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Dreams and Realities of Community

(Ephesians 4:1–6)

M. Craig Barnes

M. Craig Barnes, President and Professor of Pastoral Ministry, delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel at the Opening Communion service for the fall semester, September 9, 2016.

The third chapter of Ephesians concludes with a few words of blessing: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to him be the glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.”

This blessing means at least two things to us as a community. The first is that there is a holy power at work within us to accomplish abundantly far more than we can even ask or imagine. The second is that the glory belongs to *God*—in the church.

Notice that Paul does not say that the church is a place of glory. Two thousand years of history have made it clear that the glory is not the church or its schools. But to God be the glory *in* the church. Therefore, the text proclaims, since God is at work and there is abundant power at work in the church, be sure that you are leading a life worthy of your calling.

Now there are lots of callings in life. There is the calling to family, to work, to health. There is the calling to the environment and to the poor. Yet the greatest calling of all is to glorify and enjoy God. Therefore, as Paul says, as you fulfill your callings as students, professors, and administrators at the Seminary be sure that above all we are seeking to glorify God in all that we do. We live out of this promise: to God be the glory in the church.

The text then takes a funny turn as the Apostle tells us how we will lead a life worthy of this calling. The way we do that is 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.”

How do we find such tender virtues?

Don’t worry—just stay in community for any length of time, and you will have plenty of opportunities to discover humility, plenty of opportunities to demonstrate gentleness, plenty of need for patience, plenty of calling to forbear one another with love and to engage in the hard, hard work of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We are a people who discover every day our need for the grace of God and the need to extend that grace to others—and the need to ask it of others. And when you leave this place and begin your ministry, you will find this is your daily challenge. You will spend the rest of your life giving the grace of God to others in need of it. This Seminary is a lab school where we become good at the giving and receiving of grace.

At the center of this community is the claim that we are of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, while we take differences very seriously. We have different theologies, different races, different

genders, different orientations, different first languages, and very different stories. If we take hundreds of very different students and add very different faculty members and add very different administrators and staff, it won't be long before somebody hurts somebody else, before somebody makes a mistake or commits a sin against another. We will commit sins of omission and commission because we are flawed people, bound together in residential community. But as these sins are confronted and confessed and grace is given, transformation occurs. This is how God shapes leaders for the church. It's probably not the kind of community you dreamed to come to.

But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned us, there is nothing more dangerous to authentic community than our dreams for it because we will always love our dreams more than the community in which God has placed us. Once again, the glory is not in the church but in the God who is in the church.

This way of demonstrating our calling through humility, gentleness, forbearance, and forgiveness is not how I would have thought the ambitious Apostle Paul would have advised us to fulfill our calling. Most churches don't think this way. If you were to interview with a pastoral search committee and they ask you to describe something about yourself, imagine what would happen if you were to say, "my most significant attribute is humility. And gentleness is a close second. And what I would love to do is to help you become a humble church." That's not what they want to hear. What they want you to say is that you have a vision for making them into a great church. But the greatness, the power, the glory for which the church yearns is only found when it becomes a realm of redemption, and it can only do that by the God who is at work within it.

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel said that when two people come together a creative space is found between them. It is in this space that the Creator continues the ongoing transformation of each of them. But if someone walks away, then the creative space is also lost. Jesus Christ said that when two or three are gathered in his name he will also be in their midst. And wherever Jesus is present in a community, it is a realm of redemption, a place where people can learn how to forgive, to bear with one another in love. Then the community is free—free to do justice, free to fall in love with mercy, and free to walk more humbly. And when we engage in the doing of justice, the daily loving of mercy, walking humbly among each other, then the glory of God is revealed.