

“Equip the Who?”
Ephesians 4: 1 – 16
October 18, 2009

I. Introduction

- A. A grandmother, celebrating her golden wedding anniversary, once told the secret of her long and happy marriage. “On my wedding day,” she said, “I decided to make a list of ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of our marriage, I would overlook.”
 - 1. When someone asked what some of the faults she had chosen to overlook were
 - a. She replied, “To tell you the truth, I never did get around to listing them.
 - 2. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, Lucky for him that's one of the ten!"
- A. I think if the Apostle Paul had heard that story, he might have included it
 - 1. In his letter to the church at Ephesus
 - a. As a strategy, or way of working at the unity he writes about in our text
- A. If we could follow that Grandmother’s rule of overlooking faults in everyone we meet
 - 1. I suspect we could avoid a lot of the trouble that we find ourselves in from time to time
- A. Overlooking faults doesn’t mean that we don’t ever talk about things we disagree about
 - 1. Rather, I believe it’s what Paul is talking about when he says –
 - a. Bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain
 - (1) Unity in the Spirit in the bond of peace
- A. A growing, healthy church is one in which the peace of God reigns
 - 1. Not because everyone agrees with everyone else
 - a. But because there is a recognition that Jesus is the head of the church
- A. All the rest of us are simply parts of his body, no one part more or less important
 - 1. Functioning best because we are different, in temperaments, gifts and abilities
 - a. As long as we are allowing ourselves to be under the control
 - (1) And guidance of the Holy Spirit
- A. And that, in my mind, how we become saints equipped for the work of ministry
 - 1. And for the building up of the body of Christ, as we heard in our text
 - a. Coming together in the unity of the faith, and the knowledge of Jesus
 - 2. Growing into maturity, the full measure of the nature of Christ
- A. I’ve sometimes wished that Paul had used a different word
 - 1. When he wrote to the church at Ephesus about “equipping the saints”

- a. Or perhaps it is the translators choice of words
 - (1) Or the meaning we give to the word “saints” today
 - A. But I wonder if it doesn’t make it more difficult to apply this verse to ourselves sometimes
 - 1. Well, I’m no saint, so I don’t have to worry about the Holy Spirit’s gifts
 - a. I’m not called to be an apostle, or a prophet - an evangelist I’m not
 - (1) So then we’re down to pastors and teachers
 - b. If I’m not called or blessed with those gifts, then I’m home free
 - A. Don’t laugh, I know some people who have used that kind of reasoning before –
 - 1. In fact, it’s probably part of the reason I resisted the idea of becoming a pastor
 - a. For so many years
 - A. I figured there’s not many people qualified to be called saints in the church
 - 1. Maybe I’ll become more saintly when I get older, but certainly not now
 - a. So don’t expect me to be responsible for the work of ministry
 - (1) Or building up the church – that’s a job for those more saintly than me!
 - 2. I know, none of us here this morning would ever say that, would we
- II. And when Paul talks about everyone coming to unity in the Spirit, it can be easy to feel
- A. That perhaps it might have been possible back there in the early church
 - 1. Or in some other day and time, but I don’t see it happening now
 - a. There’s too many differences, too many things we disagree about
 - 2. Unity would be great, but there’s too many issues that divide us –
 - a. Things that we feel strongly about, and nobody is willing to change
 - A. Stop and think about this for a moment – in the time Paul was writing this letter
 - 1. There was a division across the early church as big if not bigger
 - a. Than anything that has divided the church since that time
 - 2. Know what it was? We’ve talked about it before
 - A. There were undoubtedly both Jews and Gentiles in the church at Ephesus
 - 1. People who had always believed that they were somehow different from each other
 - a. In a way that could never be changed
 - 2. If you were born a Jew, you never expected to become like a Gentile
 - a. And if you were a Gentile, for the most part you never had any desire to be a Jew
 - (1) It was like living on opposite sides of the tracks, only more so
 - 3. If you were forced to mingle with “the others” in everyday life, that was OK
 - a. But don’t expect me to ever like them, or be like them

- A. Until...Jesus came along, with his message of God's favor for all people
 - 1. And a ministry of healing and love and grace that included Gentiles
 - a. Along with his own Jewish people
- A. It took a while for Jesus' followers to catch on to that message
 - 1. Remember when James and John wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven
 - a. To destroy the Samaritan village that didn't welcome Jesus and his disciples
 - 2. Or the story of Peter and the vision of a sheet full of unclean animals
 - a. A voice from heaven told him to prepare and eat from the bounty
 - (1) Peter's response was something like – "No way! I don't eat that kind of food."
 - b. That was pretty much the same way Jews felt about non-Jewish people
 - (1) Yuck, I don't want to have anything to do with them!
 - 3. It took some convincing before Peter could say to the Gentile, Cornelius –
 - a. I now understand that God shows no partiality
 - (1) Everyone who does right is acceptable
 - 4. And later on, there were still discussions/disagreements among the early believers
 - a. About what that meant and how it should be acted upon
- A. However, the Apostle Paul was convinced that Jesus meant what he said
 - 1. About God caring for everyone equally
- A. And he was convinced that the church of Jesus Christ could not continue to be divided
 - 1. Between Jews and Gentiles, or in any other way
- A. But think what the words of his letter must have sounded like
 - 1. When they were first read in the church at Ephesus –
 - a. "I beg you to live a life worthy of your calling, with all humility and gentleness
 - (1) With patience, bearing one another in love
 - (a) Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit"
 - 2. Imagine the congregation gathered to hear those words
 - a. People with long-standing divisions of race and creed, wealth and poverty
 - (1) Social standing and education, whatever boundaries tended to divide them
 - 3. Listening to Paul's words - "You are being called into one body, by one Spirit
 - a. You worship one Lord, you share in one faith, one baptism
 - (1) One God and father of all, above all, through all and in all"
- A. It's as though Paul were saying -There is no division, no matter how big or how deep it might seem to be, that can keep you apart in the body of Christ

- A. And I can about imagine the immediate response among the believers in Ephesus -
 - 1. Yeah, Paul, but you don't understand, these people are different!
- A. We might look back at those people today, and think it rather foolish
 - 1. That so soon after Jesus had lived and walked on the earth
 - a. There would be any problems with his followers being united
 - (1) Around their belief in him and their faith in one God
- A. And yet, are we so much different today?
 - 1. We, who find it easy to say – I'm just not comfortable worshipping
 - a. With people who understand and believe things differently than me
 - 2. Or if we find ourselves disagreeing with someone in the church we are attending
 - a. Believe the solution is to leave and go to some other church
 - (1) There really is no "other church"
 - (a) We just give different names to different parts of the same body
- A. And there's no better witness to the world than when God's people can come together
 - 1. Despite our differences, and join in worshipping God in a spirit of unity
- A. Someone has said - Unity becomes precious when you walk through conflict in order to reach it.
 - 1. That is the unity I believe Paul was calling for in the early church
 - a. And that is the unity I believe we are called to today
- III. But we can never get to that place of harmony on our own, it's not humanly possible
 - A. In our own strength, we cannot achieve this vision of unity
 - 1. That Paul's holds up for the church in Ephesus, and I believe, for us here
 - A. But each of us was/is given grace "according to the measure of Christ's gift"
 - 1. The ultimate sacrifice of his very life, that's what makes unity possible
 - A. In fact, I think our differences would look pretty small and insignificant at times
 - 1. When compared to the greatness of God's gift to each of us
 - A. Every congregation that I know of has its share of differences
 - 1. And it's our response to God's grace that determines whether those differences
 - a. Separate and divide us, or if we can overcome/overlook them
 - (1) Find ways to deal with them and work together as a united body in Christ
 - A. And in the second part of our text, we hear the Apostle Paul saying
 - 1. Unity is not just for our personal benefit, it is for the benefit of the community/kingdom
 - A. The same Spirit that makes it possible to live at peace with one another

1. Calls forth the different gifts and abilities in the church
 - a. That can make it function well together as a whole
 - A. I like to think that there are many levels on which this can be true
 1. We tend to apply this teaching about gifts to our local congregation
 - a. And we'll talk about that more in a minute
 - A. But I'd like you to also consider the possibility that Paul was talking about
 1. The larger church as well as the congregation at Ephesus
 - A. Some churches no doubt had persons who were considered to be apostles, but not all
 1. Certainly, there may have been gifted prophets and evangelists
 - a. Scattered throughout the churches, but just as it is today
 2. We may not see those gifts distributed equally in every congregation
 - A. In many ways, it is when we see the church at large, beyond even our own denomination
 1. That we can see all those parts of the body of Christ functioning at their best
 - a. And yet, we sometimes think of ourselves as being in competition
 - (1) Rather than in cooperation with the other churches/congregations
 - (a) In our community and even in the world
 - A. Imagine, if you can, what it would be like if the picture of unity as Paul described it
 1. Could be seen across all the congregations of God's people
 - a. In all the communities we represent here this morning
 2. Churches bearing with one another in love
 - a. Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace
 3. Every congregation doing its part, as the Holy Spirit has gifted it
 - a. Working together to build up the body of Christ throughout the whole world
 - (1) Growing together in the knowledge of God's love
 - b. Encouraging each other to a mature faith, becoming all that God desires us to be
 - A. Maybe that seems like too big of a vision, impossible to accomplish
 1. But I believe Paul would say that we need to start somewhere
 - a. And where better, than with the people we are closest to and know the best
- IV. Each of us is given grace, Paul says, according to the measure of Christ's gift
- A. And he reminds us that Jesus descended to the very depths of the earth
 1. In order to take captive those things that would keep us in bondage to sin
 - a. So that we can be fit receptacles of his grace
 2. Fit to receive the gifts that he bestows upon his followers

- a. Gifts from Jesus himself, ascended on high
 - (1) Bestowed on us by/through the power of the Holy Spirit
- A. Isn't it wonderful to think of Jesus, up in heaven, looking down on his people
 - 1. Working through the power of the Spirit to produce the very gifts
 - a. That make it possible for common, ordinary people like you and me
 - (1) To become saints, to be the church, Christ's body in the world today
 - 2. The act of creation is not finished yet, it's still happening today
 - a. That's what I hear the Apostle Paul saying over 2000 years ago
 - (1) And I believe he would say it to us today
- A. And the list of gifts he mentions in this text was not intended to mention every gift
 - 1. That is needed or made available to the church
 - a. There are many other gifts mentioned in other scriptures as well
- A. We could list all the gifts that are being used in the service here today
 - 1. Teachers and worship leaders, singers and musicians
 - a. Preachers and givers and child care workers just to name a few
 - 2. And that doesn't begin to mention all the persons and gifts that make it possible
 - a. For us to have a place to gather in relative comfort
 - (1) To be able to hear what is being said
 - b. Read from our Bibles, sing from our hymn books
 - (1) The list could go on and on
- A. But the point Paul seems to be making here in our text
 - 1. Is that all those gifts are given for the purpose of equipping God's people, the saints
 - a. And as those gifts are developed and used, the church becomes
 - (1) Something more than just a group of gathered people
 - 2. It becomes the body of Christ, carrying out the mission and ministry of Jesus
 - a. Bringing about the kingdom that God desires on earth
 - (1) Just as it already is in heaven
- A. And the reality is, that while the things we do here this morning are important
 - 1. For uniting our hearts in worship to God, and helping us to grow spiritually
 - a. The greater part of the work of the body of Christ doesn't happen here
 - 2. This is only one small piece, one tiny slice of the whole week
 - a. Only a part of what we are called to do as Jesus' body
- A. Out there, in our community, and in our world, where we spend most of our time

1. That's where the gifts of the Spirit are really put to work
 - a. That's where spiritual maturity is needed to keep us from being tossed to and fro
 - (1) And blown about by every wind of doctrine – or wind of any kind!
- A. That's where we really need to have unity in the faith, and the knowledge of Jesus
 1. So that we can present an attractive message of good news
 - a. To our neighbors close by and to the far corners of the world
- A. Someone has said that if Christians everywhere could come together
 1. And present a united message of the power of God's love and God's peace
 - a. The world today would be turned upside down
 2. Just as it was when those first disciples of Jesus went out, preaching the gospel
 - a. And people of every race and culture came together in the early church
- V. We won't achieve the perfection of that vision today, any more than it happened then
 - A. But isn't it neat just to imagine the possibility
 1. Of the church functioning in the way that Paul describes it here
 - A. Every person, every part, doing the task that they have been called and gifted to do
 1. Just like the human body, with all of its variety of parts
 - a. Each doing what it is designed to do, making life itself possible
 - A. And just as our human bodies are controlled by the brain/mind
 1. Paul says the body of Christ must be under the control of Jesus
 - a. It won't work in any other way
 - A. Each one of us must submit ourselves to his control
 1. Must live our lives under the guidance, power and direction of the Holy Spirit
 - A. That same Holy Spirit is at work among us today
 1. Equipping the saints at Sonnenberg – yes, that means every one of us!
 - A. May we be open to the gifts Jesus has for us today
 1. So that his body might continue to grow and mature in the faith
 - a. Here in this place, and wherever there are saints in the world