Followers of Christ do it together. And our life together has a plan and a hope, a purpose and a direction. “The body of Christ,” says Paul, “is to be built up, until 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.” One of the very reasons God called Westwood Presbyterian Church into existence is for the purpose of helping us grow up in Christ. Paul goes on, “we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine... but, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

Growing up, together in Christ... that is why we are here. And the only way that can happen, the only way the church gets built up, says Paul, the only way the church and its people get mature, is when together, we, each of us, offer our gifts, our very selves, to the work of the church. Ours is a high calling – not only for clergy... by virtue of our baptism, the call to service in the church is for everyone. Responsibility for the ministry of the church rests on all of our shoulders. Bottom line – this is a matter of our stewardship just as much as our money is a matter of Christian stewardship. On day six of creation God handed us our still-in-effect job description – we are stewards, caretakers of what belongs to God. We are stewards of the creation – stewards of a life that belongs to God – stewards of the gifts and graces that have come to us from God’s generous hand.

God gives very good gifts in lots of different combinations... some teach, others cook; some do computers, others make decisions; some think hard, others build things; some dream, others organize, others pray, some sing, some teach; and on and on the list goes of the very good gifts that God has given this church in order that we might “grow up.” In the Reformed Tradition we call it the priesthood of all believers... simply, the responsibility for the ministry of the church does not rest in the hands of the few, but of the many. All have a part, all are essential, each has a critical gift to offer, without which, the church and therefore the world are diminished. Benedict of Nursia, Father of Western Monasticism, c.550 *“In a Christian community, each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. A community which allows unemployed [non-working, idle] members to exist within it will perish because of them. It will be well, therefore, if every member receives a definite task to perform for the community, that he may know in hours of doubt that he, too, is not useless and unusable.”*

In his Commentary on Ephesians, John Calvin wrote: *He [Paul] returns to explain the distribution of gifts, and illustrates at greater length what he had slightly hinted, that out of this variety arises unity in the church, as the various tones in music produce sweet melody.*

Now, obviously, neither the Apostle Paul nor the monk Benedict nor the Reformer John Calvin is saying people should not embrace a Sabbath, take a break, or let others carry

the load when they are weak or worn out. Rather, we are being told that in order to find meaning we must live fully – and in the Reformed tradition a full life is a family-of-faith life, with each one offering their best. Simply put, we need each other if we are to experience and celebrate life as Christ intends. We need the special things each of us has been given if we are to keep on growing up. Just as I am your minister, you are mine. And, you are minister to the person who sits next to you this morning... and all of us are ministers, caregivers to the world.

This morning I step into my third month as pastor of Westwood Presbyterian Church. As I listen and learn about you I am hearing a number of common themes in my conversations. There are those among you with gifts and graces just waiting to be invited to serve. To you I say, those invitations are on the way. Or better yet, don't wait for an invitation – pick up the phone and let's talk about where your gifts might be used. There are others among you who have been working so long and so hard that you are tired and need to step back a bit. To you I say, relief is on the way. There may be some others, perhaps, who think that in a community of this size, it doesn't really matter if you contribute or not, that there are plenty of folks to pick up the slack, or that what you have or who you are is just not that important. But Paul makes it crystal clear in language as direct as he can make it – you do matter. If you will not steward your gifts well, it is impossible for this family to become mature and accomplish here and in the world all that God intends. Paul's words are pretty simple – it takes all of us – bringing our best.

IV. FINEST WINE

The story is told of a small town in central Europe many centuries ago – although, interestingly enough, there are versions of this folk wisdom in every culture. The Queen and King of the land were very wise and very kind, their main concern was the joy and peace of all who lived in their realm. To this end, they made laws which fostered generosity, and sharing and regular celebrations at which people would dance and sing and renew their commitments to one another and the land.

Every few years the royal couple would travel throughout the country-side, stopping at the many cities and villages which had invited them, where they would be welcomed with parades and music and stories which sang their praises and told of the great joy and good deeds done in the village in their honor.

One village in the kingdom was a bit different from the others. A confusion had fallen over the town, and its citizens had grown anxious, a bit grim. The king and queen were often mentioned, but rarely invited; the celebrations were kept, though pretty much perfunctory. There was less laughter than usual... they seemed a bit harried, a bit withdrawn, even fearful. One year on their journey through the land, the Queen and King passed near this village and sent word that they wished to honor the village with a royal visit. The town council of course, was delighted.

As this part of the realm was known for its excellent wines, the council issued a decree that the day after next, each family must bring one liter of their very best wine to the celebration. Each family would present the King and Queen a small gift and then, with great ceremony, pour their wine into the great cask in the middle of the village, which would then be tapped by the royal guests and shared in the festivities.

The big day arrived. The villagers finished cleaning the streets and decorating the plaza as other families poured in from all around. The Queen and King sat in glorious splendor

atop their grand coach, reveling in the songs and dances and laughter of the children. One by one the families solemnly presented their leather flasks of wine to the king and queen before pouring them into the great cask. This took, of course, quite some time. But, finally the noise ended and everyone gathered around as the Mayor officially greeted the royal family and invited them to tap the monstrous vat of the area's best wine — let the celebration begin!

Delighted, the King hammered in the tap... the Queen held her goblet beneath it and turned the handle in eager anticipation of the deep burgundy liquid, the best of their vineyards. But strangely, mysteriously, what came out of the cask had not the slightest hint of red, rather it was crystal clear! The mayor was shocked, the town embarrassed... the disappointed queen lifted the goblet to her lips and one taste confirmed what their eyes witnessed... it was mere water. Had the wine been changed into water? No. Each family, *certain* that its one liter would make no difference, held back their best and instead filled their wine flasks – and thus the king and queen's cask... with water.

Finest wine? Water? The simple wisdom of a folk tale, the serious question of Scripture. The question is posed to us: What will you bring?

Amen and amen.