

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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January 21, 2018
20th Sunday in Year of Call
Ephesians 4:1-16

Called in an Age of Accelerations

Today we reach the halfway point in our Year of Call emphasis. Maybe you've noticed a pattern in our monthly sub-themes, a pattern of journeying inward, then journeying outward. It's a pattern that mirrors the Christian life, one of reflection, then action, then reflection, then further action. We are called to have faith, and called to use that faith, we are called to belief and to practice. Love for God, love for others—both axes are joined, interdependent, and integrated in mature Christian living.

This month looks outward and reminds us that we live in the world, a world which desperately needs the hope and peace and truth of Jesus Christ. God has loved this world from the beginning, and desired its reconciliation. The prophecies of Isaiah tell us that God's salvation is intended for all nations, all creation, the ends of the earth. So today we are revisiting the rich, rich text of Ephesians 4, reminding us to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, and to do that in the world in which we have been given our lives.

We are living in an age of accelerations. I owe this phrase to Thomas Friedman, whose most recent book, *Thank You For Being Late* (2016, Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux), names the accelerations in what he calls our world's three largest forces, accelerations which are affecting all of us. The book's title acknowledges part of his solution to these accelerations—taking time out for reflection—but make no mistake, change is the norm of the world today.

And this change is not linear, but exponential. We feel it all around us. In technology, in economic globalization, and in human impact on the planet's systems, the rate of change is increasing every year, every day. If Rip Van Winkle, the legend who slept for 20 years and awoke to find himself in a new nation, were to sleep for 20 years now, he would wake up in a vastly different world. Friedman details how these great accelerations are transforming the workplace, politics, geopolitics, ethics, and what it means to be in community.

Remember, Christians, the Word of God begs us to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, in the world in which we live, with its dizzying, disrupting, mind-boggling, confounding changes all around us.

It's no wonder we're confused. It's no wonder we want to retreat, shut it out, and wax nostalgic for the good old days when we thought we understood what was going on, when we felt like we had control. Now it so often feels like the world is spinning beyond our comprehension and beyond our ability to adapt.

Yet we are still called to lead the life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, and the letter to the Ephesians reminds us that we are bound together by **one** Spirit, that we are **one** body with "**one** hope, **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism, **one** God and Father of us all who is above all and through all and in all." There is a rock on which we stand in this storm. The church's one foundation, after all, is Jesus Christ our Lord.

Who calls us to unity, maturity, and courage in this age of accelerations.

I called this a rich, rich text, and indeed it is. One way to measure how beloved it is in the tradition of the church is to see how many hymns find their inspiration in it. In our hymnal, there are 32

hymns or songs indexed to this text. That's a lot. Messages about unity in the body, the diversity of spiritual gifts which make the body whole, and the bond of peace are resonant in churches. We like to sing about these themes. We know we need these messages in times of conflict. It's not always easy to be the church.

But the diciest portion of this scripture is the call to maturity, to remaining unified and strong when the world is raging around us. In this age of accelerations, the world is raging. What does a mature and unified church look like in this storm?

Well, verse 14 tells us what an immature and disunified community looks like, by way of a warning: *We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.* I don't know about you, but that sounds an awful lot to me like today's political climate. Social media fuels this behavior. Many have confessed to me that they feel like news addicts, that they just can't stay away from what's happening and what people are saying about what's happening. Many people today get their news solely from social media sources, which feed on the interests and biases of those with the same worldview. One commentator says, "Everybody gets on social media, everybody gets outraged about the latest outrage, and then something else happens and the attention flips to the next thing." Listen to the scripture: *We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.*

Joshua Dubois, who was head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, names one of the fallouts of these new ways of communicating when he says, "We've lost some of the basic moral guardrails in our conversations. People can not only get on social media, but they can say absolutely anything." (<https://www.npr.org/2018/01/15/57083232/examining-activism-on-martin-luther-king-jr-day>) In this age of accelerations, the church is called to help reset the moral guardrails, and re-assert the primacy of truth-telling.

A friend of mine who is now a retired pastor has been re-reading Henry David Thoreau and sharing his wisdom. 150 years ago, Thoreau wrote, "Read not the times, read the eternities." Updated, that could be, "read not the Tweets, read the eternities!" He also quotes historian Daniel Boorstin, who wrote in the 20th century, "It is better to read a newspaper account of an event than to watch it on TV. It is better to read a weekly newsmagazine than to read a daily paper. It is better to read a book about an event than to read a magazine." Time helps us sort out the truth, to see larger patterns, and to learn from our past mistakes. (Roger Talbott, <http://fearnotonline.org/2017/02/16/reading-the-eternities-part-1-baby-steps/>) I appreciate my friend's advice: Slow down the news cycle when you realize you are being caught up in its funnel cloud, the wind that is tossing us to and fro and blowing us about.

And in the church community, remember also the next 2 verses of scripture: *But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*

This is a picture of a mature and unified church, in which truth and love are symbiotic, and the body thrives because truth is spoken in love and love embraces the truth. We all know of families where truth is spoken without love, and the damage that can cause. And we know of families where truth is never verbalized for fear of losing love. But in a healthy family, or mature church, people trust their relationships to be strong enough to hold the body together even when people disagree. In a unified

family or church, painful truth can be heard because love is practiced even when hard words are spoken.

One of the ironies of this age of accelerations is that more than ever, we need the wisdom of the ages to help us navigate the challenges of the rapidly-arriving future. Here we have it: New Testament wisdom, shared and circulated among the newborn and growing congregations of the first century. Speak the truth in love. Don't be tossed around by changing winds and charlatans. Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. More than ever, we need this eternal voice to guide our present efforts at community in a disorienting world. More than ever, we need to grow up into Christ.

There are other sources of wisdom, of which I will choose one. It is the African wisdom contained in the word *ubuntu*. Appropriately enough, if you Google *ubuntu*, the top references on the Internet are to an open source operating system, committed to the free sharing, improvement, and distribution of software. That's fitting, because *ubuntu* means something like "I am what I am because of who we all are." Archbishop Desmond Tutu says *ubuntu* is "the recognition of our interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation. . . . It has to do with what it means to be truly human, to know that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life." (2004, *God Has a Dream*, New York, Doubleday, pp. 25-26) "Africa," he says, "has a gift to give to the world that the world needs desperately, this reminder that we are more than the sum of our parts. . . . The world is going to have to learn the fundamental lesson that we are made for harmony, for interdependence." (p. 28)

This African wisdom sounds remarkably like the New Testament wisdom of the letter to the Ephesians. If we are going to thrive in the 21st century, the age of accelerations, we will need to do it together. Not as a collection of individuals, not as a federation of nations or tribes, but as one humanity and one world. Loved and called, gifted, equipped, and sent by our loving God to reconcile the world to Godself.

There are many dimensions to this calling to which we have been called.

We are called to unity.

We are called to maturity.

We are called to recognize and appreciate and use the diverse gifts which make up our humanity.

And we are called to keep growing up together, toward Christ. May we have the courage, the compassion, and the *ubuntu* to answer this calling together.