

We are the Family of God

- I. United
- II. Gifted
- III. Growing

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. 7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8 This is why it[a] says:

*“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”*

9 (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions[c]? 10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Tell me, have you ever thought about how many different expressions God uses to describe a group of believers? We are his flock, his vineyard, his bride, his treasured possession. We are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. We are the body of Christ, the branches of the Vine, a temple of living stones. And maybe my personal favorite, we are the Family of God. By God's grace, through faith in Jesus, you and I have been adopted into God's family. We are the sons and daughters of the Holy One. But that concept of being family applies not only to our relationship to God in the invisible Holy Christian Church. It also applies to our relationship to one another in this visible congregation called Mount Olive Lutheran Church. We too are a family. In fact, we've incorporated that term into our vision for this congregation. We say that we are a Family Growing in Christ. Today we want to drill down a little deeper into that idea of family as we focus on this theme:

We are the Family of God

In our text for today, the Apostle Paul points out three characteristics of this family of God. He says that as the Family of God, we are...

- I. United,

II. Gifted,
and III. Growing.

Today we are in the book of Ephesians. This letter, written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Ephesus, offers maybe the fullest description of what the Church of God really is. Paul begins the letter by describing how people become members of the Holy Christian Church. He reminds us that all people are born spiritually dead in sin. But God, who is rich in mercy, made us spiritually alive in Christ. That was not something we did for ourselves. It was something that God did for us, purely out of his undeserved love. Paul said it so well in the familiar words of Ephesians 2:8-9, *It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Paul goes on to say that the barrier of sin that once separated us from God and each other has now been broken down for both Jews and Gentiles. Paul writes, *Now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and Aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. (Ephesians 2:13, 19)* You, dear Christians, are members of God's household. By the faith that the Holy Spirit has worked in your heart through his word and sacrament, you are connected to every other Christian, as members of the family of God. That's one of the key points that Paul makes in the first three chapters of Ephesians.

With the start of chapter 4, where the text for today picks up, Paul begins to talk about how that fact, namely, that we are members of God's invisible family, also impacts our lives within a visible body of believers like Mount Olive. Paul writes, as he sits in a jail cell, *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (Ephesians 4:1-2)* In other words, now that God has made you his children, live like you are his children. Treat one another like the brothers and sisters of Christ that you are.

In fact, Paul goes on to speak about what it is that binds us together as members of God's family. He says, *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6)*

With those words, Paul is not referring specifically to what unites us into a body of believers called Mount Olive Lutheran Church. He's talking about a much bigger body. When he says that there is one body and one Lord and one faith and one Father, he's talking about what we have in common with every other Christian in the world. When a person is led by the Holy Spirit to trust in Jesus alone for salvation, that person becomes a member of the one Christian Church, whether he happens to be a member of a Lutheran Church or Baptist Church or Catholic Church. From God's perspective, there is only one Church. It's made up of those who believe that their standing with God is 100% dependent upon what God has done for us in Christ, rather than what we must do something for God and their fellow man in order to be right with God. In other words, there are those who trust Christ and those who trust in themselves. You might say, true Believers and everybody else.

Now, if someone trusts in Christ (and recognize, that requires God to work a miracle in their heart), then that believer is united to God and to every other true believer in the world. That's a bond that only God can create. It's called Unity of Faith.

But while God alone has the ability to create that invisible bond, man does have the ability to destroy it. Humans destroy it by teaching, believing and living contrary to God's word. Ultimately it's false doctrine that destroys true unity in a church. That's why Paul encourages

each one of us to *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* (Ephesians 4:3). In other words, it's critical for us to know what God says in his word. The better we know the word, the more united we will be. Or to put it another way, sometimes you hear people say, "The WELS is so picky about every single teaching in the Bible—that's just dividing people into different camps. God doesn't want all these divisions in this church. He wants one Church." That's certainly true. But true unity is not created by ignoring false doctrine or by the compromising the truth. True Unity is created by holding to the truth, teaching it and defending it. That's called Unity of Doctrine. Do you remember what Jesus told his disciples would bind his disciples together? "*If you hold to my teaching, then you are really my disciples*" (John 8:31). Or you think about Jesus telling his disciples to teach the nation's to obey everything he commanded them.

You might say that those are the two things that bind us together as a family growing in Christ. Unity of Faith and Unity of Doctrine. One connects us to God and every other true believer in the Invisible church. And one connects us to God and each other in this visible Lutheran congregation.

In fact, don't we express that very thing in Mount Olive's mission statement? Notice how our mission statement begins. "*United by our faith in Jesus Christ* (that's what connects us to the holy Christian Church) *and our confession of God's word* (that's what connects us to Mount Olive Lutheran Church). Those are the two things that unite us. We may not agree on who's going to win the Super Bowl, or who's the best presidential candidate or what kind of worship music we prefer, but we can agree on who our Savior is and what the Bible teaches. And that kind of unity is a precious gift from God. This Family of God is, first of all, (I.) United.

But it's also (II.) Gifted. St Paul makes that point when he says, *To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.* Isn't that the truth? You think about the grace, that is, the undeserved love that Jesus has measured out to each one of us, not with a teaspoon, but with like a bushel basket. He pours out an unlimited supply of God's love, God's forgiveness, God's mercy into our hearts and lives. But remember, God has chosen to deliver that unlimited supply of grace through particular tools or instruments. Call them the pipelines of God's grace. Those pipelines of God's grace are God's word and the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. Today God will open up two of those pipelines for us. In our service last night, God opened up a third pipeline through the washing with water and the word.

Here in our text, God connects all those gifts with one other set of gifts. He writes, *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.* In other words, in another expression of his undeserved love, God gave to his church to the office of the Public Ministry in all its various forms. God sent Apostles and Prophets, pastors and teachers—for what purpose? Paul says, *...so that the body of Christ may be built up.* In other words, your pastors and teachers are here to feed you and your children a regular diet a good spiritual food to build up your faith. And then we point you to ways to exercise your faith by serving one another in love. Sometimes we refer to that as a Spiritual Wellness Plan. Just as good food and plenty of exercise make physical bodies strong, so also good food, namely, God's word and sacrament, and plenty of exercise in service to God and our fellow man, makes the body of Christ strong and growing. That's why we say that the Family of God is also (III.) Growing.

In fact, isn't that at the very core of our purpose as a congregation is? Go back to Mount Olive's mission statement. *United by our faith in Jesus Christ and our confession of God's Word, the members of Mount Olive Evangelical Lutheran Church use the gospel in Word and sacrament* (those are the gifts God has given us) to do what? First, *to win the lost for Christ.*

That's about growing the church outward, making the body of Christ bigger, bringing more people into contact with the gospel. We're going to talk more about that next week. But notice the other two purposes for using the gospel, namely, *to nurture one another in Christian love*. Nurture means to feed and care for one another in an atmosphere of Christian love. That's what builds up a church internally. It grows us closer to each other. And the third purpose for using the gospel in Word and sacrament? It's *to equip God's people for lives of worship and service*. Hmmmm. I wonder where we got that idea? Could it be from this very passage, where Paul says that God gave us pastors and teachers *to equip his people for works of service*. Isn't that right? One of the reasons we exist as a congregation is to give people opportunities to serve, to minister to each other, to use their time and talents to meet the needs of others, whether it's by wiping down the pews or putting out the communion cups, or advancing the worship slides.

But more than that, our church exists to equip people to serve in whatever capacity God is called them to serve in our world—whether it's as a Christian father or mother, a Christian husband or wife, a Christian parole officer, attorney or ambulance driver. Every day of our lives, God gives us the opportunity to put our faith into action, in fact, to exercise the spiritual gifts he's given us, why? *...so that the body of Christ may be built up, until when? ...until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature*.

Isn't that our goal for life on this side of the grave? To be spiritually mature? So that, as Paul puts it, *We will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming*. We don't want to be duped by the lies being peddled by Satan and his minions. We don't want to remain to be “baby Christians.” *Instead, as Paul puts it, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ*. We will grow to become the mature body of Christ.

Whether you call us the Body of Christ or the branches of the Vine, or the Family of God—those are all pictures of something that is alive and growing. That's God vision, yes, that's our vision for this congregation. To grow up in faith. To grow together in love. To grow out with a good news of Jesus. For in that way, we will be exactly what God has called us to be. By God's grace, Mount Olive will be...a Family Growing in Christ. God grant it, for Jesus sake. Amen.