

## Worthy of the Calling

Ephesians 4:1016

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Let us pray: God, we know you love us more than we can ever understand, and you have called us each by name. Help us now to open ourselves to hear your word so that we might become more of who you call us to be. Amen.

Most of you know that last week I spent four days in our nation's capitol as part of a group called the Lewis Fellows. We are seventeen young clergy men and women from various Protestant denominations who have come together for one year under the guidance of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary to learn how to be better leaders for the church. We reflect on our own gifts and ministry settings, we visit and hear from exemplary church leaders in various settings, we read books – both explicitly Christian and not – about leadership and discuss them, and we work on vocational discernment and skill-building so that we can serve the church better not only when we are “experienced” or “mature” pastors, but now and on into the future.

One of the activities we did at this past meeting was based on a very popular book called *The Leadership Challenge* by Kouzes and Posner, two business school professors from Santa Clara University. Kouzes and Posner say that there are five practices of exemplary leadership (and they write at *length* about each one). In our activity at the Lewis Fellows meeting, the facilitators put the names of these practices of exemplary leadership on the wall in various parts of the room, then asked questions of the whole group. To answer the question, we were to go to the part of the room with the leadership practice that best fit the situation for us or our settings personally. I'm sure you've done exercises like this before: they're especially

helpful when people in your group might otherwise be falling asleep – it’s helpful to get the blood moving.

One of the first questions asked was simply, “Which of these practices comes most naturally or is easiest for you?” I had no problem answering: “encourage the heart” was mine, and several of my peers were with me on that side of the room. There were equally sizable groups near “inspire a shared vision,” “challenge the process,” and “enable others to act.” We all discussed with each other and then with the larger group why we had chosen those areas, and how these practices play out in our lives and ministries. Then the facilitator asked, “Did anyone notice that no one has chosen one particular practice?” I had not noticed at all, but one sign was hanging on the wall all alone with no one around it. It said, “model the way.” The exemplary leadership practice that no one chose as coming most naturally or being easiest was, “model the way.”

Now we made all kinds of excuses for this – the way the authors defined the practice in the book, our status as the youngest clergy people in our jurisdictions, the self-reflective practices of Generation X, the relativity of truth for postmodern young people, the list went on and on. And we all kind of laughed it off and went on to the next question. But I have not stopped thinking about that lonely sign on the wall with no one near it, saying, “model the way.” It may as well have had tumbleweed blowing by. We were chosen for this program because we supposedly are and have the potential to be leaders in the church, and none of us feels like we can model the way for others.

It may be that the exercise wasn’t an honest reflection on the state of the church, but I don’t think it was an anomaly, either. In fact, research shows that the number one reason a

vast majority of young adults in America today have left the church, choose not to affiliate with a church, or define themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” is because either they don’t want to be tied down to an institution which seems to be more focused on perpetuating itself than making a difference in the world, or because, put simply, they see Christians as hypocrites. They hear a message preached that they don’t see lived out. No one is modeling the way for them. As Richard Ward, preaching professor at Iliff School of Theology has said, “the human community is in desperate need of communities of faith where belief and practice are congruous,” where people model the way of discipleship.

And that is our call. In the letter to the church at Ephesus, likely written by a close disciple of Paul’s, that church –and our church- an inclusive, diverse church struggling to live what they say they believe, is exhorted to walk the talk, to be the people they claim to be, to live in ways that make clear who they follow: to live lives,” as the letter says, “worthy of the calling.

Now that language can seem a little awkward: to live a life worthy of the calling you’ve received? What calling is that? What if we haven’t quite figured it all out yet? And then to be worthy of it seems impossible. But then the author of this letter says this is how we should live: worthy of the calling... And there are specifics: “with all humility and gentleness, with patience” (maybe the one I struggle with most), “bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.” And then there is the series of “ones”: there is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

So clearly living worthy of the calling has something to do with unity. But then in the rest of the passage, we hear that old familiar refrain about how we, Christ's body in the world, are together but different- we all have different gifts and should celebrate our diversity as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. We're called to celebrate our gifts. The fact that we're different is a blessing. But we all must work together to build up Christ's body in love as we grow into maturity of faith.

We have a responsibility to live lives worthy of the calling received at our baptisms: to serve as Christ's representatives in the world. More is expected of us because we are called. We act differently, we are held to a higher standard, because of our calling. We may never be 'worthy' in the sense that we will never deserve the overwhelming measure of God's grace we have received, but still we are called day by day to work toward maturity in faith, which is looking more and more like Christ, the journey that Methodists call sanctification.

To be considered for ordination in the United Methodist Church, candidates must answer a series of essay questions. Some of them come from the conference and address important issues of today, but many are historic questions that have been asked of thousands upon thousands of Methodist clergy throughout the years and are listed in the *Book of Discipline*, the rules for our church. One such question is as follows:

**For the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world and the most effective witness to the Christian gospel, and in consideration of your influence as an ordained minister, are you willing to make a complete dedication of yourself to the highest ideals of the Christian life, and to this end will you agree to exercise responsible self-control by personal habits conducive to physical health, intentional intellectual development, fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness, integrity in all personal relationships, social responsibility, and growth in grace and the knowledge and love of God?**

And the answer expected is a long-winded version of “I will.” Some clergy refer to this as “the fishbowl.” “You’re being watched,” they say, “like you’re living in a fishbowl. People want to see that you are as holy as you say you are, that you practice what you preach – literally – that you live the way you say you believe.” But maybe this should be a question not just asked at ordination, but at baptism or confirmation: “for the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world and the most effective witness to the Christian gospel, will you make a complete dedication of yourself to the highest ideals of the Christian life?” This is what the writer of Ephesians is talking about when he says “I beg you, I implore you, I plead with you to live a life worthy of the calling.” “People are watching you,” he’s saying. “They’re leaving the church, or not considering the church, or marking themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious,’ because of the way you behave.” “Grow up,” he says. “Live with integrity.” “Be who you say you are.”

And then he tells them to live with humility, gentleness, patience, and love.

But these aren’t just the marks of *individuals* trying to advance on the road to sanctification. I can’t be humble, gentle, patient, or loving by myself. And in fact, I cannot live out a life worthy of the calling on my own, either. The exhortations to the Ephesians are exhortations to the *church* much more than advice to individuals. The specifics on how to live a life worthy of the calling are *all* about relationship in community. And the whole rest of the passage is about acknowledging the unity we already have in Christ and then living so that others can know that it’s true.

This is not about uniformity – not about requiring everyone to think or believe or act or look the same way. The author of this letter is not suggesting that the Ephesians write out a “core beliefs” document – which may or may not have political and social rules in addition to

religious beliefs - and have everyone sign it before they can be official members. In fact, they are exhorted to celebrate their diversity: the church isn't like the world, where there's a distinct hierarchy and some are more important than others; the church is a place where every member is essential and all are welcome. Each different viewpoint gives us a clearer vision of the kingdom, and each person's unique giftedness adds to the beauty of the body of Christ.

But we churchpeople forget this. We get caught up in politics, in carpet colors, in building plans, in preferences of pastors, in programs and fundraisers and agendas and we forget that we are being called to live in unity with one another, bringing our uniqueness to the table, speaking the truth in love, living selflessly for the sake of the community, and working for peace. We have to ask ourselves, "What is the purpose of all of our programs? Our activities? Our committees? Are we just getting jobs done? Checking things off a list? Or are we making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, bringing our best to the table to build up the body of Christ – together?"

We are called, friends. We're called to be the body of Christ. Together. And that means we're held to a higher standard, individually and as a church. Together, with humility, gentleness, patience, and love, we can show the world that **we are who we say we are, and the One we follow is worth following**; so that the body of Christ can become more and more like the body of Christ; so through us, others can catch a glimpse of the kingdom and be inspired to follow, too.

Amen.