

Joined and Knitted Together

Amos 6.1a, 4-7 | Psalm 146 | Ephesians 4:11-16 | Luke 16:1, 19-31

EPHESIANS 4:11-16

¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

INTRODUCTION

Counting the Godfather trilogy as a single unit—and I do, because that is the only rational way to consider that cinematic masterpiece—the second greatest mafia film ever made is *The Untouchables*. Written by David Mamet, scored by Ennio Morricone, starring Kevin Costner, Andy Garcia, Sean Connery, and Robert De Niro as Al Capone. Violent, but worth watching. About a half hour in, there is an interesting scene: Al Capone stands amongst his mafia henchmen—about twenty of them, all seated at a fancy ballroom table, he paces around them, holding a baseball bat, delivering a monologue for two minutes and twenty-seven seconds:

What draws my admiration? What is that which gives me joy? [Dames! Boozin'!] Baseball! A man... A man stands alone at the plate. This is the time for what? For individual achievement. There he stands alone. But in the field, what? Part of a team. [Teamwork] ... Looks, throws, catches, hustles. Part of one big team. Bats himself the live-long day, Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and so on. If his team don't field ... What is he? You follow me? No one. Sunny day, the stands are full of fans. What does he have to say? I'm goin' out there for myself. But ... I get nowhere unless the team wins. Team.¹

What's Capone saying? He's telling them that their criminal enterprise, the Chicago Outfit, only really works if everyone shows up and does their part. When someone goes their own way, thinking only of himself, they are all at risk. It's a poignant moment as it anticipates the downfall of his crime syndicate later in the movie, when one of his guys turns against the whole team.

I mention all of this because, I believe, it illustrates a point that Paul is making in the Ephesians reading we just heard. Like a team—or even like the mafia—the church is a group of people, each with a part to play, for the good of the whole. And that's what I think Paul wants us to see and believe: We're each necessary for this thing, this church, to function properly. Let's take a closer look.

1. THE PASTORAL TASK

But first, as we tend to do, we must consider the context. In the verses before ours, having just described the glorious ascension of Christ Jesus, Paul notes that the triumphant Christ has left

¹ *The Untouchables*, directed by Brian de Palma (Paramount Pictures, 1987). See from 37:17 to 39:44.

his people gifts. But unlike the lists of spiritual gifts in Romans and 1 Corinthians, the gifts here are people.² And in the first verse of our passage, the gifts are the leaders of the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. I will not take the time right now to dig deeply into the distinctions or the difficulties of each, or why we do not have apostles after the original thirteen, or what exactly a prophet is in this context. Suffice it to say, we're talking about pastoral leaders—those whose charge is to evangelize and to teach and to care for God's people. They are gifts to the church in a very particular sense, they have a function. And in fact, the next three prepositional phrases provide the structure of his thought here. There are three tasks, outlined in successive fashion, each one providing the foundation for the next.

The first task is that of the pastoral leaders and it is the equipping, or preparation, of the saints. As a noun, that word *equipping*, is relatively rare. But it has to do with preparing, or maturing or even qualifying.³ How, you might be wondering? It would seem that the leaders are to equip the saints through verbal instruction. That is, did you notice that each of the leadership titles mentioned are fundamentally word-teaching-based positions? The apostles establish the authoritative teaching. The prophets proclaim the power of God's Word. The evangelists share the good news. The pastors caringly instruct their flocks. And the teachers teach. These are all proclamatory acts. The equipping is through instruction. And who is being equipped? The saints—a way of saying all faithful Christians.

2. THE PEOPLE'S WORK

This brings us to the second prepositional phrase and the second task: "*for the work of ministry.*"⁴ This may be provocative to some. But there is an important lesson here. In Paul's understanding of the church, it is not the leaders alone who do the work of the ministry.⁵ It is actually the saints, the people—each and every one of the faithful Christians—who do the work of ministry. The leaders are there primarily to train. The work of evangelizing the world, sharing the gospel with all people, caring for the poor, standing up against injustice, showing hospitality, holding fast to the faith, encouraging the holiness of all God's people—this work, this work of the ministry, belongs to all of us. There is an unfortunate sense of clericalism among some Christians—that all the church work and pastoral work and visitation and ministering to God's people should be done by the clergy. Paul could not disagree more. Not only are clergy not endowed with infinite energy to do all the ministry themselves, nor are they gifted with the Lord's omnipresence, so that they can be in all places at all times, they are not accountable for it. Paul puts the weight of responsibility on the saints. We all share in this work. And fortunately for us, at Christ Church, we have some people who are very much engaged in the ministry of this church. We are blessed to have saints who put their shoulders into the work. And for that, we are grateful. Because it is all of us, not just the clergy, who must be engaged in ministry.

² See Rom 12:3-8 and 1 Cor 12:4-31.

³ For example, see related words in Matt 21:16, 2 Cor 13:9, and Luke 6:40.

⁴ Eph 4:12.

⁵ It should be noted that there is a way of reading this wherein each prepositional phrase is centred back in the leaders described—that it is they who do the work of the ministry and build up the church (not the saints). This is, of course, inconsistent with Paul's theology in general as well as incoherent with this passage—as the whole body is equipped (different word) for the building up of the body. For more detailed exegetical arguments, see Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 301-304.

Now, in case that was not provocative enough—and hopefully it was, because some of you are realising that you have become mere consumers in this church—in case that was not provocative enough, there is a third prepositional phrase and task.

3. THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

The leaders do the equipping, the saints are equipped for the work of ministry, and for what? It is for the *“building up the body of Christ.”* In fact, the rest of the passage unpacks this idea: *“...until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”* Skipping down a bit: *“But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”*⁶ We can call this mutual edification. The saints do the work of ministry so that the body—the church—is edified, it is instructed and benefitted, it is built up to maturity and fullness.

This, my friends, may be even more provocative to some, because mutual edification requires presence. Again, you might be rightly worrying about what I am going to say next. But please hear me: I don’t mean this as a criticism. I mean this as an observation—an observation with love, and plea to really consider what I am saying. Some do not come to church as often as you should. Some of you have gotten used to watching online—the very definition of being a consumer—or just not bothering to attend. Now, let me be very clear. Some of you are visiting or coming back for Homecoming—the first time in a long time. I am *not* talking to you. Whatever your reasons, we are glad you are here. And some of you have legitimate medical reasons to stay home and watch on Zoom. Fair enough. But it’s not as many as are doing it. And some weeks, some of you will be stressed to the point where you should not come to church. Also fair enough. We are not being legalistic about this.

But do not think for a minute that it does not matter. Your presence matters very much. To quote a famous American black preacher named Tony Evans: *“I hear people say, ‘I don’t have to go to church to be a Christian,’ and they are absolutely right. Salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone. But you don’t have to go home to be married, but stay away long enough and your relationship will be affected.”*⁷ Evans is right. There is an immeasurable loss to your spiritual wellbeing each time you miss church. And I do not mean that in the sense that you are missing out on life-changing sermons like this one... I mean you are missing out on the thing that Paul says the church is for: the mutual edification of one another.

You see, life is hard. And a Christian life, a life of faith, in this world of dubious morals and ever-present temptations, is very hard. We actually need each other. We need to be here to encourage one another, to care for one another, to build the kinds of relationships where we can call one another, and take responsibility for another. The work of the ministry belongs to all of us, so that all of us are built up and brought to spiritual maturity. And that is precisely what we are trying to accomplish here. Through the liturgy, the confessing of our common faith in the creed, through the passing of the peace, the fellowship over coffee, and even the sharing together in the Eucharistic meal, we are building one another up, encouraging one another, and

⁶ Eph 4:12c-13, 1-16.

⁷ Tony Evans, Tweet on July 31, 2021. See twitter.com/drtonyevans.

spurring one another on in the faith. Plus, and I do not say this lightly, there is more to church than Sundays. Being a part of a faith community, a living and active and tangible expression of the body of Christ, a place where mutual edification happens, is so much more.

CONCLUSION

As I close, those of you who are not yet Christians, you should know this: Jesus Christ died and rose again to save each of us. The only requirement in front of us, then, is to confess our sins, repent, and approach him in faith. And beyond the salvation that comes from such faith, the chief benefit is being a part of a people, a diverse and wonderful people, a people joined and knitted together in Christ, a family, a team, a church—so that we may build one another up in love.

Why wouldn't you want to be a part of this? Yet... and I am not trying to pick on any particular people who have been away or who have been inconsistent. No judgment. The gospel teaches us grace and mercy. I am suggesting that for those who do believe, you are an important part of this team. Your presence is needed, for your own edification, and so that you can edify others. Without you, this team is worse off. We do not need baseball players who are out for themselves or gangsters who only care about their own comfort. We need to be the team, the family, the church that Paul is calling us to be, so that we may be built up in love.

Let me pray: *Father in heaven, you have drawn us together in your Son, now keep us together, building one another up, we pray, for the glory of his name. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*