

## “Worthy lives”

August 2, 2009

Text: *Ephesians 4:1-16*

### I.

In our reading from **Ephesians** that was just shared, right away we’re implored to *lead worthy lives*, lives *worthy* of our calling.

What does that mean for us? Certainly, we all want to live worthy lives; lives worthy of our families, our traditions, our history and life-story.

None of wants to let our parents down—our grandparents and other family members and friends, all those who have loved us and guided us and walked with us along our life’s journey. We all want to be good persons, make good choices, and live a life that honors God and a life that honors, too, those who have gone before us.

The fear, of course, is that we fall short. The term *worthy*, in this sense, can have negative connotations. Often times, we associate it with tones judgment and feelings of being *unworthy*; and then there’s the guilt part to the extent we think we’ve fallen short.

Some of us spend our lives trying to feel *worthy* of the life we have—trying to make the grade, live up to expectations ... trying to be worthy.

- Worthy of being our parents’ son or daughter ... or our grandparents’ granddaughter or grandson ...
- Worthy of being a teacher or a police officer ... a doctor or a minister ...
- Worthy of working with an esteemed artist or highly respected elected official or businessperson or whoever it is.

Sometimes we can’t help wondering, *Am I good enough? Am I worthy?*

### II.

**Ephesians** uses the term *worthy* to inspire and to motivate, in a sense seeking to raise the standards to which we aspire as Christians.

What this is all about for **Ephesians** is not so much the individual, but the faith community. The *worthy life*—the *life to which we Christians have been called*—focuses on two things says **Ephesians**:

1. on *bearing with one another in love ... and ...*
2. *maintaining the UNITY of the Spirit in the bond of peace ...*

And how do we do this? **Ephesians** says: *With all humility, gentleness and patience.* Now, clearly, that's a high calling.

And when we do this, we're worthy and more. In fact, the truth is, when we do these things, we can achieve anything.

Imagine, for a moment, if we were to try that in the United States Congress!

- We'd pass Universal Health Care legislation in a heart beat, *bearing with one another in love ...maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*
- And we'd find ways of making the economy work, too.

Of course, regrettably, that's not the way the world works. We get mired in contentious politics which tear away at the soul of our nation. However, at our best, it can be the way churches work, which is the concern of **Ephesians**. But it's not easy.

The beautiful thing about churches (this is particularly true of the *United Church of Christ*) is that, at their best, they're gathering places for a whole range of people. We boast all the time in our church about our diversity and how we're a welcoming church; and we are. And how we're intergenerational and interethnic—this wonderful gathering of God's people; and we are.

But what's interesting about this is that, while, on the one hand, this is one of our great strengths—our diversity; on the other hand, it's one of our biggest challenges. We have all these differences. But of course, it's these differences that help us grow.

Differences in how we think about church ... in the way we think of Jesus and God; differences in the assumptions we make about the Bible; differences in what church membership and commitment mean; differences in the role of church in the community and in the world—with regard to social justice, for example ... and on and on.

We have these differences because of the differing traditions we've come out of. But these differences, however large or small they are, are good. They make us bigger and better people.

But you see, this is one of the values we hold in the *United Church of Christ*.

However, not all churches deal well with differences. Certainly in Paul's churches, there were times when differences threatened to divide the church.

We need to remember that these were the first Christian churches. They didn't have other model churches to point to. They had to figure it out on their own. They didn't have any manual on *healthy churches* or on *church growth*.

### III.

Understandably, therefore, throughout his ministry, Paul was concerned about divisions in his churches. That's why, in his letters, again and again, we find an appeal to UNITY, to ONENESS. In our reading this morning, listen to verses 4-6:

**There is ONE body and ONE Spirit, just as you were called to the ONE hope of your calling ... ONE Lord, ONE faith, ONE baptism, ONE God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.**

The key is Christ, of course, because Christ is all-inclusive, welcoming of all people and the goal (being *Christ like*) towards which all Christians aspire. Paul exhorts his churches to be *Christ like* because when they are *Christ like*, with all humility, gentleness and patience, they ...

1. *bear with one another in love ...*
2. *making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

When we're *Christ-like*, our spirit is transformed and our fundamental commitment is to something larger than ourselves. We have our personal concerns, for sure. But we are also concerned about others—about the entire body of Christ that is the church.

When we break together the bread of life, as we'll be doing here shortly, we are reaffirming this solemn commitment. And always, that's a beautiful thing.

### IV.

In our church ... our gathering here this morning, we have a whole range of people, which is a blessing and for which we thank God.

1. We have Protestants ... the usual Mainline Protestants (Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Baptists) ...
2. We have non-denominational Protestants; and we run the gamut of conservative to progressive in all of our respective traditions.

And then, from the Catholic tradition, we've got three groupings:

1. Those who consider themselves **former Catholics**.
2. Others who **still consider themselves to be Catholic** but who simply prefer our church. They have a sort of dual affiliation.
3. And others, still, who are actual **practicing Catholics** but who like our Sunday School and other aspects of our corporate worship and church life.

And finally, we have a group, often referred to as *unchurched*. For whatever reasons, they never ended up going to church. But now, the Spirit is moving in their lives.

And, of course, what's compelling about all of this is that each one of us has a personal story to tell. The larger point in all of this: we're an incredible diversity.

V.

And so our challenge is for each of us to be *worthy* to the calling to which we have been called ... whatever it is; so we can BE the church in Christ's name ...

- *bearing with one another in love*, as Ephesians reminds us ...
- and *maintaining the UNITY of the Spirit in the bond of peace* ...
- working together according to the gifts God has given us ...
- *building up the body of Christ that is our church, in love.*

This is our calling. May God help us be *worthy* of its high purpose!

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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