

November 25, 2018

The Spirit in which Church Happens ...

Ephesians 4:7-16

Three men were laying bricks. I asked the first man, "What are you doing?" "Laying a row of 250 bricks." I asked the second man, "What are you doing?" "Building a wall, 50 metres long, ten metres high, with five windows." I asked the third man, "What are you doing?" "As an act of worship, I am part of building a church to the glory of God."

Which is correct? They all are, But the spirit in which you use your skills as a bricklayer can make a tremendous difference, can't it?

In Ephesians 4:7, Paul writes, "To each one of us **grace** (*charis*) has been given ..." "Charis" is the Greek root word for *joy, grace, gift, blessing* – and *thanksgiving*. To each one of us, a special grace/gift/blessing has been given. The specifics of what we are doing – building a brick wall, caring for preschool kids, doing our job, going to school, living in community in a seniors' residence, volunteering in the community – don't matter. The spirit in which we use that grace/gift/blessing is what matters.

1. God's gifts of grace

When God comes into a person's life, the Holy Spirit does things! He gives us His "grace," His blessing, His gift. At the macro (big) level this refers to God's gracious gift of new life that comes through faith in Jesus – forgiveness, restored relationship with God, promise of eternal life now and forever. This changes how we see ourselves and how we see other people. We are God's beloved children. So is everyone else.

The Holy Spirit also blesses us with the gift of His presence: leading, correcting, encouraging, inspiring, challenging, empowering (John 14-16).

At a micro (smaller) level the Spirit also "gifts" us with His grace. Here in Ephesians 4 (and in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and 1 Peter 4), we learn a bit about specific giftings/blessings the Spirit gives. We can get caught up in an odd theology of spiritual gifts in which we expect God to give us supernatural aptitudes and skills for something we had no ability at before. On rare occasions that may be true. At Pentecost (Acts 2), the disciples experienced the grace/blessing/gift to be able to speak in languages they never learned.

More often, however, spiritual gifts are an intensification of natural talents, skills, and abilities we already have. God takes the pre-existing blessings He has already built into your life (remember, He created you with those talents, skills, and abilities in the first place) and nurtures in you a new passion to use them ... and perhaps a heightened ability to do them. Paul, for instance, was a gifted leader and speaker before he became a believer; the Spirit gave him a new passion and new effectiveness in communication.

Notice a few important points from Ephesians 4:11-16:

- a. Grace/blessing/gifts come from God
- b. different people have different gifts
- c. The purpose of this grace/blessing/gift of the Spirit is to prepare God's people for works of service, to build unity, and to become mature.

In the classic story, *The Three Musketeers*, the motto of the D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis is "All for one, and one for all ..." That's not a bad summary of spiritual gifts! These gifts are not about you – as an individual; they are about us – as a church – being a healthy, united, mature body, in spite of our differences. **They are all for one** ... they all exist and ought to be exercised to build up the one body of Christ, the church. **They are one for all** ... each gift is given for all to prepare God's people for service and to build up the church. No gift is primarily given to a person for their personal benefit.

2. Aside: the Gift of ... Pastors-teachers

In Ephesians 4, Paul lists several gifts God gives to specific people in the church (actually Paul describes these **people** as gifts to the church):

- a. apostles (key, dynamic leaders. Some believe this gift no longer exists, some argue high-profile, influential Christian leaders are today's apostles)
- b. prophets (people who can speak God's wisdom directly to a situation)
- c. evangelists (people really gifted in cross cultural communication)
- d. pastors-teachers

Notice *these are **not** "super-gifts"* somehow better than others. They are just different gifts given to different (often really DIFFERENT!) people. Most pastors are people who are blessed by God with some natural abilities and skills in communication and leadership, who have been called to do these things more actively in the church. They are no more or less important or spiritual than people with gifts of knowledge, service, hospitality, etc., who coach hockey, teach school, lay bricks, work at the hospital, or visit shut ins.

The word "pastor" literally means "shepherd" (our English word "pastor" is simply the Latin word "shepherd"). That begs the question, what does a "shepherd" do? And how does that relate today (in a world where we are not familiar with shepherds!).

- **Shepherds/Pastors are servant leaders.** Pastors lead – not because we like to be **the** Leader – but because we are servants who want the best for the church. We are "servant leaders." That may sound like an oxymoron. But it really isn't. Because I am your servant, I seek to provide leadership. As we lead – through casting vision, administration, encouragement, teaching ... we work with you, in relationship, to build the church. *Pastors are NOT C.E.O.'s!* We do not run the church! (I have one vote at a business meeting like any other member; I don't chair or even have a vote at any board or committee; I have no responsibility or authority for anything financial; I have no idea who gives what to the church).
- **Shepherds/Pastors encourage people to be all that they can be.** You all

have skills, talents, abilities, and gifts. Part of our shepherding is to empower you to use your God-given gifts to prepare God's people for service and build up the church. Most pastors are generalists: part of our task is to help you use your gifts and talents. We do a lot of coordinating, encouraging, administrating.

- ***Pastors cannot do ministry alone!*** Everyone is important! Pastors do their bit – shepherding and teaching – but teachers need to do their bit, helpers theirs, servers theirs, etc. Pastors' world and influence is relatively small – but together we touch thousands of lives each week. If you leave it all to pastors not much will get done.
- ***Pastoring and teaching are interconnected.*** In Mark 6:34, Jesus saw a large crowd, had compassion on them, "*because they were like sheep without a shepherd*" and "*began to teach them many things.*" Learning and education are a critical part of spiritual growth. That's one key role pastors can take.
- ***Shepherds/Pastors provide care.*** We visit the sick and shut-ins. We counsel. We check up on people and see how they're doing. Other people can do that, too ... in fact some people are better at it than we are! Great! Go for it!

3. Everyone's responsibility

"Our responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ" (4:12). Like the third bricklayer, we are all part of building a church to the glory of God – if we choose to see life that way. It's not that we volunteer hundreds of hours to the church. It's we see each day as spiritual. So we would do well to pray at the beginning of each day, "*Lord help me see your Spirit at work in my day, today. And help me to serve today.*" We see everyday encounters in our everyday lives as divine appointments. In the course of what we normally do, we see God at work; we encourage; we serve; we forgive; we bless; we love. At the end of the day we can look back and pray, "*Lord, help me see how you were working today. Thank you for being part of that.*" Simply through living our lives, we build up the church.

Brother Lawrence (1614-1691) was a lay brother who worked in the kitchens of an abbey in Paris. Despite his low position, by cultivating "the practice of the presence of God" – remembering God is always with you and trying to carry on a continual conversation with Him at all times – he found meaning serving God doing everything from peeling potatoes to repairing sandals. "*We should establish ourselves in a sense of God's presence, by continually conversing with Him ... Think often on God, by day, by night, in your business and even in your diversions. He is always near you and with you.*" All of life can be lived for the glory of God, if we recognize he is always with us.

When we seek to practice the presence of God, "*we (will) all come to such **unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son** that we will be **mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.** Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth"*(4:13-14). When we live in continual conversation with Him, we will be a strong building, shaped by unity, knowledge, and maturity.

4. The Spirit in which church happens ...

Whether we're laying bricks, teaching kids, going to school, or peeling potatoes, *"Let us think often that our only business in this life is to please God ... We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed"* (Brother Lawrence). God is in the day-to-day of life.

"We will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church" (4:15). Truth is great – it's crucial – but how we speak it, the Spirit in which we speak it – love – is absolutely crucial. The church is "the body of Christ" and when people look at us, they will see something of the character of Jesus in us, modelled through us.

Is it possible to speak the truth NOT in love? What would that look like? Can you think of examples? Have you ever been the victim of that? Have you ever done that? Speaking the truth NOT in love, Paul says, is like being a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1). "Love," Paul reminds us, "is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

In our present political, cultural context it is harder to get more radical than to be people of love. This is what is distinctive out the people of God:

- *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* (John 13:34-35).
- *"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear"* (1 John 4:18).

With this spirit of love, walking in step with God's Spirit of love, *"He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love"* (4:16). We are not simply another brick in the wall, living with Jesus, for Jesus, we are part of building a church to the glory of God.

What do you do? Go to work? Play bridge with friends? Coach volleyball? Go to school? Walk your dog? Care for your child? Meet for coffee? Visit (too many) doctor's offices? Live in community in a condo? Travel? How can you "practice the presence of God" in those places? How can those everyday places be opportunities to serve God? You can simply go through life "laying bricks" or you can go through life building the church, doing little things for the love of God as you seek to live, in love, with Jesus.