

“The Divine Progression”

Manuscript of Ordination Sermon by Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton
Sunday, June 9, 2019, Hofstra Arena

Ephesians 4:1-6 (NRSV) | Unity in the Body of Christ

⁴ I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

- I. Today is a day about God’s claim on our lives and the examples of that claim are everywhere around us. It’s pretty amazing. All of the things we are doing today, baptisms, renewal of our baptisms, recognizing confirmations, and ordaining clergy are all shining and brilliant examples of what the church believes about God’s claim on our lives, a claim that says you matter, you are important, you are valued, and you are needed.

I believe that has been God’s intention from the beginning of time until today.

- II. I have always been fascinated by the Old Testament story. I’ve always appreciated looking at the Old Testament record as a whole. When you read the Old Testament, if you are anything like me, you read it just shaking your head. In story after story, God had every reason to say, “Okay, that’s it. I’m done with this human being experiment. They just can’t get it right.”

And God, it seems, was very tempted to do so. At one point, the people were on the verge of entering the promised land. They didn’t trust God’s care, sent spies into the land who came back and reported that there were giants in the land, and ultimately decided they couldn’t risk going in. God basically said, *“I’m so frustrated with you. I just need you to wander in the wilderness for forty years and think about it. I need that long to get over my disappointment with you.”* But God did.

- III. So much so that God sent Jesus to the world to show humanity the right pathway to God. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, advocated for the poor and marginalized. He continued God’s tradition of calling unlikely characters. He pulled away on to pray and offered a place for the little children. And you know what? We messed that one up too. We crucified him on a cross. And once again, God had every reason to say, *“Okay, I’ve had enough of this. That’s the end of the road for these humans.”*

But God didn’t. And the story continued.

- IV. Jesus is resurrected. He makes all of these wonderful appearances. Gives the disciples lots of assurances. Ascends into the heavens in this wonderfully dramatic scene that should inspire and endear confidence in the way forward, and what happens, the disciples can't get their act together. And as a result, God sends the gift of the Holy Spirit to bring clarity to their babbling, brings a strong sense of purpose to people like Peter, converts this scoundrel by the name of Saul, and continues to keep the story alive. It's a story that has continued even until today.

That is really what the Apostle Paul summarizes in the book of Ephesians. In a masterful account of the works of God, Paul spends the first couple of chapters talking about how God chose us before the world was ever created – God's prevenient grace, sent Christ to atone for all of our missteps and trespasses, sealed and endowed us with all that we need through the gift of the Holy Spirit. And then in Chapter 2, verse 7 of Ephesians, Paul says this great thing. God did all of this, Paul says, *"So that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness toward us in Jesus Christ."*

"The immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness toward us." I mean it just makes you want to sing, *"God is so good, God is so good. God is so good. God's so good to me."* These acts of grace all throughout the history of time are a commentary on this goodness of God. This, my friends, is the divine progression of grace.

- V. And in response to this awesome, consistent gift of grace, Paul says that we have some responsibilities to take care of. In Chapter 3, verse 10 Paul says that the church has been given its mission so that we can show this grace even to a world of principality and power.

That is all a lead-in to this wonderful series of verses from Chapter 4. With passionate words, Paul says, *"I beg you. I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."*

I don't know how to say that any clearer than Paul stated. The calling God places on our lives has a demand attached to it. Live a life worthy of the calling. How? By being humble, gentle, patience, loving, cooperative, and desiring of unity. Paul says, "I beg you to do it!" This is how that divine progression of grace continues, my friends. It continues through us. It is what we do with what we have received. WE are benefactors of an amazing grace that has been offered, forgiveness granted, hope instilled, and promises that have been kept IN SPITE of us! The question is, what are we going to do with it?

- VI. That progression of grace is visible right in front of us today in the actions taken during this closing worship service today.

1. We have baptized two infants. Grayson has just learned recently to walk. Holden has just said "Mama" for the first time. If I were to interview them today about their understanding of God's grace and how they are able to embrace Wesleyan theology, all I would get in return would be (a baby sound).

We baptize babies in our church not because they are able to confess their love for God but because we believe, through God's prevenient grace, that God has already claimed these two little boys as a part of the family of God. They are not just precious to us who claim them as our own. They are precious to God who claims us all as God's own! Before they can ever say "I love you God, God has already said, 'I love you Grayson. I love you Holden. My grace is for you."

Some of you might know that I write a letter to every infant that I baptize. It's a letter that describes the day and my understanding of that grace at work. I put it in an envelope, give it to the parents, and ask them not to open it until that child's 18th birthday. It has become a very special connection between me and the babies that I have baptized over the years.

About a month ago, a post appeared on Facebook from a guy who was being ordained in another Annual Conference. His name is Shannon Blosser. Shannon Blosser was the first person I baptized after I graduated from seminary. He was three years old. He was a holy tyrant when I was in Shady Spring. He would crawl under the pews and his mom couldn't get him. He would climb over the pews and make crazy sounds. He played a part one year in the children's Christmas play and, I must say, it was one of the most unique dramatic expressions of the nativity scene I have ever witnessed. And yet, God called Shannon at one point in this life and he has reached the point of serving Christ full-time in ministry. And on the day he was being received, Shannon posted a picture on Facebook. It was a picture of his baptismal letter. His wife had handed it to him that day to read once again before his calling was confirmed. He had never thrown it away. And once again, he was connecting the dots and remembering that what God had done for him when he could not put coherent words together as a child, God was still doing it for him as he was set apart to serve.

That is the divine progression. Confirmands say yes to God and confirm what was done at their baptism and the progression continues. Ordinands receive a confirmation from the church that a calling they feel inside is real and valid and the progression continues.

And it continues in you. Have any of you arrived at a place of perfection? Is there anyone here who does not need to progress into a greater understanding or awareness of how God is at work in your life? A conversion into the likeness of Christ is a lifetime venture and is not a one-time event. It is a progression of doors being open, concepts being realized, and courage being found to yes to God's call upon your life.

That's why I love to do these baptismal renewal acts. You need to feel the water again and again. A symbol of life offered to you again. A reminder that you are claimed by God, deemed to be needed and important and loved. We need those reminders when

we go through dark nights of the soul and wander in the wilderness and feel like God has given up on us. But God hasn't given up on us and continues to invite us into the promised land of awareness and joy and possibility.

And when we walk into that land of new awareness it is yet another conversion experience when we realize the divine progression and God's claim on my life has never ended.

In my first appointment there was a couple who felt a deep calling to bring foster children into their home. The Harrington's put their lives out there to receive children into their family who had no family that would claim them. But it wasn't easy. The foster kids came from a place where family, and love, and acceptance were not the norm of reality. And, as a result, there was always a struggle with drugs or sex or stealing. Mr. Harrington would often find his way into my office and seek a conversation that would encourage him. I didn't have any answers for Dennis but always encouraged him to find the answer within himself. I always said to him that he and Donna were living out their calling and that God would supply what they needed inside in order to minister to his foster family on the outside. And he did. Repeatedly he did. And sitting in my office he would get teary eyed as he reflected on how good God had been to him.

In one conversation, I suggested to Dennis that he should think about sharing with the congregation his faith story. But because he was so shy and introverted, Dennis said he could never do that. And I pushed back. *"But Dennis, your story is so powerful. There are others who need to encouragement and testimony that you could provide."* But this strong man of personal conviction and courage to give his life away for others said, *"I could never stand and speak in public."*

I let it go but would simply say to him, *"Some day, Dennis, God will rise up and surprise you. Some day, Dennis. Some day."*

It was a tradition in that church to have, what we called, "Joys and Concerns." People would stand and share their celebrations and sorrows. It was my last Sunday in that church and I was dreading "Joys & Concerns." I didn't know how I would be able to handle my emotions as I listened to the members of my congregation one last time. And it was. When the testimonies were winding down and it got quiet I began to move to the next part of the service when all of sudden this man stood. His name was Dennis Harrington. And he said, "Before you leave I need to stand and tell others about my faith." And he did.

It was simple and short and one of the most beautiful things I had ever heard. It was a baptism day, a confirmation day, an ordination day, an acceptance of a calling day, a day of conversion that admitted in a simple testimony that God was not through with Dennis yet. There was more in him that needed to find its way out. *I beg you, Paul said, to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

VII. It's hard to admit it, but I'm getting old. It's humbling how quick it passes, this journey of life. In the last year, my Mom died and I miss her like a five-year old who loses his mommy in the grocery store.

And I am a grandfather, an amazing life-altering event. And because of those two events I have never felt more compelled in my life to do everything I could to love this little guy and do all I can to help him see and find all that is good, and hopeful, and possible in this big, ugly, messed up world.

And I am a leader in the church. This is the fifteenth year that I have talked to confirmands and ordained clergy as a bishop. But I have never admired a group of confirmands or a class of ordinands more than this one. I admire you. You have said "yes" to joining a church that does not have its act together. You have said "yes" to a caravan that is wandering in the wilderness struggling to find its way. And you have said that you want to be an ordained into a mess because somehow, God's call upon your life is real and cannot be avoided.

Like a man who unexpectedly stands to share his faith, you have stood to do the very same thing. By faith, you bear witness to a divine progression, an eternal gift of grace that still today invites us to be a part of the story.

And I beg you. I beg you to do the same thing. All of you. *To lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

And if you can. And if you do, in ages to come, these little guys and many more will tell others of the immeasurable witness of God's grace in kindness through Jesus Christ.

May it be so. Amen.