

07-10-2022 WORSHIP SERVICE

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church – we’re grateful to be gathered this morning to worship God, to sing God’s praises and to hear the words from scripture that we trust will guide and inspire us. We’ll focus on the centrality of Jesus Christ as the one who shows us how to live.

What things do you bring to share with one another this morning – opportunities or announcements?

Call to Worship – VT 189 and then VT 861, invocation

Prayer of dedication – O God, all good gifts come from you. Accept these gifts now as a token of our love and a sign of our commitment to following your son Jesus with our whole lives. Amen.

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16 – Phyllis Voth

Sermon – Pastor Lois Harder
Becoming what we already are

This morning we’ll wrap up the three-part series that Pastor Caleb started two weeks ago. We’ve been focusing on identifying and using our God-given gifts. Let’s just review a bit.

The first week, Caleb reminded us that this isn’t about simply *having* strengths, it’s about recognizing developing God-given strengths. And that it’s also not about competing with our strengths. He told us that as part of the conversations we’ve had about what it means to be church, you all told the Vision team that we need to “Empower each person to be aware of their gifts/strengths.” In order to do that, we need to try to identify the things we’re passionate about and that are life-giving to us, along with which board and committee slots are needing to be filled within our current structure.

Caleb said that through the scriptures, we learn that the Holy Spirit is the source of our gifts. These aren’t traits or abilities that we can take any credit for – they are truly *gifts*. Caleb called them undeserved privileges, given to each of us out of God’s undeserved *grace*. They are offered by God because they are crucial to the task of *the church growing in love*. Now, just to clarify, Caleb didn’t say – and nowhere in the scriptures does it say – that God gave his people gifts for the task of growing the church in numbers or in programs or in buildings or campuses. Some of those things might happen, but the scriptures tell us that those things aren’t the reasons the gifts are given. The task for God’s people is to grow the church in love. What does that even mean? It’s a weird, counter-cultural, one might say, upside-down kind of task. In fact, we are to be transformed, different, peculiar people, as the King James says – offering our lives

as examples of how to live out the joy and the hope that our God-given gifts provide – so that we can reflect the love that God is. But how do we do that?

Paul tells the early churches to whom he was writing that humility is the place to start. We begin from a place of knowing which gift or gifts we've been given and understanding that they don't make us better than anyone else, they don't make us smarter or more right – our gifts don't give us any clout or any excuses. They're used best and most *fully* when they're offered in humble gratitude and alongside of everyone else's gifts.

This is not as simple as it may sound! A lion's share of our life's work is to discover and embrace our Spirit-given gifts. This requires time and attention, thought and intentionality. As Caleb pointed out, these are not necessarily the same as "natural talents" and also not necessarily the things we think we should do! Our all-too-human tendencies can lead us to both ends of a spectrum. We can be plagued by an unwillingness to try new things – whether it's for fear of embarrassment or of not doing something "perfectly". Or, we can be motivated by a serious case of "the shoulds", thinking we "should" do something whether or not we find it particularly life-giving or soul-feeding. Caleb reminded us that there are some things that do just need to be done and it works best when we can, maybe, take turns and simply pitch in to make those things happen. But there are also things that have maybe never been done before (or maybe never been done in that way) and when we can embrace some new or different possibilities we can also be led by the Spirit to identify and nurture those Spirit-given gifts. Part of our job in the church is to help one another to encourage each other to be certain that we are each God's beloved children, gifted and blessed for the work of the church.

Last Sunday we heard part of the story of Gideon – about how Gideon had to have courage to trust that God would use his gifts, in spite of Gideon being timid and uncertain. God's words to Gideon were, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel." In a nutshell, Gideon was up against the Midianites. All of Israel had been oppressed by this powerful world-dominator and Gideon did not really see how he was supposed to take on the Midianite army.

From this story comes the practice of "laying out a fleece" to seek God's wisdom and direction. Gideon first asked God to wet the wool fleece (and not the ground around it) with a morning dew in order for him to be sure about God's instructions. Once that miraculous sign had been given Gideon boldly tested God again, asking for the ground to be wet and the fleece to be dry in the morning. Again, the sign was given. As if that wasn't dramatic enough, God guided Gideon through a process by which he weeded out his troops from 32,000 to 300. With these 300 troops, Gideon, using his own God-given strengths AND his trust in God's strength, succeeded against the Midianites, spooking them out of their territory and reclaiming it.

I've really given the cliff notes here – and I've left out the violent parts, but you got the gist and, I think, the main message that Caleb was trying to lift out... Gideon needed to both trust in his own giftedness (which God had given him) and also trust in God's Spirit to lead him in using those gifts. Like Gideon, we all need to be able to rely on our own God-given strengths and also

trust the Holy Spirit, working through one another, to help us identify, embrace and use our strengths.

The part of the letter to the Ephesians that we heard Phyllis read for us earlier sums up all of these ideas with the phrase, “The task of the church is to become what it already is.” (Tom Yoder Neufeld, BCBC, pg. 170) God has already given each of us the gifts and the strengths we need in order to say our “best yes” to whatever God is calling us to be and to do – “all” we have to do is figure out what that is! No problem!

This passage from Ephesians can help us with some ideas of how to figure that out.

“Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 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.” One commentator that I read said that this whole, long sentence basically says, “Grow up!” Become mature in your faith and realize that God’s call to us is to work together, to be a sign of God’s reign in this world.

The world, the people we meet up with and talk to every day are looking, searching, waiting for the church to actually be what God has already gifted us to be.

In a culture that values absolute freedom over almost everything else, the world needs to see that people who follow Jesus are not free, because we are bound by our common love for Jesus and his love for us. We are not free because we’re bound to one another by our commitment to humility and gentleness. We’re called to show the world how we bear with one another in love as we disagree, because in disagreement we learn to know one another, we hear new and different perspectives that help us to learn and grow. When we listen carefully to one another and speak gently and honestly, the Spirit is welcome and can move among us so that we can *experience* that unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. And the world can see that people who follow Jesus operate differently because they’re committed NOT to their own freedom but to their bonds of faith.

The Greek word that’s used here for bond is the same word that Paul uses to describe himself as a prisoner in the Lord and his readers as prisoners, bound by the love of Christ. Both the exhorter and the exhorted are bound! But we freely choose this when we commit to being baptized and becoming members of the church – of Jesus and of one another.

We sometimes act like that’s when our growth and development stops, but actually that’s the starting point! Paul says that when we make a commitment to join the body we are equipped for the work of ministry. Every one of us. And as we learn how to operate that ministry equipment we grow up, we become more mature, we allow ourselves to be conduits for the gifts within us to be used to build up the body, and we become more fully who and what we already are.

No longer like children, being tossed around by every wind of doctrine but solid in our self-understanding as beloved and gifted children, knowing that each of us can only become our true selves in relation to one another. As we are transformed individually, the corporate body reflects more clearly the image of God to the watching world.

Here at Alexanderwohl, there is a long and rich history of using our God-given strengths, of trusting in the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us. One of the beautiful gifts of a church with a long history is its traditions and established patterns, ways of doing things. This congregation can look back a long way and trace God's faithfulness through many generations and that is certainly something to celebrate and be grateful for.

When I read this passage from Ephesians, I become curious about the ways a long-established and deeply rooted congregation can take to heart words that were written for a young, fledgling congregation. I wonder how these exhortations about becoming who we already are can have life and breath and meaning for us.

How can we draw out and encourage the use of every gift of every person? What are strengths that people bring that no one even knows about? How could we learn to know each other in ways that would reveal and encourage the use of those gifts? Are there ways for us to think about things and maybe even do things a bit differently so that everyone is valued and respected as a minister whose contributions bind us more closely to Jesus? Who are the people among us who are like Gideon – those who feel timid and uncertain about what God is calling them to do? How can we see one another more like God sees us – gifted, ready to experience the Holy Spirit's transforming power and just needing some affirmation and encouragement from God's people. I wonder if there are ways that we can speak the truth in love to one another? As I was reading about this passage this week, one author reminded his readers that if it's only truth and no love it's very difficult to hear any truth at all.

All of these ideas call us to live and behave in ways that are pretty different than the culture around us. But when we do it the watching world can see the church actually becoming who we already are. They can see that we are learning to grow up in every way into Christ and, together, be Christ's body here on earth. Let's sing about that now. I hope the words of this hymn can help us imagine how this looks.