

“MARKS OF DISCIPLESHIP: V – USING THE GIFTS YOU’VE BEEN GIVEN”

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Ephesians 4:1-16

One of the most iconic television shows from the late 60’s to the early 70’s was a little thing called “The Brady Bunch.” Remember them? “Here’s the story of a lovely lady, who was bringing up three very lovely girls. All of them had hair of gold, like their mother, the youngest one in curls. Here’s the story of a man named Brady, who was busy with three boys of his own, they were four men living all together, yet they were all alone. And then, one day, when this lady met this fellow, they knew that it was much more than a hunch, that this group would somehow form a family, that’s the way we became the Brady Bunch!”

Well, for five years, we watched them become a family, and like all blended families, they had their ups and downs. At times, it was the boys against the girls, at time it was the young kids against the older ones, and in one of the most remembered episodes of all, it was middle-girl Jan against the world. She was feeling underappreciated, all the while watching her older sister seem to get everything she wanted and all of the attention, and in exasperation, she screams out to her parents, “Marcia! Marcia! Marcia!”

Since that time, whenever you hear anybody say that mockingly, “Marcia! Marcia! Marcia!” you know that it means somebody is jealous of somebody else, and pretty sick of them as well.

Well, apparently there was a little “Marcia! Marcia! Marcia!” stuff going on in the early church at Ephesus. You can tell by Paul’s words in the lesson we heard from Ephesians this morning that some of the new Christians are not getting along with each other, and not working well together, and that could spell disaster for a new, young church – so Paul writes to them about it.

Now, he doesn’t say there is trouble directly, instead he urges them to live lives worthy of their calling in Christ. He builds them up, reminds them of who they are and whose they are. And over and over, he keeps talking about unity in the Body of Christ. He holds that up as the goal for which they should strive – because the unity of the Church is not only good for the church, but good for the world.

Because Paul knew that more people would come to Christ, like he had, if they saw Christians acting like Christians should – with, as he said, humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance.

A number of years ago, I, like many of you, read the Mitford series of books by Jan Karon. And there was one particular story in one particular book, *Shepherds Abiding*, that I will never forget, and it speaks to what Paul was saying to the Ephesians. A young woman named Hope was going through a difficult time. She wanted to become owner of the little bookstore in the town where she lives, which is Mitford, North Carolina. The store is called “Happy Endings.” She is having trouble getting everything to fall into place and she’s getting very discouraged. And then one day she receives a letter in the mail, on which there was only one sentence, and it read: “Dear Hope, keep on living up to your name.” (James W. Moore, *There’s a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, p. 39)

“Dear Hope, keep on living up to your name.” In much the same way, Paul writes to the Ephesians and says to them, “Dear Christians, keep on living up to your name.”

And then, he tells them one of the ways they can do that – and it is to use the gifts that God has given them. Now, it appears that Paul has gotten wind that, like those Brady girls, some tension and jealousy was going on in the young church. Certainly there were some who were leading the church – preaching, teaching, serving as administrators and so forth – and surely they were garnering a lot of attention.

So some may have been jealous of that, and perhaps jealous that they weren’t getting attention themselves. That happens in church sometimes, you know. People who are in highly visible positions, positions deemed to be important, sometimes find people in the church resenting them for that, or even suggest that they think they’re better than everybody else.

In order to counteract that, Paul writes that indeed some people are gifted for certain leadership positions in church, but, and here’s the crux of what I want you to hear today – but, he says, everyone is gifted. Every one of you has been given gifts by God for you to use as Christians and to build up the body of Christ.

Now, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve said to someone “You are gifted,” and they reply, “No, I’m not.” I don’t know why we do that, except perhaps because we’re looking at others with gifts and comparing ourselves with them and feel like we don’t have gifts like theirs. But indeed, everyone has been given gifts by God, and everyone is called to use them.

Do you know what your gifts are? I read a really interesting suggestion this week as to how you can identify your gifts. The writer suggested that you ask yourself, "How would Jesus describe me?" And the answer will help you understand what your gifts are.

Jesus would have a field day answering that question around here – because God has poured so many wonderful gifts on all of you. Some of you are gifted musically and you bless us with that; some are gifted speakers and use that in worship leadership, or reading the Gospel lesson or teaching; some have a deep love for and gift of working with children, and you do that by teaching Sunday School or leading a choir or working with Vacation Bible School; some have a gift of sharing their faith story, and you do that by inviting others to church or serving as a friend-in-faith to a confirmand; some are gifted cooks and help out in so many ways – with hospitality hour, and special dinners and receptions, and retreats and picnics. Some of you are gifted with your hands and can fix anything, and you rise to the occasion where there is a need in the church or parsonage, or in the home of a person in need. Some have the gifts of caring, and you pray with others and call them on the phone and write notes of encouragement. Some have the gift of hospitality and you greet people as they come into the church and make sure they feel welcome.

You see what I mean? Everyone of you is gifted, and you promised, when you joined the church, and as a matter of fact, everytime you're here for a baptism or confirmation, that you will use those gifts to support this church, this part of the Body of Christ, by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness.

And friends, what you do matters. It matters. Your gifts matter. We can't be who God calls us to be without everyone using their gifts in whatever ways they can. So if you're not using them, or if you're not sure even what they are, think about that question, "How would Jesus describe you?" or ask people who are close to you.

You know, I've told you my story before, but let me just remind you that after I got out of college and didn't know what I was going to do with my life, I didn't have a lot of self-esteem or self-confidence. I really didn't know what my gifts were, or at least, I was afraid to use my gifts. I think I was hiding my light under a bushel, as Jesus would describe it.

Until one day, a Pastor named Glenn Catley invited me to read the Gospel lesson in worship. After years of being afraid to stand up and do anything like that, somehow God nudged me and gave me the courage to try, and I remember it like it was yesterday. As soon as I started to read, something came over me, and I loved it, and I never looked back.

So today, I'm inviting you like Glenn invited me, to use the gifts God has given you. There is a place for you to use those gifts in the ministry or through the ministry of this church, and when you do, you will make us stronger as a body, and stronger in our witness to the world of the love and power of Jesus Christ.

If you don't know what to do, come and see me. I'll help you find your way. Or ask others in the church. We'll point you in the right direction.

So, can you knit? There's a group for you.

Are you good with technology? We can sure use you on our tech team.

Do you love children? We would love to have you help teach or volunteer in the nursery with Miss Yolanda.

Can you sing? The choir's just waiting for you.

Are you good with a hammer and nail? The Trustees would love to know that.

Do you have office skills, or a gift of working with numbers? We can use your help with that.

Do you have a gift for decorating, or working with flowers, or do you like to cook? Let us know. There's a place for you.

Well, you get the idea. There is no gift that God has given that cannot be used in and through the ministry of this church. There is no gift that God has given that when used, cannot help but convey the mission our church is built around – helping people to know Jesus Christ and his love.

So, dear friends, as you come forward for communion this morning, and hold in your hands visible reminders of the body of Christ, I invite you to kneel in prayer and ask God to lead you in discerning the gifts he has given you, and show you the way to use them. If we all do that, and we follow where God leads, there will indeed be unity in the church and we will be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. May it be so.

Amen.