

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
II SAMUEL 11:26-12:13a
PSALM 51:1-12
EPHESIANS 4:1-16
JOHN 6:24-35
August 4, 2024

Equipping Some! Equipping All!

The debate continues to rage among New Testament scholars in what is a not-so-trivial linguistic nuance. Does the writer of Ephesians use the phrase “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, no punctuation, no commas, separating the phrase? Or does the writer intend the quote to say, “to equip the saints, comma, “for the work of ministry,” in other words “to equip the saints ‘and’ for the work of ministry, the difference being quite significant? This debate about a comma reminded me of our beloved United Church of Christ. Now as people of the comma, the God is still speaking people, we know all too well the difference that punctuation, that a comma, can make in a sentence. After all, we have borrowed heavily, perhaps stealing, Gracie Allen’s line, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma!” As Uccers we seek to live by that insightful, most meaningful, principle. A few years ago in our beloved United Church of Christ, the leadership at the mothership, headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, were seeking a way to differentiate between our liberal, progressive United Church of Christ and the sectarian fundamentalist Churches of Christ, most, but not all, of which are located in the south, mostly rural, firmly planted in the heart of the Bible belt. Neither denominational entity wishes for there to be any confusion, one denomination horribly mistaken for the other. Now I can personally and professionally attest to the veracity of this seemingly innocent, presumably myopic, inane, concern because when I was called to the

nightmare that was the now defunct United Community Church that became SouthShore United Church of Christ during my tenure—the name not changed to protect the guilty—upon arrival I discovered that the congregation was littered with Churches of Christ individuals who had joined the church through the years and simply did not know the difference, thinking the church was liberal because it had a piano and an organ! As you are probably aware the Churches of Christ only allow acapella singing because instrumentation is never mentioned in the Christian scriptures, the New Testament! I should have known right then, seeing the handwriting and handwringing on the wall! The suggestion was made by mother church that when we proudly name our wonderful denominational home that we put a slight pause between United and Church of Christ, as in United . . . Church of Christ! How silly! It was a ridiculous idea that thankfully did not last. My take on saying the name that way was “never put a comma where there is not supposed to be one!” **One thing we always must remember when we read Bible is that there were no punctuation marks in the original languages, in Greek or in Hebrew. All the punctuation you now see supporting every biblical text are later additions, every jot and tittle added by scholarly editors who have carefully research each text. In the final analysis, however, these punctuation marks are nothing more than suggested edits, to a degree somewhat blind guestimates, all designed to help contemporary readers in their real time study, all put in place to enhance our ability to read these ancient narratives.**

One of the things that fascinates and intrigues me when I read the volume of epistles produced by the early Church that became part of the canon of Christian scripture, texts that were vetted at the Council of Rome in 382 CE to form the Bible as we now have it, some writings included, some writings excluded, is how quickly this emerging faith galvanized as it developed and evolved, rapidly shaping into recognizable forms as it gained both momentum and institutional traction, achieving a modicum of structural stability. Many of these

letters were written much earlier than the Gospels and thus they reveal an apparent rapid succession of events that were the result of numerous councils that gave the fledgling Church shape and meaning, a movement coalescing around the original disciples but expanding with the infusion of new proselytes who came on the scene, individuals who took the mantle of leadership and took the infant Church to the next level, including its radical embrace of Gentiles. See the apostle Paul who is by far a quintessential, the clearest biblical example. We all know Paul's story. After his conversion on the Damascus road he became a dynamo, a 180-degree pivoting zealot, immediately assuming authority and becoming a major player whose impact continues to drive much of the Church's theology today. In our epistle lection from Ephesians, look at the various offices, easily dismissed as assumed commonplace occurrences, that had been firmly established, including "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers." Each one of these primary positions served in specific capacities, had certain responsibilities, a definite focus, their roles already defined and fully functioning. It is obvious that the early Church quickly came to realize that a variety of diverse gifts, reflecting a diversity of gifted and talented individuals, was needed to make the systems go, to make each young church function in both the rawest and roughest and the seasoned and smoothest ways that come with any emerging organization. Everyone needed to find their niche, their specific gift, all hands on deck. The same remains true for all of us steeple people today. Evidently, the congregational model, what is traditionally called the "congregational way", our adopted and adapted pattern of operation, was not in vogue at the time, not the practice employed by these early ecclesial outposts. There were strong leaders who gave strong leadership, including the office of bishop, anathema, insuring that the wheels continued to turn, that the cogs in the machine continued to fire on all cylinders, roaring as new systems often do. So, just what do these things mean? **What do these things say to us as**

contemporary, postmodern, yes, progressive Christians all striving to be and do our best as a local missional congregation?

I wish to take a somewhat quick detour in my sermon this morning because that is exactly what the unawares biblical writer seems to do in the epistle lection for today. If the writer can do that, then so can I! find it strangely interesting, yes, most intriguing, that after the writer of Ephesians ends the lection chosen for today by listing the various offices that have come to light in these early stages of the ecclesia, that the writer then dramatically shifts to a concern about doctrine, a word of warning to the apparently easily influenced, easily swayed, Jesus followers regarding all the various Christological theologies that were emerging and evolving right alongside the becoming Church, a host of concerns and issues swirling around the early Church. Then, as now, it seemed hard to know what to believe, hard to separate fact from fiction, myth from mystery, the threat of fake news, alternative facts, as real then as they are now. Only now, as a result of our toxic political climate, have we coined terms, creating language to define such false narratives. Our assumption, as wrong as it is, is that the early Church was directed by one narrative, one prevailing opinion, one theological viewpoint. No, very quickly, very early on in the emerging and evolving process toward congregational institutionalization, already mixed reviews were circling within every church, the advent of Gnosticism the most notable scourge that comes readily to mind. This intuitive writer declares, “We 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.” And the writer goes on from there! I find it incredibly ironic, that after affirming the beautiful diversity that comes with human giftedness, all the wonderful offices that displayed the various talents of those who held them, that suddenly there was deep concern, dire warning about the consequences of falling for all the theological conjecture that was naturally dominating so many conversations. Frankly, what should have been a good and powerful, a life giving, development, the free and open exchange of ideas, the

raising of questions, was seen as a threat, a pariah, heresy always lurking around every corner, behind every bush, camouflaged in every new thought. Despite their best efforts, leadership could not keep the proverbial Genie in the bottle, free expression and intellectual curiosity always managing to seize the day. We inherited both perspectives as our legacy, but for our purposes, we are not so much about keeping each other in line, staying on the straight and narrow, bobble-heading to the boring routine of tradition, but are much more inclined to be about dialogue, asking cutting edge questions, challenging status quo, critiquing tradition with all its rigid orthodoxy, doctrinal dogmas, creedal affirmations.

Well, the message really is not that complicated, not so difficult, far simpler than we might think. It is true, the more things change the more they remain the same. As Hillary Clinton once said in a vastly different context, “It takes a village!” It takes all of us combined, every time, all the time, to make things work, to keep the well-oiled wheels turning, everything, from the trivial to the complex, the ridiculous to the sublime. And to work within the paradigm that gives structure to our congregational mechanics that serve as a driving force as a significant part of our body politic, our polity, to use a churchly term, our bottom up rather than top down tradition, we truly value each and every individual, affirming the gifts for mission and ministry that makes this local missional church, this beloved faith community, all that it can be, the best that it can be. Folks, congregationalism is messy, always messy! Democracy is messy, always messy! This stuff is messy whether it is a local church committed to majority rule or whether it is a country committed to same. Nerves can get frayed, raw! There are rough edges! The system is frequently stressed, even to the max, because in many instances there is no other option than to have winners and losers! The “congregational way,” as our form of governmental polity has been traditionally described, reflects both the best and the worst methodology, every time, all the time. The impetus

in these congregationally democratic processes is always put upon the losers following any vote to graciously accept the results, generously concede and get with the program, join the party, and seek to move forward regarding whatever initiative has been put in place, whatever issue or position has hopefully been addressed and hopefully resolved. We all win when everyone participates. Ironically, perhaps not, our church defacto becomes a mini-model for this entire country in the ways that democracy should work, at least when it is on its best behavior.

The pseudonymous, think anonymous, writer of Ephesians had a specific goal in mind, a clear objective to the reader that was undergirding the important reminder of the beauty, and the challenges—notice I did not say the bane—of diversity, the inherent value of people, all people, including their sacred giftedness. The reason we have apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, and a whole lot of other professionals and volunteers, is to achieve a common end, the means always more important, most important, and that is that we come to, as the author of Ephesians suggests, “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,” that would be Jesus, that we come to a place of maturity, to “the measure of the full stature of Christ.” In other words, everything we are and everything we do is designed to make us the most authentic, the most genuine, followers of Jesus that we can possibly be, integrity a non-negotiable. A major part of the way we accomplish this altruistic hope of becoming as one begins with, is found, in our hospitable behavior toward one another and expanding beyond our walls. Our ultimate desire, hopefully, prayerfully, is to ever become more and more a hospitably, radically, welcoming and inclusive, expansively embracing, open and affirming congregation, an extravagant invitation extended to anyone and everyone we encounter, anybody who makes our day, who blesses us, by walking through our doors, whatever particulars have led them to make that decision.

The challenge of this text as we give it a broader brush stroke for our purposes, allowing for a larger reading as we often do with Bible, is the reminder that the Church today, at least among our contemporary, postmodern manifestations, is not only as diverse as its origins, the faith of our forebears, but no doubt is even more so, the inherent challenges manifested in a variety of ways as people encounter and engage one another and share their personal beliefs and stories as they, yes, as we, live in close proximity as a congregation, richly blending all our diversity into one, but never, ever, losing who we are in this evolving process of becoming.

Unfortunately, sectarianism has always been a driving, strangely motivating, factor in being the root cause of splinters, schism, and the creation of interesting mutations as fine as many of them are. See Mormonism as a quintessential American example! What we have come to learn is that these words of caution, these words of warning, first proclaimed as a letter addressed to the church at Ephesus, but now a message to all who would read these sobering words, is that persons and churches on the left and the right now invoke this warning of apostacy about the other, mistrust the order of the day, heresy the accusation leveled from both sides of the aisle, each believing their position is right and that the other, therefore, has to be wrong! While there is truth on all sides, the radical departure between us does indeed indicate that one side is by and large right while the other is wrong! What we are learning, and many, including myself, have learned the hard way, is that diversity in all the spectrum of a colorful rainbow of kaleidoscope proportions is a beautiful thing to behold. But sadly, that altruistic paradigm usually stops at the intersection of theology. It has been painfully proven that individual churches cannot and will not survive, much less thrive, when there is radical theological divergence within their ranks, all of which eventually and inevitably leads to irreconcilable conflict and discord. The minor stuff, not a problem, easy-peasy. We can playfully banter all day long and live together to tell

about it. The major stuff, however, is a sticky wicket that always threatens, risks being a deal breaker, creating no fly zones, entrenched lines in the sand, plumb lines that cannot be crossed, issues that create a my-way-or-the-highway posture. Understanding this painful principle is essential to not only developing clear identity as a local missional church, a transparent congregational ethos, but is necessary for health and wellbeing, for simply getting along as a baseline of behavior, finding commonality and a collegial sense of mission and purpose as the local outpost of the body of Christ, the goal of achieving a common goal. After all, as we all know full well, those who stand for nothing fall for everything! The early Church learned this stuff the hard way in their real time and churches have been learning this principle ever since. The good news, though it sounds bad, rather negative, is that we are the richer for their experiences, yes, the benefactors, having learned, sometimes not, in our real time from their school of hard knocks. Of course, we continue to learn through our unique insights as well.

Many churches have permanently split over trivial pursuits, over paint and carpet colors for example, over whether to get an electronic or pipe organ, all decisions presumed to be a piece of cake except when they are not, when they are proven to be insurmountable obstacles! The joke has merit, “Do not let someone donate a chandelier unless there is someone who knows how to play it!” We human beings are great at making something out of nothing, of focusing on the minutia, obsessing on the speck in one another’s eye rather than the log in our own, taking criticism to an art form. Sadly, the Bible has become a breeding ground, a Petrie dish, a greenhouse, if it has not always been so, for incubating hostility based on borderline irrelevant stuff, angels-dancing-on-a-pinhead kinds of arguments which have led to broken relationships, permanent splits, final schism, all of it based on inflexible interpretations, intractable positions, none of which are probably totally accurate, completely correct. After all, this stuff is ancient, subject to hearsay, the danger of oral tradition prior to writing, editing,

and compiling the texts we now read, many uncritically so. At the expense of divine productivity as the human creature, we are prone to avoid or ignore that which matters and find ourselves lost in the weeds, somewhere in the shuffle, obsessing on something, things that are next to nonsense. We are all guilty on occasion!

Recently, preached in a sermon just a few short weeks ago, I am sure you all remember, I mentioned the research of my good friend and fishing buddy New Testament scholar R. Alan Culpepper, in an article that has yet to be published, Culpepper reminds me. The discussion focuses on the pivotal verse cited from our Ephesians lection today that contains the quote “equipping the saints for the work of ministry.” The comma has been removed as many scholars believe that it should! After engaging a careful word study, Culpepper determined that the best interpretation, the best translation and understanding, of the Greek term for “equipping” is the idea of “mending.” It is the same term that is used in the Gospels in the place in the text where we find the disciples mending their nets right before Jesus calls them to come and follow and be his disciples. The word is also frequently used as a medical term appearing as a verb in a variety of contexts “expressing preparation, restoration, or completion, processes that may involve equipping, outfitting, instructing, reconciling, or repairing,” images that are completely commensurate with the machinations found in church life. Culpepper adds, “The medical usage is an adaptation of the term’s basic sense – bringing together, reconciling, or unifying – which makes it particularly suitable for the appeal to the church and its leaders in Ephesus.” In the context in which we find the idea of “equipping” or “mending” today there is a clear inference that part of what we do for one another is what we do for one another, a significant part of our communal responsibility, our accountability one to another, yes, even on a daily basis, perpetually so, is that we go about the business of attending to one another, to attending to the needs of one another, to meeting needs,

addressing concerns, being there for each other in whatever way a circumstance or situation demands. We care! We grieve! We share! We celebrate! All together! We are responsible one to another, “priests to each other,” to invoke a book title by the late Baptist theologian Carlyle Marney. We go out of our way to make sure that people are empowered, to insure that they can become as whole as they can be, are as healthy in every way imaginable that they can be. The operative word in this text is “work”, as in our developing skill sets in and among one another as we uplift one another so that we all together can do the work, that we do something, that we do lots of good and gospel kinds of things. We are always about the task of pulling together, never taking our unity and harmony for granted. We are always a “work” in progress, to misuse this profound image from the Ephesians lection for today. The purpose of “equipping,” “mending” the saints for the work of ministry is to accomplish great things, all of us expected to contribute, call it an unspoken requirement, to do our part, all of us combined creating a well-tuned, fully functional, local missional church, a graciously loving beloved faith community. It is a tall order as we hope to help every individual become all they can be by attending, by “equipping”, by “mending”, meeting the demands of whatever the emotional, mental, physical, and of course, spiritual, aspect of life might be overlooked or lacking in our lives and in need of attention, some tweaking, offering our sincerest care and concern. “Equipping”, “mending” is a major part of what it means to be church family, to function fully as beloved faith community. May it be so for some of us, indeed for all of us!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and longs to equip us, yes, to mend us, that we might be the servants we are all called to be. Amen and amen!

