



CHURCH ANNIVERSARY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 10, 2013

Carl W. Kenney II, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Clergy and blogger living in Durham, NC

Lection – Ephesians 4:15-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 15) But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, (v. 16) 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.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The celebration of a church anniversary is more than the rekindling of memories. It is an opportunity to remember and reclaim the vision of the church. The countless activities of a year of service can leave a church perplexed regarding why it has chosen to continue to be witnesses of hope, or with a sparse living record of what it has done to make the Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, and/or with great hope of continuing good and helpful works for the year ahead. Each church functions with a unique call from God. The anniversary provides the church a chance to remember the travails of those who carried the cross of Christian service. In addition to being a time to remember, the anniversary evokes the theology of the local church. The

celebration of the anniversary declares: This is who we were, this is who we are, and this is who we will always be.

Quite importantly, as each church assesses its impact and plans its anniversary celebration, an opportunity is available to determine whether its members are maturing and becoming more Christlike, and whether all areas of the church are working properly as they advance the causes of Christ. All churches want to grow spiritually and numerically. By focusing on whether its members are maturing and becoming more like Christ, churches automatically enhance their spiritual growth, which leads to numerical growth.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ephesians 4:15-16

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As someone with more than 20 years of pastoral experience, I believe a number of critical questions should be answered in preparing for a church anniversary. At the center of the celebration is the recognition of the many clouds of witnesses who paved the way in building the ministry. The work of ministry is more than the bricks and pews that make for the home/place of worship. History is about the people who continue to lead the way. History is more than dates and memories of old songs that capture the faith of those left behind. History is about the people.

Here are questions to begin the planning process:

- What was the vision of those who started the ministry? Why did they start the church? What were the obstacles they were forced to overcome?
- How does our current mission show up in our history?
- What is the voice of the biblical witness? Great care should go into finding Scriptures that speak to the history of the church and its present vision.
- Who are the people who helped shape the ministry? Be careful to include lay leaders. It is crucial that the history of the church takes into account the *priesthood of all believers*.
- Who are the people who helped stir the faith of the church during troubling times? Why are they significant? How do they reflect the vision of the church today?
- Who are the people currently within the church who exemplify the vision of the church?

The struggle of every church is in making the connection between the past and the present. The celebration demands the weaving of the former days into the present worship format. The church should avoid the temptation of making the service only a reflection of today's worship style. The past and the present should be celebrated as part of the history. It's part of a long journey that reveals the hopes and dreams of yesterday and the victories along the way.

The planning committee should ask at least the following questions:

- What songs did they sing when the church was organized? Spend time asking older congregants to share songs they remember along the way. It is more enduring when the history moves beyond songs of an era to embrace songs that are a part of the history of the congregation.
- Ask older congregants to relate memories from the past. What are their memories within worship? What are their memories beyond the worship setting? Are there sermons they remember?
- What are the initiatives in which the church has engaged in the past three or so years and what are the most important initiatives planned for the next three years? How can these initiatives be woven into the materials that will be used during the celebration? How can they be interwoven into events that will be held? How can they be used to frame all worship services that will be held related to the anniversary?
- How can the celebration be designed to ensure the balanced involvement of all generations of the church and those with disabilities?
- How can the celebration be designed to involve sister churches and the community?
- How can the celebration be designed to show that its members are maturing in Christ and in doing the works of Christ? This is quite important.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Ephesians has long held a significant influence in the Christian community. In my estimation, in the New Testament, it is only superseded by the immenseness of Romans. Ephesians is practical theology placed in letter form.

The authorship of Ephesians has long been disputed. The arguments against this being authentically a letter written by Paul can be grouped into three categories: linguistic, literary, and theological reasons, although many still ascribe its authorship to Paul. It is also a circular letter (meaning sent to several churches in Asia Minor) given Ephesians 1:15 and Ephesians 6:21-22.

If a theme were attached to the letter it would likely be “The Behavior of the Body of Christ.” This makes it particularly apropos for its use for a church anniversary lection. Today’s text is found in chapter four of Ephesians. Beginning here, we find the second major section of the letter, beginning at Ephesians 4:3: “maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.” Next, the writer speaks of the unity and yet diversity of the Godhead. After that he addresses the leadership of the Church with diverse gifts and offers that they are grow together in unity. This is the behavior of the Church of Jesus Christ—diverse in gifts yet unified. Unified so that it can live out the character of Christ corporately and in our individual lives as we tell and show the good news throughout the earth. This is what God requires the Church to do.

The church has no right to set its own agenda. It was placed here to carry out God's agenda. The church was not placed in the world with a mandate to correct the evils of society but to declare and demonstrate the power of God in Jesus Christ. The great and beautiful paradox of the church is that the more it focuses on its true spiritual mandate, the more effective it is in correcting the ills and evils of society.

But how is it that the black church, filled with people of all ages, occasionally of various races, from different backgrounds, different social strata, with different interests, can unite to corporately live out the character of Christ as it spreads the good news? One thing that will help do it is for the church to receive good leadership from their apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, for it is their job to "equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). These are some of the leaders we celebrate during each church anniversary.

How else can it be done? It can be done when believers speak the truth to each other in love. Such love is a requirement because it is only love that gives us the courage to grow up as the body of Christ and grow into Christ. Such love gives each of us brakes when we move to make our word the last word or when we move to interject principles and ideologies that are not in keeping with the teachings of Christ.

Finally, it can be done when each part (meaning each member working in his or her area of calling) is working properly in love. This promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. Too often when churches speak of growth they speak of growing numerically instead of growing spiritually. But this text shows that one will not work without the other. So, even if a church "blows up," as they say in the current urban parlance, it will deflate and die if it is not a church built on love for the sake of having its members become like Christ so that they can personally and corporately spread the good news and be that news for someone in need of a Savior.

So, as you celebrate another anniversary this year, make sure that what you are celebrating concerns your church having mature leaders, being a loving church, and most importantly being a church that God can look at and say, "**They glorify me by spreading the good news of Christ, in word and deed, to those in need.**" That is why the Church exists: to glorify God by lifting the Son in word and deed. The privilege of being able to do so is definitely something to celebrate. Happy anniversary!

Challenge

Let us always remember our church ancestors on whose shoulders we stand; their faith and fortitude built black churches with nickels and dimes, prayers, and courage. We must remember and celebrate our past. However, we cannot live in the past. We too have a mark to make for Christ—some child to house and clothe, some soul to lead towards the marvelous light, and our Great God to glorify.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include, but are not limited to:

Sounds: Ushers marching; joyous music of celebration; children laughing; pastors preaching; deacons praying; the clinking of money; resolutions being read; the roll of deceased members read;

Sights: Ancestors worshipping in the 1920s, '30s, '40s, and '50s; choirs dressed in robes standing to sing for the anniversary; an officiant standing and directing the order of worship; tears of members celebrating the history of their church; youth, young adults, and elders celebrating together; people enjoying a meal after the anniversary celebration; and

Colors: The green, red, white, or yellow flowers at the altar; the white, red, or burgundy robes of the choir; the red chevrons in the preacher's robe; the gray hair of elder members; the black outfits of the mime dancers; and

Tastes: The taste of the historic foods of your church, such as chicken, sweet potatoes, lemon pound cake, strawberry-tasting punch, and rolls.

III. Other Sermonic Suggestions

- **Other Scriptures that can be used for a Church Anniversary:**

Judges 2:10-14 NIV (Hebrew Bible Reading)

Deuteronomy 6:6-9

Matthew 16:13-20 (Gospel Reading)

Ephesians 4:1-16 (Epistle)

- **A Church Anniversary Benediction**

By Carl W. Kinney II. Based on Joshua 1:9 and Amazing Grace by John Newton

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Keep maturing. Keep being the ones through whom the world can see Christ. Be strong. Be courageous. Go in confidence. Walk in the steps of our ancestors. The gates of Hell will not prevail against us. Now, go, tell, and live the story. Amen.