



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Put on the New Humanity

Ephesians 4:11-24

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Back in the Fall of 2007—after you’d hired me, but before we’d made the move here—I came up for a standing committee meeting in Victoria and then a visit here. The trip from Tsawwassen to Swartz Bay started out like any other trip, but about half an hour in, the winds picked up. It got bad enough that the terminals were shut down for the rest of the evening. But there I was. It was one of the big Spirit-class ships. But there I was on a ship in the middle of the storm. What was supposed to be a two-hour trip took a little over three hours as the ship drove into the winds and the waves. Every few minutes the ship would hit a wave and the loud “thud” and the shudder would reverberate through the ship. But we made it. It took longer than it should have. And all through, even though we could feel the reverberation of the waves through the ship, it was steady as a rock on the churning strait. Its design, its stabilisers all did what they’re supposed to do. I was a little impatient to get to the destination, but no one was seasick and never once did I fear we wouldn’t make it.

Brother and Sisters, in the midst of the wind and waves of the world, that’s how the church should be. The church should be the great ship, rock steady, in the middle of the storm, not being tossed this way and that way. The church should be the ship, dead on course, sure of its arrival even if the storms slows her down. The church should be the ship—like Noah’s ark—a place of security, a place of peace, a place of safety in the midst of the wind and waves. But the ship won’t be that

steady rock in the storm if we don’t get the preliminaries right. Those big ferries that sail the Strait are carefully engineered: precisely designed hulls, precisely designed stabilisers, paired with precisely designed engines. And just so the church.

Remember last week as we began our look at Ephesians 4. I said that what Paul was doing there was a bit like designing a three-legged stool to support what comes next. And so he stresses, first, that we—as individuals, but then collectively as the church—need to be humble, meek, and patient, bearing with each other in love. You can build a church without those things, and it might even be rock steady in the storm, but it’s going to the sort of place—or the sort of ship—that throws people overboard when there’s a problem, or it’s going to be the sort of ship that sees someone floundering helplessly in the sea and runs them down instead of rescuing them. It’s going to be a ship sailing to the wrong port.

And, second, the church needs to be *one*—to remember the unity it has in the one Spirit, the one Messiah, the one God and Father of all. We’ve all been baptised in one baptism and strive forward toward the one hope shared by the one church. It’s hard to be steady in the storm if we forget that. Instead of all pulling together to accomplish our gospel mission, this person is doing this and that person is doing that and someone else is doing something else over there and the ship goes nowhere or drifts aimlessly off course.

And then, third, and closely related are the gifts. Paul wrote in 4:7-10, loosely quoting Psalm 68:18, that when Jesus ascended to his throne, he sent the Spirit to bring gifts to his people—so that he might fill all things. That was temple language and a reminder that God’s ultimate purpose is to fill the whole of creation with the knowledge of his glory and ultimately with his presence. And that’s our job, our purpose, our mission. It’s the port our

ship is headed for as we proclaim and live the gospel, making God known. But we don’t do it on our own. Our knowledge and experience of God’s glory will only go so far, and so he’s not only filled us with his Spirit, but the Spirit the equips us for the mission. In the Spirit, the presence of God goes with us.

And that brings us to our text today as we pick up with Ephesians 4:11. [Page 1161 in the pew Bibles.] As Paul wrote verses 11 to 16, it’s one really long sentence. In English we have to break it up. It has two “movements”. First, look at 11-13. Paul writes, “The gifts he gave were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for their work of service, for the building up of the Messiah’s body, until all of us come to unity of faith and the knowledge of the son of God, to maturity, measured by the standard of the Messiah’s fullness.”

This is one of those lessons that it seems the church has to learn over and over and over. We’re all different. Paul, thinking in terms of the First Century, talks all the time about Jew and Gentile, slave and free, rich and poor, man and woman, but we bring all sorts of difference. We come from different cultures and backgrounds, different socio-economic classes, different languages, different levels of education, different sorts of families. We have different interests and different likes. We have different personalities and different skills. Sometimes we find that those who were once enemies—soldiers on different sides, criminals and their victims, people from different political parties—are now brought together by the gospel. The Spirit binds us together. We share one baptism in one Lord who is the son of the one Father and we all yearn towards that one hope in which the earth is full of God’s glory and creation set to rights once and for all. And it’s not only that, but the Spirit gifts us all differently. What those gifts are and

how they work and how they're received isn't fully clear. I think sometimes we've had a tendency to try to nail this down too much. To say, for example, that the gifts Paul talks about are all somehow miraculous gifts that we wouldn't have without the Spirit or we take Paul's lists of gifts (and there are several lists and they're all different) and we tell people that they *have* to have one of those specific gifts from his lists. Brothers and Sisters, I think it's more organic than that. The Spirit can give someone an entirely new gift that they could never come by naturally, but many of the gifts are just who we are and what we're gifted with naturally, but now empowered and given gospel direction by the Spirit. And I think the full list is as diverse as the church is. None of us is entirely quite the same as anyone else.

So there's a vast panoply of gifts, but Paul puts his focus here on the ones that steer the ship: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. I wonder if Paul puts his focus here because of his own experiences with rejection as an apostle. Or maybe it was because he'd seen churches torn apart when leaders and teachers put themselves above the unity of the church. Some people followed this teacher and other followed that teacher. It's still a big problem today. I'm always suspicious of men and women who develop big ministries that aren't anchored the church and who name those ministries after themselves or ministries, again not really tied to a church and all centred around a person or personality. We just don't see that in the New Testament. It's the opposite of the model for ministry scripture gives us. And it's also sadly common these days for churches to split because people have decided to follow *this* teacher, instead of *that* one. When the gospel is being compromised and the people doing it refuse correction, that *may* be just cause for division in the body. But an awful lot of our divisions today are the result of leaders and teachers

who have forgotten the great importance of maintaining the unity that Jesus and the Spirit have given us.

Whatever Paul's reason for focusing on these kinds of leadership or authority or teaching gifts, it's not exhaustive, and his point is that the Spirit gifts us—not just some “saints”, but *all* the saints, all of God's people—in order to equip us for the work of service. Some translations say “ministry”, but I think “service” is probably better in our context. When we think of “ministry” today, a lot of people immediately think about the clergy, about pastors. The way we talk about the clergy can be misleading. We often use the term “minister” for someone who is ordained. Or we say, “He's in *the* ministry.” And that can leave people with the false impression that people like me or like our bishop are the ones who do the real work. But that's not how it's supposed to be. We're all ministers and we're all equally involved in ministry—or service. The Greek word is *diakonia*. That's where we get the word “deacon”, meaning one who serves. But that's what we all do. The church isn't like a ferry, where you've got a few people who run the ship and everyone else is just along for the ride. In his providence, God has brought us all together and each of us has a natural place to serve. If we struggle to find it, it might just be because we're thinking too narrowly of what “ministry” is or looks like.

And that ministry, whatever it is, Paul is stressing, is for the building up of the body. Paul longed for the Ephesians to grow into maturity. And that meant growing to the point where they—not just as individuals, but as the body—the point where they faithfully put on display the truth of Jesus the Messiah. It happens through a combination of unity in faith and knowledge of the son of God, of Jesus. And the standard for measuring that maturity is the fullness of Jesus himself. Think of it this way. The

risen and ascended Jesus is the embodiment not just of God's new creation, but more importantly he is the new human being, the new Adam. He is everything Adam was supposed to be and more. And Paul wants to see the church grow into just that kind of image: to grow into Christ-likeness. It will never be perfect this side of eternity, but Brothers and Sisters, *when the world looks at the church, it should see Jesus and it should see his new creation.*

And this maturity, this growing up” is the main point of verses 14-16. Paul goes on, “This is so that we won't be babies any longer. So that we won't be tossed to and fro by the waves, carried away by every gust of teaching, by human tricksters, by their cunning and deceitful scheming. Instead, we must speak the truth in love, and so grow up in everything into him, that is, into the Messiah, who is the head. He supplies the growth that the whole body needs, linked as it is and held together by every joint which supports it, with each member doing its own proper work. Then the body builds itself up in love.”

We all start as spiritual babies. God plunges us into his Spirit and gives us new life, but that doesn't make us mature saints—saints who have grown into the stature of the Messiah—overnight. That said, it's often remarkable what the Spirit does do. Often the Spirit will convict of sins that we didn't even know were sins. Often the Spirit will suddenly flood us with one or more of his fruit and dramatically change us. But on the whole, it takes diligence and effort to grow as Christian. We don't learn the great story, we don't learn God's character, or what he expects of us by osmosis; we've got to steep ourselves in the scriptures. We've got to invest in prayer—talking to God—in response, as we hear him speak to us through those scriptures. We have to exercise our faith as if it were a muscle and the same goes for all the fruit of the Spirit. We have to work

diligently to put off the old and put on the new, not just to leave our sins behind, but to resist going back to pick them up. We have to work at guarding the unity of the body of Jesus. Because the world, the flesh, and the devil are all doing their damndest to make sure we never grow up.

And this may be why Paul puts the emphasis here on gifts related to authority, leadership, and teaching. There are heresies and false teachers out there. People proclaiming false Jesuses and false gospels, people promoting gospels that promote selfishness or sin or health and wealth. There are people proclaiming violence and politics as gospel. There are people inventing their own scriptures and their false prophets. And there are even real Christians and real churches out there that have, themselves, never grow up. They got as far as the spiritual toddler phase, and somehow they got a platform—the modern church is sadly really good at giving it to them—and they’re proclaiming that Jesus just wants you to come play forever in the sandbox instead of doing the hard work of growing into his full stature. We need the people with those gifts who will lead us where we need to go. The apostles—who were unique and whom we only meet in the New Testament—it’s their authoritative writings that speak with the authority of God. There are those uniquely gifted to shepherd the flock into green pastures and to protect them from wolves. There are those with gifts to faithfully teach. God even gifts some to be prophets. We too often today think of prophets in terms of someone who tells the future, but in scriptural terms a prophet is really someone who applies God’s truth to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. A prophet comes alongside the faithful in times of trouble to comfort and to exhort. But a prophet also confronts the church when it is in error or has gone astray and calls it back to its faithfulness lest it experience God’s

judgement. These are the people who guide us as we grow, who protect us from wolves, and who confront us when we’ve gone off course—or when we’d rather just play in the sandbox.

And, of course, it’s all done in love. Remember the first leg of the stool that supports all this: humility, meekness, patience, and love. As we minister in the name of Jesus, we need to minister with the heart and character of Jesus. But if we do that, we will gradually grow up into Jesus, who is the head of the body. And Paul stresses: never forget that he is the one who ultimately grows us up. It’s all of his grace. He’s ultimately the one who has brought us all together and holds us all together. If we want to grow up into his likeness, we need to keep our eyes, our focus on him.

So Paul started the chapter by urging them to live up to the calling they’ve received—in other words, to be the new humanity that Jesus has made them. And now he gets back to that in verses 17: “So this is what I want to say; I am bearing witness to it in the Lord. *You must no longer behave like the gentiles*, foolish-minded as they are. Their understanding is darkened; they are cut off from God’s life because of their deep-seated ignorance, which springs from the fact that their hearts are hard. They have lost all moral sensitivity, and have given themselves over to whatever takes their fancy. They go off greedily after every kind of uncleanness.”

This should be a no-brainer. I think that was especially so for the Ephesians. They’d come out of the dark, hopeless world of paganism. They knew how everyone just looked out for themselves. They knew what a world without grace was like. They knew that world in which things like humility and meekness and forbearing with people below your status was a sign of weakness. They knew a world of idolatry and moral filth that, even as bad as our world sometimes seems, we can only begin to imagine. They’d

been delivered from that kind of life. They’d been made part of God’s new creation. And yet, over time, bits and pieces of that old world kept creeping back into the lives of these Christians. The same thing happens to us. We’re captivated by the gospel, we repent, we turn aside from sin and idols, we embrace Jesus. We read our Bible and we pray and we walk with our brothers and sisters. But slowly bits and pieces of our old life start to creep back in. Or maybe we’ve never fully repented in the first place. So we commit ourselves to Jesus, we love God, but money is still an idol. Maybe not as much as it once was, but we haven’t really let go of it and that starts affecting our spiritual growth and our witness. Greed leads us to be dishonest in business or to treat coworkers or employees unjustly. It keeps us from being generous with God and with others. Or maybe it’s sex. We continue to use and abuse others, whether physically or virtually through pornography, to gratify our desires. Maybe we indulge our anger and wrath. Maybe we let our self-control slide. And instead of maturing into the stature of Jesus, we stagnate or we even start to revert back to being babies again.

Paul warns us: Don’t behave like that. You know better. The fallen world and fallen humanity are like that because their hearts are hard and their minds are full of foolishness—and, most importantly, they know nothing of *real* life. But you know better. The Spirit has softened your hearts. God has filled you with his wisdom. And, most important of all, he’s not only given you a taste of his new creation and made you a part of it, he’s made you a steward of it. No, Paul says in verse 20: “That’s not how you learned the Messiah—if, indeed, you did hear about him, and were taught in him, in accordance with the truth about Jesus himself.”

Notice: Living in such a way that Paul would question whether you ever actually did know the gospel, that’s

not a good place to be. No, Paul's saying, remember what you were taught: "That teaching stressed that you should take off your former lifestyle, your old humanity. That way of life is decaying as a result of deceitful lusts. Instead, you must be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and you must put on the new humanity, which is being created the way God intended it, displaying justice and genuine holiness."

I love the way Paul puts in terms of how we "learned the Messiah". That's how it works. We were captivated by the gospel because we learned an image of Jesus: wise and loving, tender and gentle with the hurting, confronting and stern with the hypocrites and the wicked. And we realise, that's what true humanity looks like. That's what men and women set to rights by God are supposed to be like. And so, in our baptism, we put off the old, fallen, broken, decaying way of being human—a way that leads only to tears and death—and we put on the new humanity embodied by Jesus and enlivened, made possible by God's indwelling Spirit. Maybe we need to bring back the old practise from the ancient church where those being baptised put off their old clothes and put on clean, fresh, white robes. It might remind us what we committed to in our baptism: to put off the old way of life that leads to death and to put on the new life of Jesus and the Spirit, the new humanity, God's new creation. Because, Brothers and Sisters, we need to ground ourselves in this renewal *every single day*. This is what it means to be a Christian. This is what it means to live as God's renewed humanity.

And, Paul stresses in verse 24, such a people will display God's justice and true holiness. Let's close with that image: justice and true holiness. Such a people will display their—our hope—as we live together as a people washed clean by the blood of Jesus and renewed by the Spirit. We live

out and bring to the word justice. Or righteousness. The Greek word, *dikaioisune*, means both. And that's why Paul can couple our display of justice and righteousness with true holiness. Brothers and Sisters, as God sets us to rights, he makes us a people who witness the very thing the whole of humanity and all of creation so desperately needs—the solution to the pain and the hurt and sickness and the tears, the solution to the brokenness of the world. It's not just moralism. It's justice finally brought to a world of injustice. It's righteousness finally brought to world of unrighteousness. It's a people, made holy by Jesus so that we can be a fit place for the dwelling place of God—a temple that carries his presence to the ends of the earth. It begins in our baptism, but it does not stop there. It continues as Jesus grows us into his full stature of justice and holiness, and as he brings us together to share our gifts in a united mission of service: to bring the good news of that justice and righteousness to the world. To be the temple through which God *will* make his glory known through all the earth.

Let's pray: Almighty God, who gave your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always receive with thankfulness the immeasurable benefit of his sacrifice, and daily endeavour to follow in the blessed steps of his most holy life, who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for evermore. *Amen*.