

# *In the Spotlight*

A Sermon Expositing Ephesians 4:1-16

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It is a banner day at First Baptist Church of Rochester! You would think that careful planning and consideration had gone into aligning the events of today thematically, but in fact, it just so happens that today's celebrations, each having come down their own roads of development and planning individually, have arrived at an unplanned intersection. These kinds of synchronicity occur once in a while, but never without cuing my mind and my heart to listen a bit closer to what God may be spotlighting for me. I can't help but wonder what God wants to be in the spotlight today.

Listen to the celebrations that stack up for us today: After a prolonged search in the midst of a global pandemic that included one of the most harrowing travel days I've ever heard of, Benjamin Smith, a kind, perceptive, intelligent, strong, and caring pastor begins his tenure as our Associate Pastor today. Friends, this is not a hold your applause to the end kind of day {but of course, we churchy people don't just do applause, we do "amen"} if you're grateful for Benjamin's joining us today would you lend your voice to welcoming him with a hearty, "Amen." {Don't worry Benjamin, we'll teach them what a good southern "Amen" sounds like}

There is a kind of joyful sentiment in the air for me today as well. Another moment we celebrate today, by happenstance, is our fifth anniversary as pastor and congregation. Somehow in these five years you've managed not to turn ALL of my hair gray..., but you have somehow made it curl, a reality I'm still trying to figure out. For God's bringing us together in ministry I am inclined to offer another hearty "amen," how about you?

On the very same day, as it turns out, we are celebrating the coming together of the Permanent Council on Ordination of our American Baptist Region. That council includes an elected representative from every congregation and *every person ordained to vocational ministry affiliated with our region*. On these occasions I never cease to be amazed, and a little intimidated, by the collected knowledge, wisdom, and experience in ministry represented by such a gathering AND by how many of those gifted, caring persons call First Baptist their church home. I wonder if I could ask our ordained clergy who are here today or with us on Zoom to just wave a hand – and mind you there are several more who can't be with us today. Would you express your love and admiration for these with, you guessed it, a good hearty, "Amen."

The purpose for their coming together today is to consider, and I think ultimately affirm, the calling of two individuals to vocational ministry and recommend them to their respective congregations for ordination. One is Jen Lessard of Immanuel Baptist and the other is one of our own, Tim Gaura. To know Tim is to know one who is not only fit for ministry, but desperately needed in ministry. He is a resident chaplain at Strong, where after serving for a year in the midst of a pandemic, he voluntarily applied and was accepted to serve a second year. Talk about dedicated love. If all goes as anticipated this afternoon we'll be planning an ordination service here for the coming weeks and if you're looking forward to that would you let Tim know...with a good hearty, "amen?"

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

It is a banner day at First Baptist and all of these celebrations that have emerged are focused on those who by virtue of training, of vocation, of giftedness, of temperament, of calling serve in vocational ministry AND they come together on the day that the lectionary, our pre-planned slate of sacred readings, happens to recall for us the part of the letter written to the Ephesian church and the church at large that “Christ’s gift” to the church was that some would be called from among them to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The list reads like elsewhere in the epistles where various gifts given to *all people* in Christ are spelled out, but in this one moment the writer is pointing to specific people who have held specific roles within the budding community of Jesus followers. And they happen to be doing so on the day we happen to be celebrating the beginning of a pastoral tenure, the anniversary of another, the gathering of our ordained, and the pending ordination of one more. I wonder what God wants to be in the spotlight today.

It would be tempting for us, in our culture to think that God wants for those who serve the church in specific ministry roles to be in the spotlight today. It’s entirely possible that that will come across as a self-serving idea, but consider our culture for a second. Sociologists will tell you that we live in one of the most highly individualistic cultures known to history. We invented the phrase and believe in the idea of picking one’s self up by our bootstraps! That doesn’t even work as a metaphor, sit on the floor and tug on your bootstraps. You’re not going anywhere no matter how strong you are, that’s not how physics works! But that doesn’t stop us from perpetuating the farce of the fully self-made person or from, as a culture, prizing individual rights ahead of collective wellbeing. And all this individualism leaks into the way we perceive leadership. When things go wrong organizationally or governmentally we know exactly who to blame and when things go right we know exactly who gets the credit as if nothing in this world is systemic. We love our knights in shining armor almost as much as we love our straw people.

The same mentality of leadership soaks into church life. Imagine this, you’re driving down the highway and you see a billboard advertising a church - one of those big seeker-styled churches beckoning you to come by for a visit. What image is on the billboard? Maybe a shot of the church’s building, maybe a family from the church, but most often you’ll see what? The pastor. Usually a great big, beaming, smiling, trendy pastor. That’s the draw – a personality. That’s the person with the vision, that’s the person with the message, that’s the person with the mission, that’s the person in charge, that’s the figurehead, the spokesperson, the one we’ve all come to hear, the one we all follow.

The same is often true in more pastoral relationships. Tim, Benjamin, others with us, I don’t know about you, but one of the skills I had to hone in my own pastoral training was pivoting conversations away from a desire for advice. That’s because pastors and chaplains are so often viewed as the ones with the answers, the ones with the formulas, the rites, rituals, and advice to make everything better. Fortunately for me convincing people that I don’t know the answers isn’t very hard, I just open my mouth.

Now, time for a bit of nuance here. There are times and reasons for pastors and chaplains to have an upfront voice and we do collect some wisdom and knowledge in our days. We can *sometimes* offer helpful advice and some of us like the Reverend William Barber, or like the Reverend Dr. King in his day, or like the Reverend Myra Brown in our own city have good reason to be very visible parts of the church. The problem I’m highlighting is not those particular moments or people, but rather a generalized desire in our culture for the church to put their vocational leaders in the spotlight.

Do you know – now I’m gonna pick on you for a minute, ok, I’ve been here 5 years so I get to do that a little – Do you know that no fewer than half a dozen of you made a frustrated observation about our church website after it was developed? My image wasn’t the top image on the staff page. Now if you’re one of those half dozen or so people, worry not, you’re safe in anonymity and I know your heart and your care. I’m not picking on you, I’m just highlighting a trend. There were protracted conversations, a little bit of a battle waged on whether my image and bio should be at the top of the page or at the bottom where I preferred it. It was a battle I lost when I relented and allowed myself to be placed at the top for a while, but a war I ultimately won when I logged on while writing this sermon and put myself back at the bottom. You called a pastor with a communications degree, don’t blame me.

Even we Baptists whose polity is built upon the bedrock of congregational autonomy, bottom-up decision making, grassroots leadership *feel* the cultural pull toward hyper individualized leadership, but I'm not convinced. I don't think it's we vocational clergy who God wants in the spotlight today.

Did you hear what the writer's ultimate hope in the letter to the Ephesians was? Their fear for a budding, growing, learning, trying-to-make-this-thing-work community was that their vision and their mission would be sidetracked or derailed in one of two ways. First, that there would be unhealthy, inner conflict. Not that they would disagree with one another mind you, the early church was actually really good at disagreement – but church leaders who wrote most of the New Testament worried all the time that debate would devolve into animus and the community would shatter. They also worried that outside influences would be able to manipulate the community by teaching gently warped versions of their core beliefs that were counterproductive to the mission of justice, peace, love and redemption at the heart of their work. The part where the writer of Ephesians gives thanks to God for those in particular ministry roles does so because of their unique place in staving off these threats to the community. But there are two clues in the text that the writer's main point is something else. The first is context. The passage, nor the letter on the whole isn't *about* those people. They're mentioned and appreciated for who they are only in the context of the fuller community. The second is the series of Greek words that most English translators render as "*equip*." The folks the writer gives thanks for have specialized roles, but he views their collective work within the congregation as "equipping" the community for their collective work. The writer isn't giving thanks for the ministers! The writer is giving thanks for the people who teach and encourage and resource and challenge and build up all of the other people to be the ministers!

The writer isn't putting the vocational people in the spotlight! The writer is putting the community in the spotlight! And why wouldn't they? They knew the limitations of individual leaders, teachers, preachers. They were the same then that they are now. How many times have the leaders we put on a pedestal let us down in this world? How many times have failures of morality brought down a person and harmed a cause in the process? How much of our time do we spend arguing over who the right *person* is to put in office and forget about the *people* they're supposed to represent? Painfully, how many times in our world has a worthwhile cause been stalled or thwarted by violence against individuals?

Here's the thing: you can hurt or ruin or bring down an individual, but you can't defeat a community. A person at the top can falter, but that doesn't have to break the community. Neither this world nor the church needs another charismatic leader out front carrying the banner for us. What the church needs is not billboard worthy clergy. What the world needs from the church is a community, yes, well equipped by their vocational leaders, but in the end a community so deeply committed to the work of God that all the world will have to take notice.

Listen, I'm overjoyed to have been with you for five years. I'm gratified by those of you who have noted the milestone and I feel genuinely loved. Benjamin has told me that he feels at home here and he feels well loved and supported already. Tim has told me that his journey toward ordination among us and our wider region family has been gratifying and uplifting. And the sizeable contingent of clergy we have here is evidence to our ability to care for and welcome them. But I think I can speak for all of us clergy when I say that when we close our eyes and imagine how the world will come to know of the love of God we don't imagine ourselves in a high pulpit or in positions of power. We imagine you, the community to whom we've dedicated our lives and our ministries. You're the ones, together, who will change the world, who must change the world. I guess what I'm saying is I think what God wants to be in the spotlight today is...you.

Amen.