

*Ephesians 4:1-16*  
*August 1, 2021*  
*"What Gifts Can You Bring?"*  
*Rev. Randy Smith*

Have you ever been part of a Communion service in which the Communion elements -- the bread and the wine -- are not already set up on the Altar when the service begins, but are instead brought up to the Altar -- as gifts -- as a part of the people's Offering, just before the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving?

I remember that the first time I saw this I was curious about this change of procedure in the service and looked into it. It turns out this offering by the people, of the bread and wine, as **gifts**, gifts which are then blessed and *shared* during Communion, is an ancient practice of the church. And it is, in and of itself, actually full of theological meaning: in the offering of the bread and wine, the people are offering their whole material existence in the world back into the hands of the One who made, and who -- day by day -- makes their existence in the world possible. In doing so, they are asking God take the whole of their lives in the world, and bless them, *viz.*, transform them, into lives which -- just like Christ's own life -- can be shared with others in ways that are truly useful to others.

I thought of this kind of offering of gifts at Communion, because it is our first Sunday Communion worship today, but mostly because of the astounding words from this morning's Scripture reading from Ephesians, c. 4. It is astounding because Paul makes it clear that the calling of the Church is nothing less than to be, and to continually "build up", the Body of Christ in the world, and to do this for the sake of , not just *representing* but "**re-presenting**" Christ himself in the life of the world. And the way that happens, Paul says, is by all of the baptized being willing, and able, to offer into the life of the Church whatever gifts Christ has *given* them, whatever they *have*, to offer

Recall what, toward the close of our UM "Prayer of Great Thanksgiving", we pray:

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,  
and on these gifts of bread and wine.  
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,  
that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

And then:

By your Spirit make us one with Christ,  
one with each other,  
and one in ministry to all the world,  
until Christ comes in final victory,  
and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

When I pray that part of the prayer, calling for the Holy Spirit -- *viz.*, God at work in our human lives here and now -- to come, I am praying that the ordinary bread and wine -- just like our ordinary lives -- would be transformed, the bread into the Body of Christ, and the wine into the Blood of Christ, so that we might all together, when we receive the Communion elements, once again take into ourselves the essence of Christ's own life. Which is impressive enough.

But I am *also* praying that we -- you and I -- be transformed, into a growing unity with Christ, and so a growing unity with one another (understanding that you cannot have the one -- the growing unity with Christ -- apart from the other -- the growing unity with one another). *Not* a unity which is just a bland uniformity, and *not* a unity which is just a bland, continual effort just to be "nice" to each other, avoiding anything too personal, or difficult or controversial. Rather, a unity which demonstrates to the world around us that we are, in fact, being transformed by the Holy Spirit into a people who are capable of living together in ways in which -- frankly -- they are not.

Why is such unity of critical importance? It's for the sake of ministry -- translating the Greek word which means "serving". It's that we might become "*one* in ministry to all the world", employing forms of ministry -- the Greek word means "serving" -- which **witness** to our abiding, and foundational hope, that there will indeed be a "final victory" through Christ over all that leads to the moral tragedies of human life, which are rooted in, and stem from, the many kinds of *disunity* we humans foster, or adopt, and then maintain in our relationships *of all kinds* with others, turning human social life, for all kinds of reasons, into an ever shifting arrangement of "thems" and "usses".

This unity -- and the kind of ministry and witness it makes possible in the world -- is the theme of Eph. 4. It is here that Paul turns to talking about how this comes into being, and how it is sustained. And how it comes into being, he says, is with all **humility** and **gentleness**, with **patience**, **bearing with one another in love**, making every effort to *maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

So, some great insights into what Paul is talking about here, first on humility, from the 20<sup>th</sup>-c. German pastor and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"If my sinfulness appears to me in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all."

And then, from popular American Christian pastor and author, Max Lucado, on gentleness:

"I choose to be gentle. If I raise my voice may it be only in praise. If I clench my fist, may it be only in prayer. If I make a demand, may it be only of myself."

And then, from the late Henri Nouwen, Dutch Catholic priest, professor and theologian, on patience:

“A waiting person is a patient person. The word patience means the willingness to stay where we are, and live the situation out to the full, in the belief that **something hidden** there will manifest itself to us.”

Has it ever seemed to you, in standing back and reflecting on certain relationships in your life, that those people who so quickly and easily make us angry and upset, and who we are then inclined either to attack, or to shut out of our lives, might actually have something to teach us, and we them – “something hidden there” – that we never in fact learn, because we’re not patient enough?

Finally, about bearing with one another, from my friend, James Howell: Forbearing isn’t tolerance. We could use more tolerance in our world, but that’s a low bar. I “tolerate” something or someone I really don’t like. To “*forbear*” is to bear burdens with another person [and to realize that you and the other person are] in this together.

We hear these words, however, these wise words of spiritually mature people, and we think: “Well, that’s all well and good, but how am *I* ever going to be able to live this way? How will *I* ever be able to put such wise and mature perspectives on relationships with others into practice?”

This is when we need to try extra hard to hear Paul’s words when he says that, “*each* of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (4:7). The word “grace” here translates the Greek word, *charis*, from where we get our English word, “charismatic”, the essential meaning of the word being “gifted”. All the baptized, i.e., have something to offer.

Some have public, highly visible gifts. Paul cites “apostle” (think missionaries); “prophets” (preachers who insightfully and powerfully discern and share the living word of God in her or his time); “evangelists” (not just the ordained, but all those who are able to find ways to make the gospel, the Good News about Jesus, real and meaningful in the lives of others); “pastors” (literally “shepherds”) and “teachers”.

But all of us have gifts to offer into the life of the Church, *even* those parts of our lives, present or past, that we would not consider gifts at all, the parts we *generally* try hard to conceal from others: our shame, our emotional wounds from how others have wronged us, our guilt over how we have wronged others. Or, i.e., all of our brokenness.

But, here, in the life of the Church, in the continual embrace of God’s love, we can be free of the exhausting work of keeping up a facade, always trying to look like we’re doing better than we are. “The truth is,” says Jennie Clark, “that we all come to this life in Christ with our rough edges. **God gives us to one another** to help each other smooth out those edges as we live from our center in Christ’s love.”

"God gives us to one another." The most basic -- and, really, best -- gift we have to offer into the life of the Church is ourselves.

What gifts can you bring?