

I found myself drawn to the Ephesians text this week because it speaks about community, and lately I've been thinking a lot about our Central community. I'm approaching my two year anniversary as a staff member of Central UMC, and, as sometimes happens with anniversaries, I've been reflecting on what has gone well and what has been challenging in my time here. I only had 7 months of regular worship with you all before the pandemic hit and we had to transition to online worship. Only 7 months to start forming relationships, to learn names and faces, to figure out where different supplies are kept, to experience how Central typically does things, and begin to establish how I wanted to fit into all of it.

I think it's a good thing that when the pandemic started I had no idea how long we would be worshipping like this. Like many others, I was sure that after a few months we'd be back to normal. Surely by September 2020 we could start the normal programmatic year. If I had known that it would be more like a year and a half before we could plan to hold a worship service in our sanctuary or have in-person Sunday School, I would have been terrified that I would fail completely at this job. How in the world would I continue to get to know this congregation, learn about the children and youth I was hired to serve, if I couldn't meet with you all? This past year could have been a completely lost year in terms of the life of this congregation.

But you all are amazing. You have a connection and sense of community with each other that is too strong for this pandemic to damage. Pastor Jill and I have come up with ideas for you all to stay connected, but it is you who stepped up and were willing to try them out. You were willing to learn how to use Zoom, to gather in the parking lot for worship or art projects, to record yourselves singing Christmas Carols and figure out how to send those videos to me, to show up to meetings in parks, to drive to people's homes to wave from the front lawn, and to send cards and check in on each other with phone calls.

And you are so welcoming, that even though you hadn't known me for very long, you've drawn me into this community in such a way that I feel like I've known you much longer than two years. When I bought a house, you all

celebrated with me and stocked my pantry and paper products shelf so well that I still haven't bought toilet paper, paper towel, sugar, or flour since I moved. You've even accepted my crazy parents as part of this Zoom worship community. I feel at home with Central in a way that is really remarkable considering that I've spent twice as long getting to know you all through Zoom than I have in person. It's because of the community you as Central have created over many years and generations and your willingness to bring others into this community. So thank you.

But it was not my intention to preach about how welcome I feel at Central. Really all of that was just to explain why I chose to preach on the Ephesians passage instead of the gospel passage. I've been thinking about this church community, and the fourth chapter of Ephesians talks about the nature and purpose of Christian community. So please forgive me for taking up your time telling you how wonderful you all are, and now I'll get to my message for the day.

There are some themes in this passage that you may find familiar as they resonate with themes in many of Paul's letters. The author of Ephesians claims to be the apostle Paul, but the majority of scholars argue that it was most likely written by an admirer of Paul in the late first century. It wasn't uncommon in those days to write in the style and theme of a well-known figure and claim to be that person. It wouldn't have been considered impersonation or identity theft like today. Instead, it was considered complementary.

So, the author of Ephesians uses many themes that originated with Paul. Themes like the different fruits of the Spirit and the Body of Christ as an image of the Christian community. We are reminded in this passage that through the grace of God we have all been given gifts, and these gifts are meant to be used in service of God's kin-dom and each other. Our gifts are diverse, given so that there are within the Christian community apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. All necessary to both build up Christian community and to do the work of God in the world.

Now perhaps you don't see yourself in one of these categories. But I found that how the Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries for the UMC General Board of Discipleship, describes these gifts helps me see how all of these gifts are still among us. He describes apostles as those "sent out into the world to be a sign that God is still at work", prophets are those "who tell the truth to a world that loves comfortable lies", evangelists "find and proclaim good news even when everyone else sees negativity", pastors "provide care for others, for the hurting and the broken", and teachers are "those who bring knowledge, who lift up those who don't understand this world and their place in it."

Every one of you has an aspect of one or more of these gifts. I've seen them on display throughout the craziness of the last year and a half in how you care for each other, welcome the stranger, speak truth to power, advocate for the marginalized, and proclaim that not even a global pandemic will keep this congregation from planning for a new future with renovated and brand new facilities that will serve the life of this congregation and our surrounding community. You might not realize it, but Central is full of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

Now I'm sure some of you are thinking, yeah I can see how that leader in the congregation is a prophet or how my friend is a pastor in their care for others, but I'm not so sure I've actually been given any of those gifts. Well, I'm here to tell you, you have. Every single one of you has been called and claimed by God, and God doesn't skip anyone when it comes to giving out grace and gifts. As the writer of Ephesians says, "these gifts were given to equip fully the holy ones for the work of service, and to build up the body of Christ". God equips each one of us for the work we are called to do as a community of Christ. Every one of us is called to participate in God's work of bringing about the kingdom, and we have been given the gifts we need to engage in that work.

All we need is the courage to accept those gifts, to accept the call God has placed on our lives, and be brave enough to step forward and say, "here I am, use me." It can be frightening to realize that you have a role to play in the future of

this congregation and its work to be the beloved community within Detroit. But I know you have the strength to do it. You've proven over and over that the care you have for each other is deep and your commitment to being a welcoming community is unshakeable. Now, to move forward into the future is God calling us into, we just need everyone to claim their God given gifts and take their place in the work for the kin-dom.

Amen