

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
New Chapter, Same Book
Ephesians 4:1 – 16

I recognize that this is one week premature, but I have to say it – I love the fall. I love when the days begin to shorten and the weather gets cooler – although the weather didn't seem to get the memo last week. I love when the fog rolls in and stays for the majority of the morning. I love how there is a freshness, a newness, as schools start up again and adults adopt that fall rhythm.

And I love how the fall reminds me that in a few short months, Advent and Christmas will be here. I can't help it – I love the festivities, the beauty, and the reminder that Jesus has come, and that we are waiting. We are waiting for him to come again to heal our world and to heal us. We are waiting for the day when we will no longer be overcome by sin, when we will see Jesus face to face, and when all will be well. We are waiting for it; Scripture says we *groan* for it (Rom 8:23).

As the seasons change and the earth responds, so *we* respond to the changing seasons of our lives. We grow and flourish. We lay fallow and parts of us die. Dreams we once had may not be, and surprises we never saw coming arrive. As much as we would like to be in control of our lives, change comes whether we invited the fall, winter, spring, or summer.

Last week, we celebrated a man who was a part of *many* seasons in the life of St. Timothy's. We celebrated a man who was a part of many, or perhaps, *all* of the seasons of your lives. Last week, we celebrated Pastor Dan and commissioned him in his new role as bishop.

Pastor Dan's 25 years of ministry in this place were no small gift. His gifts of love, stability, inspiration, mentorship, and Christ-centeredness, are not gifts to be taken for granted, but gifts to be appreciated. What a gift, for St. Timothy's and for you to have been the recipient of so much love.

And this is what makes love so difficult; love means letting go and loosening our grip of control. We don't *want* to let go. We *want* to hold on; we don't want *anything* to change. We don't want anything to change, because we fear that adjusting to change will show that we never loved that person. We don't want anything to change, because we don't know what the future will hold. As we experience the waves of grief, it will behoove us *not* to rush or overlook our grief.

As Pastor Dan placed his father's shoes on the pulpit and then placed his shoes on the pulpit, he left us with an encouragement. He encouraged us that he was never asked to fill his father's shoes, and he encouraged us *not* to ask someone to fill *his* shoes. He encouraged us to find someone to fill their *own* shoes.

As the interim pastoral team, Pastor Judy, Pastor Jim, and I want to tell you that there will not be an effort to *replace* Pastor Dan's shoes. *No* one can replace Pastor Dan's shoes. As every pastor who has served St. Timothy's before Pastor Dan, their shoes have made an indelible mark on this place and on your hearts, which will *never* be replaced.

I would like to share with you a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer on grief. "There is nothing that can replace the absence of someone dear to us, and one should not even attempt to do so. One must simply hold out and endure it. At first that sounds very hard, but at the same time it is also a great comfort for to the

extent the emptiness truly remains unfilled, one remains connected to the other person through it. It is wrong to say that God fills the emptiness. God in no way fills it but much more leaves it precisely *unfilled* and thus helps us preserve – even in pain – the authentic relationship. Furthermore, the more beautiful and full the remembrances, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy. One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain.”¹

A precious gift to the church, a precious gift to you. We hold this gift and recognize that the seasons are now changing. A new, unwritten chapter is now being written. A new chapter with surprise twists and turns. A new chapter of the same book, a book begun 57 years ago in St. Timothy’s and nearly 2,000 years ago in the Church. This book is our calling as disciples of Jesus, a calling to share the good news of Jesus with the world.

So what does that calling look like? Does it look like standing on the street corner with a bullhorn, quoting Scripture and telling people that they need to believe in Jesus? Does it mean going to church every week and hoping that your neighbors notice, so that one day they will become Christians? Many of us have lived the Christian life long enough to know that these are not the most helpful evangelistic approaches. So what *is* the way to live out our calling to share the good news of Jesus?

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/283627-there-is-nothing-that-can-replace-the-absence-of-someone>

In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul writes that living out our calling looks like humility, gentleness, patience, love, and peace. Our calling looks like humility. St. Bernard once wrote that humility “is the virtue by which a man becomes conscious of his own unworthiness, in consequence of the truest knowledge of himself.” Humility comes from self-knowledge. When we see ourselves as we truly are and compare our lives not with someone we perceive to be worse than us, but compare ourselves with the life of Jesus, “there is no room for pride.” When we see ourselves as we truly are, we recognize that we are utterly dependent upon the God who created us. “Christian humility is based on the sight of self, the vision of Christ, and the realization of God.”²

Our calling looks like gentleness, or meekness. This looks like the person who “is always angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time.” The gentle, or meek, person is a person who is indignant with “the wrongs and the sufferings of others, but is never moved to anger by the wrongs and insults” he or she has received.³ This meekness looks like Jesus, who angrily turned over the tables of the profiting money-changers in the temple but did not defend himself as he was crucified.

Our calling looks like patience, or long-suffering. This looks like a “spirit which never admits defeat, which will not be broken by any misfortune or suffering, by any disappointment or discouragement, but which persists to the end.” It is a

² William Barclay, *Ephesians*, 135.

³ Barclay, 137.

“spirit which bears insult and injury without bitterness and without complaint.” It is a spirit like God, who is repeatedly described as “long-suffering” in Scripture.⁴

Our calling looks like love. This looks like “the ability to retain unconquerable good will to the unlovely and the unlovable, towards those who do not love us, and even towards” our enemies.⁵

Our lives of humility, gentleness, patience, and love produce peace, or right relationships. When our lives are filled with humility, gentleness, patience, and love, right relationships with one another will be the result.

This all sounds very nice, but if you’ve been tracking with me, this also seems *impossible*. To see yourself as you truly are, to be angry at injustice to others and not to yourself, never to take revenge, and to love even your enemies, is a *tall* order. But this is the life we are called to live. You and I are called to live a life that is void of “me.”

I am reminded of one of my roommates in college, who posted a sign in our apartment. The letters were bright red, and it said, “It’s Not About Me.” And that’s just the point – it’s not about me and it’s not about you.

So what do we *do*? How do we live lives that are not about “me” but are filled with the *antithesis* of me, with humility, gentleness, patience, and love? For those of you who have tried desperately to be good, you have already come to the conclusion that you *cannot* be good, no matter how hard you try. You have recognized that you can do all of the most generous things in the world, but your heart is still filled with “me.” There is *nothing* you and I can do to be rid of “me.” And so we confess that we

⁴ Barclay, 138 – 139.

⁵ Barclay, 140.

are filled with ourselves. We ask God to put that “old self” to death and pray that the life of Christ would live in our hearts. We confess and we pray, but the work is the Holy Spirit’s work in us. The *Spirit* is the one who produces good in us.

So is that *it*? We confess and pray and don’t worry about the rest? Well no. We are called to discipleship, to following in the footsteps of Jesus. We are called to follow Jesus, who humbled himself and was obedient, even to death on the cross.

This calling to discipleship, this calling to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, is a *lifelong* journey. Not one of us will be finished until Jesus calls us home. And this is one of the great encouragements of the Christian life – not one of us has it all figured out; we are all growing. It doesn’t matter if you have come from a long line of missionaries or pastors, whether you are 90 years old, or whether you have been a Christian all your life, you are growing. If you are still breathing, God is not done with you yet and you have something that only *you* can contribute to the Church.

Not one of us has all the gifts, nor *should* we. As Paul writes, we each have a gift given to us by the Spirit, and that gift is to be shared with the Church. Your gift of teaching, of leading, of caring for children, of listening, of sharing wisdom, of practical helps – whatever your gift is – your gift is *needed*. Your gift is needed for *you* to grow and for the *Church* to grow. The Church is like a body, which needs to be exercised in order to grow stronger. You need to exercise your gift so that the *Church* body can grow stronger and so that we might look more and more like Jesus.

We are Christ’s Church, and we were *always* meant to do this together. You have important gifts to share with us, just as we have gifts to share with you. It’s time to exercise; it’s time to grow.

May you grow in faith and may *we* grow in faith, as we offer all that we have and all that we are to one another, to the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.