

Legacy Sermon Series
Faithful Leadership
Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16; Hebrews 13:7
September 11, 2022
LPC 70th Anniversary Worship
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Last Sunday we began a sermon series that will take us through the month of September, and it's a series that was inspired by what we are doing today. We are celebrating our church's 70th anniversary and giving glory to God for God's faithfulness and for the worship, and spiritual formation, and ministry, and mission that have taken place at Lakewood and because of Lakewood over the years. I am so glad that so many of you are here today because you have been a part of all of that. I began this sermon series last week by saying that these kinds of occasions- birthdays, anniversaries, the beginnings of a new year – are times when we naturally tend to reflect on where we have been and when we feel inspired to figure out what we need to do to get where we're going next. It's good to do that kind of reflecting so this sermon series is meant to help us do some of that. We want to look back to see where God has been; to celebrate what God has done; to pay attention to the legacy that has been passed on to us and then listen to what Jesus has to say to us about how to carry on and build on that legacy today and as we follow Jesus into the future.

I know there might be some different ideas about what the "Lakewood legacy" is, but if I asked this room full of people to describe the strengths, or the traits that have defined this congregation over the years, I think there are some things we would hear expressed over and over. There *are* things that I hear expressed over and over, and things that stand out when I hear stories from the past, and things that I have observed about this congregation in my own time here so for the purpose of this series, I have identified 4 of those things, and we're talking about one each week. The four things are extraordinary generosity, faithful leadership, caring community, and excellent worship. Since we have the privilege of having several former ministers with us today, this seemed like the right week to celebrate the faithful leadership that has blessed this congregation for 70 years and to listen for what Jesus has to say to us about leadership for today and the future.

Our Scripture reading this morning is from the Book of Ephesians, and Paul is writing this letter, not to *the* church that he planted in Ephesus during his second missionary journey but to that church and to the several other churches that had grown up in the area. In the letter he reiterates the good news that they have been chosen to belong to God through Christ; that through Christ they have been redeemed and received the forgiveness of sins; that they have been marked as God's own with the seal of the Holy Spirit who lives within them; and all of this is the unearned gift of God's grace. "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works so that no one can boast*" (Ephesians 2:8-9). He also reminds them that the result of their having received the gospel is that they are now part of this beautiful new household called the church that exists to bear witness to God's saving work through Christ. At the beginning of chapter 4 there is a shift in the letter. After going on about the difference that Jesus has made in their lives, and after reminding them that they are part of this community of people that has been miraculously joined together through Christ, at chapter 4 he starts talking about how they ought to live in light of these realities. "*I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received,*" he says.

One of the things that I have learned in my own spiritual journey, and I'm sure you have learned this too, is that I need help as I try to live a life that is worthy of the calling I have received. I need people who can help me learn more from Jesus, and I need people to encourage me in my efforts to become more like him and as I try share in his ministry. Paul knew that this is something that all believers need, and in Ephesians 4 he points out that Jesus knows it, too, and has provided for our need by endowing the

members of his Body with spiritual gifts that we are meant to use for the purpose of helping each other. No gift, or person, is more important than any other, but in this passage, Paul does highlight the gifts and roles of those who are responsible for teaching and preaching the gospel and those who have been charged with the responsibility of equipping the saints and preparing God's people for works of service. In some traditions and some churches today, their leadership may include people who are called prophets or evangelists, but most often in our tradition, those who have been set apart for the particular ministry that Paul is talking about here, we know as our pastors.

The church can be the church without a pastor, and I will say more about that, but what a gift to the church are our pastors, and our youth ministers, and our Christian Educators. Our pastors proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to us week after week keeping us rooted in the Truth that leads to life and reminding us always of the hope that is ours. They speak to us prophetically, challenging us to let go of the old life and inspiring us to embrace and promote kingdom life. They feed us the bread of life and share with us the cup of salvation in Jesus name so that we can be spiritually fed and nourished. They listen for the voice of the Spirit and strive to lead where the Spirit is leading, and they pray with us about our concerns and pray for us asking God to bless, and heal, and guide, and strengthen, and conform us more and more into the image of Christ. They do indeed provide the kind of help that we need as we attempt to walk worthy of the calling we have received.

Of course, I don't have to remind you that pastors and other church leaders are also human, and there are the tragic stories of those who have had some type of fall from grace. And sometimes it may not be a newsworthy fall from grace, but a leader's humanity or the combination of a leader's humanity and the humanity within the congregation can sometimes result in a conflicts or challenges that lead to a parting of ways. In those unfortunate situations, a church may not always feel like their pastor was a gift or vice versa. When those things happen, Christ is faithful still (Christ is *always* faithful to his church), and churches can survive and even thrive afterwards, but those seasons can be very challenging and disruptive for congregations and their ministries.

Knowing that these kinds of things can and do happen, when I consider the life and leadership of Lakewood Presbyterian Church over the last 70 years, one thing I know is that this church has been richly blessed with the pastoral and ministry staff leadership that God has provided for the whole 70 years of Lakewood's life and that is something to celebrate. For 7 decades, God has faithfully called, and inspired, and sustained pastors and staff who have been committed to Jesus, and to God's mission, and to the spiritual care and spiritual growth of this congregation. Have your pastors and staff been perfect? I'm not naïve enough to think that we have all made everyone happy 100% of the time, and I think we are all humble enough to admit that there are things we did wrong, or ways in which we feel like we failed you, but despite these things, this church has been blessed with faithful leadership, and this congregation and the community around us are better because this is true.

I hope many of you would heartily agree with my assessment, and I know many could give your own examples of how you saw your pastors living out their calling faithfully among you, and you could tell stories of how your faith grew, or was stretched, or strengthened as a result of their ministries. I know this is true, and I want the former pastors of this congregation who are here or are listening today to know, that your names and memories are often invoked. It is not uncommon for me to hear someone tell me during a pastoral visit something that one of the former pastors told them once that gave them strength at the time and still gives them strength today. Sometimes someone mentions one of your sermons that they remember, or at least an idea or a quote from the sermon that has stayed with them. They remember and recall the programs that you initiated and the opportunities that you gave to them to use their gifts and share in ministry. Of course, I wasn't here for any of that, but it's because of the things I hear and know of the pastors and because of what I see in this congregation today that I say this church has been blessed with faithful leadership.

In our passage, Paul talks about the fruit of the ministry of those who are called to preach and teach and lead. He says that the purpose, or the result, of their ministry is to build up a community that is marked by its unity, and spiritual maturity, and the knowledge of Christ- which doesn't mean knowing a lot *about* Jesus, but people who *know* Jesus personally. The church that is led and instructed by faithful leaders will be a group that is united in Christ and growing and being built up in love. Are these things true at Lakewood Presbyterian Church in our 70th year? I think the answer is yes. I see you coming together despite your differences. I was saying last night, and I've said to lots of people, I am and was so proud of how you all navigated Covid together. I heard horror stories from colleagues about the conflicts and bad behavior in their churches because people didn't agree with or like wearing masks or not wearing masks or whatever. I know that in this church we didn't all agree about everything, and I know that everyone didn't get their way, but did it tear us apart? It didn't. Did you still come to worship and put on a mask even when you didn't think you needed to? Some of you did. Did you accept online worship when you would have preferred to worship in person? You did. You all demonstrated humility, and grace, and patience. You looked like Christ. Did the pastors who came before me who taught you and helped form your faith have anything to do with how we got through Covid? I do think so. Now, after bragging on your spiritual achievement, I'll ask the same question I asked about your pastors. Are you a perfect church filled with perfect people? Like your pastors have to admit that we aren't perfect, I think it's only fair if you make that admission, too. But you know Jesus, and you love him, and you're following him, and you're becoming like him. That is what is important, and it's what God wants for you.

In this series we don't want to just look back. We want to look at the past to be inspired for today and for the future, but with leadership, there are no guarantees. We can't really say "it is our tradition to have good pastors who stay for over a decade, and excellent interim pastors in between, and we always will." With the combination of pastors who are imperfect and congregations who are imperfect, despite the fact that we trust God to lead and call and provide, the possibility always exists that something could go wrong or differently than we hoped it would or than it has in the past, and what would happen if that day should come? We can't guarantee that we will be spared some leadership challenge at some point, so what can we do try to maintain the legacy of faithful leadership at Lakewood for years to come? Let me suggest 3 things that you can do today that will contribute to maintaining that legacy but will also help you to endure and come out well on the other side if you don't manage to escape some pastoral staff leadership challenge.

The first is to ask God to continue to provide faithful pastors and leaders and pray for the ones that God has given to you now. I do pray for you. I say prayers for you individually, and I pray for you as a congregation, and it gives me strength when I know that you are praying for me, too. When one of you mentions to me that you have prayed for me, or that you do pray for me, or that you will be praying for me, it lifts me up, and I can tell you, I need it. I, like you, am susceptible to landing in those seasons that St. John of the Cross called the Dark Night of the Soul, when God feels distant or unknowable. I have insecurities and doubts and have to learn daily to trust Christ in all of life and especially in obeying his call to serve you. I can be overwhelmed and distracted by the cares of life, but I *want* to be your faithful pastor and I need your prayers and Jesus's help to be able to do that. (I'm speaking for myself, but I expect Brian would say the same thing).

The second thing you can do is heed the word of the author of Hebrews. "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." It's been said- you've had wonderful leaders and teachers that have helped you mature and grow to this point. Even though they are no longer here, remember what you learned from them and keep doing it. You can continue to benefit from their leadership and the members of the congregation who may not have been here when they were your pastor can benefit from what you do and how you live as a result of what you learned from that.

The third thing is to develop your own gift and use it here in the church. I said earlier, churches can exist without a pastor. The pastor isn't the church. He or she is just one member of the Body. It's not ideal to go without leadership, but Christ gave gifts to everyone and the church benefits and is built up when *everyone* uses their gifts. You may not be a teacher and you may not be on the session, but there are different kinds of leadership. We lead when we set an example, and our example becomes better and better the more we pursue Jesus and become more like him. We also lead when we do whatever it is that we are able to do well, and when we are all using our gifts, the Body will be built up and will have the spiritual strength and maturity to stick together, and to help each other, and to keep on doing ministry in Jesus's name, even if for a time or a season you have leadership trouble.

I am so grateful to God for this day, for this church, for all who have blessed and served this congregation for all these years, and to the former pastors and staff who are here today I want to say thank you and well done, good and faithful servants. Though we have some glory days in our past, I don't think all of the glory days are in the past. I think God has more in store for us. I know there are some here who traveled from out of town or made a special effort to be here today, but if you are able to worship with us regularly and to get involved in the life of this church on a more regular basis, we would love for you to come along with us and be part of what God has planned next for LPC. Amen.