

“It Takes a Village”  
Ephesians 4:1-16  
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Preached August 9, 2009 at San José, Costa Rica

The news is hard enough to read or watch on a daily basis without facing the inevitable stories of children abandoned, neglected, or abused, probably the most heartwrenching of all. Children locked in closets and starved by alcoholic parents, babies shaken to death because they wouldn't stop crying soon enough, child soldiers and prostitutes doing adult work when they should be playing in the park, promising minds pulled from school to work to provide money for a poverty-stricken family's survival, girls burned to death because they weren't born boys. These are just a few of the tragedies that befall the world's children. If you had a childhood that included none of those traumatic events, count your blessings, and know that you are in the minority. Reality is far from pretty for the vast majority of the world's children.

Not that it should be so, and not that the parents of all those children dreamed it would turn out that way when they first held their newborn bundle of joy. I can't speak for all parents, but most of the ones I know, including my wife and I, have hopes and dreams for our children, perhaps not all of them realistic, perhaps some of them actually our own dreams in disguise, but most of them having to do with health and happiness, productivity and meaning, faith and blessing. The blank slate of a child's life is easily enough filled in by the fears and

longings of others, and we do our best to make sure the picture that eventually tells the story of that child's life is a portrait that doesn't appear on the news in that awful category of stories we'd rather never see. It may be a well-traveled expression, but it remains true that it takes a village to raise a child. Fortunately or unfortunately, however, the location of the village, and the character and habits of its inhabitants, make a lot of difference in how the child grows, and the choice is not always up to us; sometimes we choose our neighbors, and sometimes they choose us.

In a sense, tonight's passage from the fourth chapter of Ephesians is an instructional manual for those who might wish to have some say in the shape of the village in which they raise their children. In the letter's own time, it was meant to help new Christians form themselves into a faithful, supporting community that fulfilled the dream God had for them of life in Jesus Christ, a dream that had as a key feature a kind of unity unknown in the world around them. These new Christians weren't being called to be exactly alike, but to have in common a faith in Christ that would enable them to survive the stormy social environment in which they lived, that would enable them to live authentically as the new creation in Christ that they were. In the words of the passage, they were called to "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." It

may not be the metaphor of a safe and thriving village, but a vital, healthy body full of love is an image just as powerful.

In our own time, the letter offers us some timely wisdom as we prepare to baptize a child in the church of Jesus Christ. The culture in which we live today may not be as hostile to the Christian expression of faith as was the Roman Empire, but parents today still face their share of daunting challenges even if those challenges look a little different to twenty-first century eyes. These challenges confront the hopes and dreams with which their children began life, and parents everywhere can use all the help they can get in making those dreams come true. I'm not talking about dreams of "going to Disneyland", but rather the ones you have standing over the crib as your child sleeps. And so, whether he ever could have imagined it, the kind soul who wrote the letter to the Ephesians blesses us still today in making those dreams come true.

This fourth chapter begins with just that kind of cribside dream. Wouldn't every Christian parent want a child who was, in the words of various verses here...full of humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing others in love...who knows to what God is calling him or her...who comes to the unity of faith, the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ? Of course, it just so happens that this is exactly what God wants for each of us, and thus, why it appears in our Scriptures. It is a profile of sorts of the mature Christian, an ideal picture, if you will, of where God wants us to be in our

relationship with the divine. And it if it coincides with what we want ourselves and our children to be, so much the better. This profile then, is the very reason for our village's existence, and so we organize ourselves so that every child of God has the best chance of growing to the full stature of Christ. In a little while, before we baptize young Julian, each of you will be asked to promise to do everything in your power to see that he grows up according to this profile. And when you look at the church's programs, and its budget, and the way it conducts itself, what you should see is a church that has taken that promise seriously, not just for the child that we baptize tonight, but for all who have been baptized, and are on their way to maturity in Christ. We know to what we aspire, and we are called to help one another get there.

Knowing what God wants for us is one thing. Doing it is another. We clearly can't do it on our own, or at least we haven't succeeded yet, despite the loftiness of our dreams. There are no perfect villages, turning out perfect teenagers. This one is simply beyond our means, and so we are given a beautiful reminder of why what we do for one another is not in vain: "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, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all." We don't each have to seek our own way, under our own power. No, there is one God, in whom we have everything we need. It may not be according to our timetable, but the

power is there, and the grace is there, and those are enough. They are there for the asking, there for the taking.

So we have the profile, and we have the power. Now all we need are the villagers. Who are our fellow citizens, and what do they bring to this great experiment in child rearing? Our passage in Ephesians reminds us that God has populated our village with people of faith to whom great and wonderful gifts have been given, that some would be apostles, others prophets, others evangelists, others pastors and teachers. Let us be clear however on the role of each of these gifted people, their purpose within the community. That purpose is not to do all the work themselves, but rather, and I quote: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Now it is true that the list in Ephesians stops after naming just a few kinds of people, but the gifts don’t stop. A child needs a pastor, yes, but he or she needs so much more, and so those pastors are called to bring out the “more” that has been given to the village. God knows we need the people gifted as friends in our lives. The ones gifted as musicians. As social critics. As encouragers. As generous givers. We need those gifted as grandparents and as creative artists, and water quality experts. As defenders of animals. As truth telling journalists. As protesters shouting from rooftops. As servant leaders. We need people gifted at making us laugh and cry. Gifted at helping us think and feel. Gifted at bringing silence and song. Each of you is gifted, and each of you is called

to use those gifts in service of one another, to build up the body of Christ. You are our neighbors.

My friends, all of these gifts, and so many more, are needed if our children, if we, are to live into that divine profile we draw from this passage. All of it is needed because in a sense, what Ephesians 4 describes is not a perfect human being without flaws or without sins, but a person who has actually become human in the way God intended when we were created in the very image of God. What God wants for us is that we recognize the central and inescapable place of God in our lives, and for us to become whole and wholly human with that knowledge and truth. We are not called to transcend our humanity, but to live it fully and righteously, and in such a way that at least in our village, the news we watch and read isn't full of stories of neglect and abandonment and abuse, but of joy and generosity and celebration.

We would be missing the point of the passage, however, if we limited our thinking to our own village. You see, in that mysterious part of the passage where it talks about Christ ascending and descending, about making captivity itself a captive, is the blurring of the borders of the villages of the world. We don't know exactly what Jesus did when he "descended," but we can be pretty sure that he was taking his message of healing and grace to some places that really, really needed to hear it, places of neglect, and abandonment and abuse, to places of death, to chaotic villages creating chaotic lives. As uncomfortable as it may be, we are

called to go to the same places, to venture out of our own villages and into the places where we can, however imperfectly, make a difference for those children who suffer so much. The beauty of our village, and the strength of our body, is wasted if we never venture outside our own boundaries.

It may not be found in the Bible, but there is great truth in the saying that “while anyone is in chains, none of us are free.” Friends, the church of Jesus Christ must be in the chain breaking business, because it will not be fully free until everyone is fully human, until dignity and the knowledge of God are available to everyone. And all of this starts right here in this building, with the people you see around you, with the promises we make to this child we are going to baptize, and with the exercise of the gifts God has given each one of us. Remember again the purpose of those gifts: “To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” What is the “full stature of Christ?” Well, it is nothing more or and nothing less than a human being so connected to God that he lived with no other concern than to realize God’s purposes and uplift other human beings. Imagine this world with an even incremental movement toward the full stature of Christ, and you can imagine clean rivers and breathable air. You can imagine healthy homes in lawful and orderly communities. You can imagine children knowing where they will sleep and not being afraid to spend the night there. You can imagine that their

full creative energies are used to find new games to play with one another rather than new ways to bully. You can imagine grace freely extended and received.

You may dismiss me as naïve if you wish, and insist that the human condition will always keep us at one another's throats, or stepping over one another to get ahead, but you will also have to dismiss Jesus Christ as naïve, and insist that the human condition is more powerful than God. I prefer to admire Jesus as the ultimate realist, and God as "above all and through all and in all," and therefore quite capable of making the church fully free. But as is clear on every page of Scripture, including those we have read tonight, God has made us partners in that process by asking us to do our part: "We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." God doesn't do it for us, but rather equips us for the task, and may God give us strength daily as we seek to be that village that raises a child to be full of humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing others in love...who knows to what God is calling him or her...who comes to the unity of faith, to the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, and to the measure of the full stature of Christ. Amen.