

This chapter of the letter to the Ephesians must have been triggered by some dissension and conflict in the church, but it goes to a lofty place from there. I say that because the writer calls the church members to behave with humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love, and making every effort to maintain the unity of God's Spirit among them. Why would he do that if everything were already harmonious and smooth at Ephesus? Probably they're acting like churches often do, sniping at each other and losing patience over each other's annoying character traits, so he calls them to take a breath and remember that they have all been called and given grace. Then he goes on to enumerate some of the gifts that Christ has given, like apostleship, prophecy, teaching, and so forth.

Frederick Buechner's take on this passage goes like this: "God was making a body for Christ, Paul said. Christ didn't have a regular body any more so God was making him one out of anybody he could find who looked as if he might just possibly do. He was using other people's hands to be Christ's hands and other people's feet to be Christ's feet, and when there was some place where Christ was needed in a hurry and needed bad, he put the finger on some maybe-not-all-that-innocent bystander and got him to go and be Christ in that place himself for lack of anybody better."

That works for me, but I think there's more. The "not-all-that-innocence," I think, is part of the draw for God—it's value added. Let me back up, and then I'll try to explain. Verse 6 says that God is above all and through all and in all. So God is sort of like the Dao, sort of fluid, flowing through the universe. Christ is envisioned as "ascending on high" in that prescientific three-story universe, going *up* to heaven after having been *down* on the "lower parts of the earth." "He who descended is the

same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.”

Again, this fluidity, a presence that unites heaven and earth by inhabiting both, with the aim of “filling all things.” And then the author discusses all these gifts given to equip the saints for ministry.

The word translated “equip” belongs to a family of words in Greek which describe, among other things, the setting of broken bones during surgery, fostering healing, and working for rehabilitation. Equipping is also mending. In fact, you see the same word in the story of Jesus calling his disciples in Matthew, where James and John are in the boat with their father, *mending* their nets. Mending and equipping are related, so that for us to be equipped for the work of ministry means that we are weaving back the frayed and tattered fabric of life, repairing what’s been broken. When Frederick Buechner suggests playfully that God rebuilt the body of Christ with random, not-so-innocent passersby, I think he’s inadvertently admitting that the flaws are actually part of the equipment.

Gifts are not the same as talents. Talents are what we’re good at, either by disposition or by training. Gifts can be those things, but they are also what we’ve inherited, what our background has formed us into, the insights we may have from poverty or affluence or being neurologically heteronormative or heteronormative in some other way. Gifts are what we come with and find ourselves tapping into as we endeavor to mend what’s broken.

I love the suggestion that we identify our gifts by asking ourselves how Jesus would describe us. After all, Jesus knows us thoroughly, he harbors no illusions about us, but he also thinks we’re terrific. How would Jesus describe where you

came from? How would Jesus describe who you are now? Think of the words that Jesus would use to describe you: that's a good way to identify your gifts. Let's do a little congregational sermon participation. Think about how Jesus would describe where you came from, or who you are. Take a moment, and then let's hear some of them. I'll give you one example that leapt to my mind when I started thinking about this concept of gifts being what we come with and can use to mend what's broken. A small group of families in the neighborhood of Bancroft Elementary School, where Bea teaches 4th grade, agreed when their children were toddlers that they would send their kids to Bancroft and be involved in the school. They knew that Bancroft was drawing increasingly poor children whose parents faced lots of life challenges, and that it might be tempting to move their children to a less gritty, more affluent neighborhood school. But they also thought it was important to support and strengthen their neighborhood school, so they made this agreement. And at least one of those children is now going to be a 5th grader at Bancroft, so they really carried through. And sure enough, he was one of Bea's star students, because his parents are able to provide stability and enrichment for him—but he is also completely comfortable and enmeshed with his classmates, playing off of them and being played off of, enhancing each other's learning. I'd say that living in the Bancroft neighborhood was a gift, and that group of parents used it as equipment to mend what was worn and frail, the community that is Bancroft Elementary.

So if you've had a chance to think of one of your gifts—not a talent, not a brilliance, but a gift—let's hear a few examples. *** [my gift of being a stranger]

It is a great thing to have talents, and we should cultivate and improve our

talents. But it is more fundamental that we have gifts, and that we identify our gifts for use for the work of ministry, building up the beloved community. I think again of the wonderful wobbly church community in Anne Tyler's book *Saint Maybe*, in which vacation Bible School was held in someone's back yard and every summer the children got ear infections from the inflatable wading pool. They cared for their children with what they had, the gifts they had, and the children grew up resilient, curious, and highly tolerant of quirkiness, which is a gift greater than the sum of the gifts given them. The thing is to offer them truthfully and lovingly, so that the whole body is built up in love.

Let us pray: God, you offer us so many ways to serve and to be.

Offer us, too, the will to discern the unique part you want us to play whether apostle or prophet, or evangelist, or shepherd, or teacher.

Help us to find a way to develop the gifts you have given us and to be part of the mending of your beautiful creation.