

★ *The Episcopal Diocese of Texas* ★

Grace and Peace, Sermon at Clergy Day
April 24, 2012

Well, I have to be honest and tell you I have started and restarted these words for this piece a hundred times so I begin with this. Grace and peace be with you.

I think if I am truthful about who I am and where I am on this day, I must claim clearly and faithfully that I find myself to be a reluctant apostle, a reluctant teacher, pastor, and prophet; yet, an eager evangelist. I am, as the ordinal says, persuaded of my calling, and in that persuasion I am ever more aware that I am a sinner who rests upon God's grace and redeeming work alone. And so I stand before in this moment of this time together to offer a few words of grace, a few words of peace. Hoping somehow, as I internalize and think and have thought and prayed about the passage from Ephesians that I myself—first in my own meager way—am trying to live a life worthy of this calling and worthy of the sacrifice paid by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and that gift, which is His.

I want to look at Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I think it would be interesting to find out, actually—but I have a suspicion that 90 percent of you choose this passage in your ordinations. And I am also keenly aware that over a thousand successive years when I pick up those sermons preached on this text and find millions of views about these callings and persuasions that Paul mentions. Thinking of that hymn, perhaps even a hundred thousand tongues have tried to fathom the uniqueness of these gifts given and the freedom of life in service to Christ at that moment in which hands have been laid on our heads as the ordained and the Holy Spirit called down upon us.

I actually find it hard to imagine all that St. Paul meant in these words about calling and giftedness, especially as we look back at this passage, given our vantage point today and our current time. The names of these offices you see—these offices of evangelist, prophet, apostle, pastor, teacher—these are perhaps normative ministries in Paul's context. The names of the offices have meaning to Paul, and we keep stretching back to figure out what those are. My guess is, even for many of you who have longer tenures in ministry than I do, and thinking of a few of you who have served for 40 and 50 years, the notion and idea of what those offices mean and have meant has changed even more rapidly recently.

So it is that Paul in his language always seems somewhat beyond my reach, somewhat stuck in the midst of his own context, in his own world, and I and you—we are firmly grounded and stuck in our own. To be sure, Paul could not have imagined either the structures of our current

church or the twists and turns the apostolic church and its history has taken over the years to bring us to moments such as these. I returned. I went back. Given I can't see that,—I can't see what that means—I can only wonder. I returned to the Ephesians passage, and I wondered what is the subject of Paul's charge and challenge? What is it that he argues for outside of the assumptions of what all of that giftedness might mean?

Paul is challenging—I think—the readers, and so it challenges us today to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called and I have been called with all humility, gentleness and with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of spirit and a bond of peace. That is Paul's challenge. That is Paul's argument. That is the gospel offered to us. A worthy ministry, a worthy life led then, has some icons about it. It has some things that are produced out of that worthy life, which is always oriented in Paul and in the gospel on grace,—always on grace—so you can see that each one of us is given grace, according to the measure of Christ's gift.

As we live that life worthy, then what happens is that we see. Our eyes are open to see that there is one body and one spirit. It is not a product that we make. It is a gift of grace, just as you were called to one hope of your calling. That itself is a godly gift—one Lord, one faith, one baptism. These are the things that flow out of a life that is lived and is worthy. A worthy ministry is lead with giftedness, and so you might be called from different times. You might be called a prophet. You might be called a pastor. Those are the things that happen. Our giftedness is more, though, than just for our own purpose or simply coming out of this understanding of grace, but it is always to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ. It is a grace given for mission. It is a grace given that becomes unity. Faith, and knowledge, maturity are aimed—not for our own good, but always for the life that is Christ's own. Living out a worthy ministry means that we act and will be seen no longer as children that are tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine. Worthy ministry is one dependent on grace where love is spoken—truth and love.

I want to walk through a little bit. I want to—kind of—make our way backwards and ponder those things that Paul offers us. Paul ministered to and worked with a diverse group of congregations. It is clear in my reading of scripture that they drove him nuts.

His letters—I'll never forget in seminary that moment when you understood that the letters are always addressed to problems, unless we're in Philippians, right? They are always addressed to problems. I want more Philippians, please, Paul. Where did those letters go? His own letters testify to different thoughts about life, different local traditions and customs—all of which seemed so very central to the people to whom the letters are addressed in those house churches.

Probably—now I'm going to predict my own stuff—it probably like a great distraction to Paul in his mission.

So it is that I think that Paul believes a worthy ministry is one that encourages each congregation, community, church to work at its very best locally—to work well locally, to work as communities that, in and of themselves, are trying to grow and trying to thrive within their local context. Paul did not, after all—and I think this is something worth noting—he did not exist—his ministry did not exist with these congregations in a unified church, where there was a unified tradition or unified worship. He did not have a prayer book to guide his people. We take from that we are to help our people understand the uniqueness of their local context, so that they can be met ultimately into a greater body of many, as Paul says, and varying parts, instead of assuming that every part is exactly the same. It was, after all, this idea of this missionary method of Paul's, which would ultimately build a thriving and growing church. I think Paul would have encouraged every congregation to be themselves, but—and it is a big but—to be focused on the gospel of salvation and the uniqueness of God in Christ Jesus and to grow into a maturity which allowed speaking across conflicts with love for one another and being—I think—ultimately in love with one another.

Only in speaking love to one another can the whole body seem to work together. Such a thought, though, requires the next life lesson of Paul's missionary methods, and that is ultimately maturity—maturity. The church that we know today—not unlike, perhaps Paul's house churches and communities—is a place often filled with trickery. It can be a place of craftiness, and it can be a place of deceitful scheming. It is a place of politics, and it is not meant to be a place where children who are interested in the saving work of Jesus Christ—that gospel, grace, and mercy—where the children of those communities are thrown back and forth against one another. That is the kingdom I think we've made for ourselves, and in my short time as a bishop, but also as priest, such an immature church has been my experience.

We have too often seen our people as the means to the end of the recent wars, which we have raged on one another, and we have tossed our parishioners this way and that. The ultimate question is not, you see, “Are you with me or against me?” The question is not what is your position, so I can decide if we are friends. Maturity means helping individuals in our congregations—all of them—to know that there is the need of only one thing—only one thing—and that is grace. My salvation, the salvation of my congregation, the salvation of my church depends on nothing that I myself can offer, and I think it is true for the dioceses and its bishop, but it is dependent upon grace.

The worthy life, the worthy ministry lived well as one, always dependent upon grace, which remembers everyone else's dependence as profound as your own. Worthy ministry is one that

works to grow this maturity within the congregation and the wider body of the church. A worthy ministry is one wherein the leadership itself helps people to understand who they are as creatures in need of grace and encourages them to work with others—many kinds with many stories—but all out of our common need and dependence upon God alone. Paul certainly built an identity of a common mission out of this, where individual congregations and people across Asia Minor saw that they were needed in the wider apostolic church and the wider mission field. Paul did not inspire people to stay by themselves in the midst of this grace, but to seek others in the same need and to lift up their eyes from their local context and reach out and do that work. Unity flows—you see—out of this common understanding of our dependence.

Here is the catch in all of this—all of this living, all of this maturity, all of this thinking of others, all of this cooperative life that we long for—and that is the knowledge of God in Christ and grace. Congregations and church will always and only exist in a maturity and in a mature unity at the level upon which its leaders itself live out their own individual and worthy lives in ministry. If we don't know Jesus, and if we don't participate in the reception of His grace, then we are all lost human beings. I myself—have difficulty with grace and with the risen Lord, because we prefer to pretend, project, and live out a lie that says that I don't actually need anything, that I am my own salvation and that I am the captain of my own destiny or the destiny of my community.

We would rather die on white stallions fighting the good fight—whatever the good fight is from wherever you stand—than we would to be honest about our failures to love. We will do everything that is required. We will feed our congregation. We will get them into community. We will build up our average Sunday attendance. We will work all day and very hard, so that everyone will be happy, and we cannot be seen as anything less than the most perfect pastoral leader the church has ever seen.

That is not true. That is not even near reality. Our outer projections are not real. They are a lie and they cover up all of the real motivating forces inside. I have been reading and listening to the sociologist Brené Brown from Houston, and she has this idea that these outer factors are simply—kind of—a costume—a dress—that hides the real motivating factors of our lives. Those are the things and the images of our recent lessons—our recent gospel lessons—kind of the image or icon of the Upper Room that we have locked the door and tucked inside of ourselves. There are these words. I'm going to—as if I'm not already messing around with us plenty today—I'm going to mess around with my own upper room and yours.

I am going to say to you that I know that what hides there are words such as these: “I am not good enough. I am not pretty enough. I am worried about my future. I am not sure that I have saved enough money—that I have enough money to live the life I want to live. I'm worried about losing my job. I'm worried I won't give the right answer about what I believe, and therefore, I

will lose my friends and everything that I stand on. I am worried what will happen if others find out who is actually locked away inside that upper room. I am worried about my control and power. I'm anxious about what this or that will cost me," and before you know it, we're just this person balancing a thousand different plates of lies, so that nobody will see who we are.

Inside of us is the pain that others have caused us that we do not want to deal with, but more importantly, is the pain that we know we have caused others that we do not want to acknowledge. There are the hidden words that we have said that cannot be taken back, and then there is the list—the long, very long list of people that we have hurt. I have that same list—different people.

Paul frequently reminds me that fear and anxiety are the key ingredients to human life that is rooted in ego protection, so we protect by projecting. We point out everybody else's sinfulness first. We make sure that everyone knows the failures of my brothers and my sisters, so that attention is deflected away from me and I will do all of that at all cost, in order to not examine my own soul. We pretend that these very real pieces of who we are and who we dress up to be cannot be seen, so we hide them and they drive us to all kinds of activity that destroys the very thing that we're meant to build up. We consume. We destroy. We hoard. We blame. We shame, and, in fact, we undo everything. We undo everything that Paul is trying to teach us about grace. I want to remind you that God did not call the perfect. God did call the fully formed. God did not call the professional. God called you and he called me. He called me. He called you. With all of that stuff—knowing all of that stuff. That is a great image in the last couple of weeks. Jesus—the real Jesus—is right in the middle of that stuff—not the perfected fake me—the real me. When we don't deal with the real us, it is hard to deal with the real God. When we are just dealing with the fake, play, pretend stuff, we end up—as they said in this last week's gospel—with a ghostly Jesus—a phantom that floats in and out of life, always to our own expectations.

It's hard—I think. It's to know and to feel and to experience grace and our need for it, if we're not deeply in tune with that inside of us. That is why Paul speaks of grace so very much. That is why that is the challenge. Paul connects to us over the many centuries—not out of some office that we may hold, but rather out of his very human nature and the fact that Paul himself knows that he a mess—just like his people, and we discover today—just like us. Therefore, what is needed by all in this equation is a full measure of grace. That is the key.

I think—as long as we deal with one another as clergy and leaders of this church without being who we really are, we are somewhat doomed to keep rehashing the conflicts of the past, to have a graceless life with one another, and mostly, a graceless life without Jesus—just a ghostly Jesus who is nice. If we lead a worthy life—one that is not about perfection, but about the real us

turning towards God and turning towards one another and supporting one another, then I think we see resurrected life as it is out of this grace received.

Out of this flows—what Paul calls—that profound humility that becomes the central piece of relationships. Then in that grace-filled life, we find gentleness from one another—gentleness. We find patience with one another. In that grace, we find patience. You can be who you are. I can be who I am. That is where the resurrected Lord is. We can bear one another in love, because now you don't have to meet what I need you to do or not to do it. I don't need you to. We can pray for our enemies—and not that they would be changed—you see. That is most often the prayer—I think. “Heavenly Father, help my enemies see that they are wrong.” but that we'd actually find how much we are alike, and that is the grace-filled prayer. It's really funny. We're all just stumbling foolish mess of human beings dependent on our Lord and Savior, and in those relationships, the incarnation is present. It is forged in grace, and then there is a bond of unity, and it blossoms. It blossoms—right, Paul?—and it is blossoming so that the kingdom of God may take root, so we will proceed from this place to talk about our life together. Grace be with you.

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