

## **“Life in the Spirit: Called and Welcomed”**

July 6, 2014

July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday at Lake Harbor UMC

This year marked 20 years since I graduated from Mason High School. In 1994, along with about 190 others, I received my diploma and went onto “life after high school.” For me it was college at Grand Valley and then seminary at Garrett-Evangelical and then appointment to pastoral ministry. For others, some college or work or other things. But when we gathered together a few weeks ago, there was a sense of unity because of what we shared. I have known some of those people since we started kindergarten! Some people have kept close ties more than others, and yet, the idea that we graduated together somehow brought us together.

A sense of unity is transformative. If you’ve watched the World Cup or coverage of it, you’ve seen it clearly. We get behind our country. People gather together in front of huge screens and root for their team. Country flags are flying. Unity is powerful.

Today we begin a series on spiritual gifts, and we’ll look at all of the Scriptures with specific references to those gifts. But today we remember what brings us together. First of all, before anything else, God’s grace is at work in our lives - sometimes even when we’re just feeling that pull, that tug that we can’t quite name. God’s grace is where it all begins - not with us, but with God’s invitation. So, the water is here. We have the opportunity to touch the water today and remember our baptism. Some of us can remember it clearly. Some of us have heard about it. We know that it happened when we were very small. Some of us may have yet to experience baptism, and yet we know God’s grace is real. Wherever you are, it all begins with grace.

Beyond God’s grace, our faith in Jesus Christ brings us together. Now I don’t presume to think that all of us are the same point on our faith journey. Some of us have a long-term relationship with Jesus and a deep faith that has been tested and tried. Some of us may be new to faith in Jesus, and we’re excited to share how God is real in our lives right now. Some of us may be unsure of what we believe and why. Some of us may be struggling with faith even in this moment.

However we come here, God meets us where we are. And we have the opportunity to nurture our faith at the table where Jesus is host. He is the One who invites us to share one loaf and one cup. He is the One whom we meet when we come. He is the One who offers grace and strength for the journey ahead.

We start in Ephesians, but this part of the letter in chapter 4 begs us to go back to the beginning. “As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” That word “then” right at the beginning is pivotal. All that has been written up until this point is important. So far, the writer has reminded the Ephesians about God’s gift of salvation. “By grace you have been saved through faith. It is a gift of God so that no one can boast.”

And they have been reminded that both Jews and Gentiles are called to be God’s people. Most scholars believe that this letter was written later in the first century, but we get the idea that there have been tensions between Jew and Gentile Christians. They have experienced division which has threatened the witness of the church in Ephesus.

But at this point in the letter, now that we’ve talked about God’s gifts, we move to our response. There are some instructions about how to live together and some qualities that can help us: humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love. It all sounds quite challenging to me, and I think the writer wants us to understand the demand of it. We have to be aware of what it takes - sacrifice for the sake of others. It’s not just a “me” perspective anymore, but a “we” perspective.

Living a life worthy of our calling means that we live together because there’s this call to unity and peace. There are seven essentials listed here that unite those who follow Jesus, and it’s no accident that ONE is repeated seven times. Here’s what brings us together:

We are the **Body** of Christ. We are gifted by the Holy **Spirit**. We share the **hope** of the resurrection. We love and serve Jesus our **Lord**. We claim **faith** in Jesus our Savior. We are **baptized** in the name of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are children of **God** our Creator.

It’s easy to look around and see differences among denominations and even among one congregation. And it’s easy to focus on those differences rather than remembering that we’re united in Jesus Christ. By virtue of our baptism, we are called to ministry in his name and for his sake. We are called to make disciples. When we come to the table, Jesus invites all those who seek to love him and who seek to be more like him. Unity is not a given, but a goal as we seek to follow Jesus. We work at it every day.

After naming these seven essentials, the writer reminds us about spiritual gifts. They are given to all to equip the saints – and the saints means those are made new in Christ – that’s you and me - for the work of ministry. Gifts are given to build up the Body of Christ. And the list isn’t in order of importance. All the gifts are named and valued! One person used the image that we’re called not to be monotone. We don’t all sound the same, and if we did, it would be boring!

We don’t have the same gifts. We’re called to be in harmony - using the gifts to make something more beautiful. If the gifts of God are offered and used, then the Body of Christ will grow together in love and not be led astray or misled. The Holy Spirit is at work in us - in me and in you - all for the building up of the Body of Christ.

You heard it earlier: The Spirit changes everything. That’s true! We wouldn’t know the love of God without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. And we experience that deep love in the sacraments. Sacraments are “sign-acts” – moments when we can experience God in a tangible way.

Yes, it’s personal to remember God’s grace in my life, but it’s powerful to look around and know that God’s grace is at work in you, too. Sacraments connect us to Jesus and to each other, even though we might not be connected otherwise. They call us to hold one another in prayer and love – to treat one another as children of God.

And the Holy Spirit is at work! The water is more than just water. It’s not just an elaborate bath, but it’s a sign of God’s grace. The bread and cup are more than just a snack. They are a sign of God’s grace for us and a reminder of the lengths that God goes to show us love. So, this is where we begin life together in the Body of Christ. At the water...at the table...at God’s grace.

You are called by God and given gifts. You are welcomed at the Lord’s table to be strengthened to live for Jesus. We come together united, not uniform. We come together because of God, not because of us. We come together united in Christ - called and welcomed in God’s grace.

Thanks be to God. AMEN!

What a blessing to see how we’re involved in ministry together. Already, I’ve experienced your commitment to Jesus Christ in this congregation. We were blessed by all of you who worked so hard to prepare the parsonage for us, by the meals you made,

by your cards and prayers. I've witnessed many youth from this congregation serving at Lakeside's VBS. I'm excited for the youth and their chaperones as they prepare to share God's love in south Chicago, and I know your prayers and support make it possible. They will help people, but they will also be transformed. I'm excited about your willingness to serve others by hosting Family Promise and serving at Supper House. I'm interested in the opportunities we have to worship and study God's Word together. What will God call us to do together to show Christ's love for our community? For Muskegon? For the world? We'll see!

*Perhaps God is speaking to you today – the Holy Spirit is moving in you in a mighty way and encouraging you to use the gifts that God has given you. Perhaps God is calling you to make a commitment to a life with Jesus.*