

Sermon Finance Campaign Week 4 November 26, 2017

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, He had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose He is working out in everything and everyone. It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free - signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life. That's why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the followers of Jesus, I couldn't stop thanking God for you - every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask - ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory - to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing Christ personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is He is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life He has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of His work in us who trust Him - endless energy, boundless strength! Ephesians 1:11-19

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is my favorite book of the bible. Ephesus was a seaport, considered the jewel of ancient Asia Minor, and was under the control of the Roman Empire. Christians there needed tools to help them live as citizens of God's Kingdom - rather than reflect (or deflect to) the predominant culture's devotion to Caesar and Rome - and to be able to thrive as God's people. Paul's letter is about spiritual formation, which is the spiritual equivalent of physical exercise... growing strong spiritual muscles... it's practicing faith rather than intellectually consenting to it. In a culture either indifferent or hostile to Christians like Ephesus, or like ours, spiritual formation reminds us of who we truly are. Paul wrote in this letter, "It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for."

This is an important day for us to hear Paul's words, because we stand on the threshold of two important events in the life of our church. One is the finance campaign, which ends next Sunday with the dedication of our pledged giving in 2018. All this month we've heard about spiritual gifts that are called charisms - gifts the Holy Spirit

gives to each of us - meant to be used to bless each other, to reveal God, and to help heal the world. It seems to me that for quite some time the church hasn't taken seriously that all Christians are given charisms... sacred gifts or features of God's divine nature... to use, and polish, and enjoy. The Finance Team selected this month's theme of spiritual gifts so we can see our charisms, including our generous giving, as ways to bless each other, to reveal God, and to help heal the world. In the 1930's this saying became popular: "Put your money where your mouth is". Those words echo Jesus' words, "Where your treasure is... your heart is".

On Thursday most of us celebrated Thanksgiving with our family and friends; we prepared feasts; and hopefully we gave thanks to God, naming our amazing blessings. The November finance campaign is a good time for us to pause to think and pray about our amazing blessings... including our Holy Spirit-given gifts... and how we're going to use them to help build God's Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. Paul wrote, "This sign" (and I take it that the sign Paul refers to is our charisms, our Spirit-gifts) "This sign from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life."

When we're mindful of all God has and is giving us, we can become part of the "praising and glorious life". On page 3 of the worship program, just under "The Witness" is this question, with some space for you to write an answer or draw a picture. The question asks, "What work, what part of the "praising and glorious life" is Jesus calling me to? Before we pause to consider the answer, let's think together about what it means to be part of God's work. Paul told Christians living in Ephesus - Christians who might have been tired of living in opposition to or out-of-step-with the culture around

them - that “Christ has His eye on us... designs on us... part of the overall purpose He is working out... in us”. And in another letter, Paul wrote the words to the song we sang at the beginning of worship: “He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it”. Paul believed that the church’s work (because we are the Body of Christ) is to reveal Jesus to the world. The Holy Spirit has given each of us special and unique gifts for this work. Jesus invites us to live a “praising and glorious life...” a life of thanksgiving, generosity, and joy. So now please consider the question: ***What work, what part of the “praising and glorious life” is Jesus calling me to?*** [PAUSE]

I think “church” could be radically different if we take it to heart that we’re the Body of Christ, and that in our midst - whenever and wherever we are together - our work is to reveal the Risen Christ in what we say and what we do. If our work is to reveal the love and generosity and kindness of Jesus, then we’ll need all of our Spirit-gifts working together as a unified body.

If you read last week’s Eblast you saw the article about the Congolese refugee family that we are co-sponsoring with three other churches and Catholic Charities. There are eight people in this family; they’re Congolese but have lived in a refugee camp in Uganda and came to the states, to Oakland, in July. They don’t speak English, but Swahili. I’ve gone to doctor and dentist appointments with the parents and some of the six children, and because we don’t speak each other’s language it’s been interesting, and challenging, and exhausting. A group of us from the four sponsoring churches has met twice now, and we’re starting to see the gifts each of us brings to this task of helping a family who’ve lived for years in a refugee camp, survive and thrive and acclimate to a home off 98th Avenue in Oakland. It’s going to take all of us, all of our

gifts, to help them. I've been going to the Refugee Task Force meetings at Lynnwood United Methodist Church in Pleasanton, to learn from their experiences of working with refugees, and they are an amazing team, like a finely-tuned machine. That's what can be said of us when we all use our Spirit-gifts to do the work of revealing Jesus's love and mercy to the world... that we, Lafayette United Methodist Church, are like a finely-tuned machine, or like a professional dance, or like a perfect newborn baby, or like a work of art. Those are pretty words... fanciful words... but is it possible for us to embody them?

We had sixteen people at our house for Thanksgiving dinner and seven out-of-town family members who stayed for the weekend. After everyone had left yesterday morning I congratulated myself, as I told Ralph and Mimi, "I did really good! I only got mad twice!" (And by "mad" I mean was only grouchy and snarky twice. That I could remember.) I am a professing (and a professional) Christian, and I preach about following Jesus, and reflecting His love, and helping heal the world... and there I was, congratulating myself for only been mean-spirited twice during the holiday. What's the secret to authentically being who I want to be... a facet of our generous and gracious God? And how do I not be overcome with guilt that I'm not who I want to be?

I think where we see our true selves most clearly is in community. We all view our own flaws like a seventh grader sees a pimple on his face... big as a crater, and the only thing other people are going to notice about him. But in community and as the Body of Christ we can more clearly and truly see who we are. Each of us facets of God's love and together we are a whole rainbow reflecting God's beauty and light. Maybe the most committed optimist can see themselves as a gifted facet of God, but I

think most of us have a pretty critical mirror in which we see ourselves. Being a Christian is hard work, and we can be discouraged and even bitter about how little growth we see in ourselves. So one of the reasons we need each other as the Body of Christ is to call out each other's gifts, to recognize and celebrate them. Last Christmas I got a wonderful email from Warren Cancel (and I have his permission to share this.) Warren said some nice words about me... and then he said "Claudia and I see you. We really see you ~ who you are, what you do." It was this amazing gift Warren gave me, that he looked past my flaws and at my gifts... Warren saw me with God's eyes.

On page three of the worship program there's another question that asks: ***What gifts has the Holy Spirit given me to do this work?*** "This work" remember, is the work of the whole church: to bless each other, to reveal the Risen Christ, and to help heal the world. What are your Spirit-given gifts to do this work? This has been our theme all this month and you may have been thinking and praying about your charisms, your Holy Spirit-given gifts... or it may be a new idea to you. There's space in the worship program for words or pictures... and in the back of the sanctuary there are copies of two different spiritual gifts inventories for you to take with you. For now... just think about it: What gifts has the Holy Spirit given you to do the work of building God's Kingdom? {PAUSE}

I said at the beginning of my sermon that today we stand on the threshold of two important events in the life of our church. One is our finance campaign, which determines what ministries we can accomplish in the coming year. And the other is the coming of Advent. Advent itself means "coming" and it's coming next Sunday. Advent is the season of waiting for Christ to be born... in the manger in Bethlehem, in the world,

and in our hearts. It's a season of prayer and preparation and hope and waiting, and it happens simultaneously with an out-of-control season called "the holidays". I like Christmas, I do, but "the holidays" makes my spirit ache. I don't see Jesus anywhere in "the holidays" but I do see grasping for serenity and contentment and love (things that money can't buy) and I feel greediness and dissatisfaction and loneliness. During Advent the church invites me and you (this is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians) to "See exactly what is it Jesus is calling us to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life He has for His followers... endless energy, boundless strength!"

During Advent your calendar might be full to overflowing with invitations to eat, drink, and be merry, but in order to have this promised "endless energy and boundless strength" to do the work Jesus calls us to... to bless each other, to reveal God, and to help heal the world... we need to be here - together - to worship God, and to immerse ourselves in the wonder and mystery of God's amazing plan to be one of us. What's your survival plan for "the holidays"? Mine include worshiping with you, every Sunday, to hear God's story unfold, to see the candles and the greens, to sing the sacred songs of Christmas, and to give you the gift of seeing you... really seeing you... through the eyes of God's love. My survival plan for "the holidays" includes spending quiet time with Jesus every day; walking as much as I can; leading an Advent bible study; and mindfulness of the abundance of gifts God is giving me all the time. In the middle of the worship program is a third question for you to ponder: ***How do I experience "endless energy, boundless strength" in my spiritual life?*** Or maybe the question is, "What is my survival plan during 'the holidays?'" Or if you love "the holidays" what spiritual

practices will keep you grounded and centered in Christ, and keep you from excessive spending or partying? [PAUSE]

This is a sweet pericope (which is a slice from a larger writing) from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He encouraged the Christians there to be trusting and hopeful because "Christ has designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose He is working out in everything and everyone". One of Paul's passions was to encourage newborn churches who found themselves at odds with the culture outside, and clashing with each other inside, to be faithful to Jesus and to care for each other. Paul wrote, "I couldn't stop thanking God for you... every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks.... And I ask God... to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing Jesus personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is Jesus is calling you to do".

Jesus calls us, His Body, to use our charisms, our Holy Spirit-given gifts, to bless and encourage each other, to reveal God, and to help heal the world. We do this in community, all of us using our gifts together... each of us a valued part of the Body of Christ. There's another question on page three of the worship program. It says: ***How do I express appreciation (Do I pray for them? Do I write notes or appreciation? Do I tell them what they mean to me?) to those who support and encourage the work I do for the Body of Christ and to help build God's kingdom?*** There's some space to write names of people who support and encourage you, and who see you - really see you - with the eyes of God's love. How do you thank them? [PAUSE]

As I said, in the back of the sanctuary there are two different spiritual gifts assessments. You're welcome to take one of each of them, if you're curious about your

spiritual gifts. I'd also be glad to talk with you about charisms. I want to encourage us, as the Body of Christ in this place, to take it to heart that Jesus has "designs on us for glorious living" that include reaching out to the lost and the least in our society; revealing the unconditional love Jesus has for us; forgiving sins in His name; and helping to heal the brokenness in the world. We can only do this work if we know and use our Spirit-given gifts, and love and encourage each other. Amen.