

“Equipping the Saints”

Ephesians 4:11-16

September 12, 2021

In the summer of 2019, when the leaders of our church gathered to pray and dream and plan for the years ahead at Second—years that we envisioned as years of plenty—the passage we just heard from the letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 4:11-16) framed our discernment and animated our conversations. Ephesians is written to an early Christian community struggling to discern and then cling to its core identity in the face of cultural change and shift. The letter shines a spotlight on the distinctive marks of what it means *to be the church*. Two years ago, we began with belonging: the conviction that we belong to each other because we all belong first to God. And haven't those Lego stress blocks come in handy these two years? Last year, in the grip of pandemic and strained by compound crises, we turned our attention to the essential truth of Christian unity: what we share in common, what unites us. And today, leaning into that call of renewal and the possibility of hope, we begin a year of emphasis on equipping.

As we commence a third program year centered on these verses from Ephesians, a confession is in order from me. Here it is: The text from Ephesians did not come to me in a flash of lightning. There was no voice booming from the heavens. It was not even the result of lengthy group discernment among our Session and staff. No, this is a passage that I have carried with me for over a decade now because it was the passage that was preached on the day of my ordination. The preacher that day centered the sermon on this phrase: *equipping the saints for the work of ministry*. This, he boldly proclaimed, is the primary role of the pastor. To equip the saints for the work of ministry. Not to *do* the work of ministry on the people's behalf. Not to lead the saints in ministry that they may not otherwise pursue. Not even to compassionately care

for the saints as they do the work of ministry. The central task of the pastor is to equip God's people to do the work of ministry. It is a call to which I've been aspiring since January 6th of 2008.

In those years, though, the aperture through which I view that call has widened considerably. Now as I read this text, I see equipping as the ministry of the pastor, yes, *but* I also see it as God's mission in the whole church. You see, the subject of the sentence that begins this chapter is *God*. As the great mystic Evelyn Underhill wrote a century ago, the interesting thing about religion is *God*, this God who gives a diverse array of gifts, prophets and apostles, teachers and pastors. God distributes the gifts across the community. *God* equips the saints for the work of ministry. And in this passage, the focus is not on the gifts and not on the recipients, but on the giver. God governs the sentence. God alone equips.

Those who are the equipped are the saints. We'll have the chance to reflect more fully on this word later in the year—you may know there's a whole day dedicated to saints—but it's enough for now to say that the saints here include you and me. We are the ones who are being equipped for the work of ministry. And we are not alone in being equipped. The term in the New Testament—saints—is not restrictive but inclusive. God intends to equip *all*, not some, for the work of ministry.

And then there is that verb: equip. As we were mapping out the theme for the year, there was some sense among our team that we may want to update the language a bit. Equip, after all, is not exactly a word we hear or use every day. How about “preparing the church for ministry?” Or in his paraphrase, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson captures it this way: “God

handed out gifts to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work." I like that. But I remain partial to the word *equip*. I found a good reason for that in doing some study on the origin of the word, and it is at this moment when all you non-geeks in the congregation can tune out. The word *equip* comes to us through the French (which also gives us the noun, which translates "team." So there's that!), but most etymologists think the origin is actually Old Norse—the word *skipa*—a technical term, more useful in their day and time than ours, used to describe the act of boarding a ship. Now, *that* will preach. In fact, it just did. What if we conceived this year, this time in this place, as the act of boarding the ship together, training and preparing to set sail into this beautiful, broken world where the spirit of God is already present at work?

All aboard! For what purpose? Well, the work of ministry. Here we are equipped to do God's work, yes. But, here's the crucial shift: That work is *out there*, for the God we worship is a *sending* God. We've got to set sail.

Many metaphors have been employed, both in scripture and in the centuries since the formation of the canon, to attempt to capture the purpose and practice of the church. Many belong to specific contexts and eras in history. For a long time in this country, the church (and the nation itself) was described using the image of a city set upon a hill, boldly beckoning all people to its magnetic shining light. Roots of the image are in the Sermon on the Mount, but the specific application to our land was made by the Puritan preacher John Winthrop in a stirring sermon preached to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Winthrop said, "We must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world." For decades, even centuries, that metaphor, that image, worked for the church. A light lifted high in the world. People streaming from north and

south and east and west into the holy city of God for inspiration and instruction. What we might call the *attractional* model of the church.

My friends, we live in a different time, a time described by some as post-Christendom or even the post-Christian era. All of the statistics painfully bear this out. We can deny it, pretend it's not true. We can lament it, grieve over its truth. Or we could resist it. There is another option. We can prayerfully discern a path forward that asks in this moment how God intends to use the church. That's what I'm trying to do. It's what I believe we together are called to do. To ask questions like: What is the mission of the church *in this moment*? What does it mean to follow Jesus *in this world*?

Here's my metaphor tailor-made for 2021: the church not as city on a hill but as *charging station*. *Equipping the saints for the work of ministry*. Not overly obsessed with attraction, but well-suited for sending. Not a distant fortress built high upon a hill, but a dynamic network of energetic (or electric?) faith where God's people are fully charged for our mission in the world. Isn't that what we want to offer? Isn't that what we have to offer? Isn't this what we all need now?

Imagine this: You are inviting or thinking of inviting a friend or classmate or coworker or neighbor to church. Here's one way to frame the invitation: *I really think you'd like my church. The people there are so friendly. The space is so beautiful. The worship is meaningful and usually only lasts an hour.* Nothing wrong with that. Now try this one: *You should come try our church. The spirit of God's is alive in that place. It fills me up all week long and sends me out for the journey ahead. It challenges me to live faithfully, to remember the Gospel every day.* I think you get the contrast here.

I do most of my writing on a laptop, and I love to write in coffee shops. Occasionally, I leave my laptop charger at home. When I do, I find myself nervously writing as I watch an icon in the top right corner of the screen. It looks like a battery. After an hour

or so, that icon will turn red, and then an ominous message will pop up on the screen. Here's what it says: *Your laptop will soon sleep unless plugged into a charger.* My pastoral sense of your lives, and my own lived experience, is that most of us spend a great deal of time in the red zone when it comes to our spiritual batteries. What if Second Church was your charging station? What if we could be a charging station for young adults who long for a deeper vision of a meaningful life than what they're being sold beyond these doors? What if we could be a charging station for our neighbors who have been depleted by constant struggle to provide for their families; for those in our city left behind, cast aside, ignored, and overlooked? What if we could be a charging station for parents seeking to raise faithful children in a world that doesn't always encourage that goal? What if we could be a charging station for leaders who need a better vision of the common good, of what matters most? What if we could be a charging station for older adults seeking community in a sea of loneliness? What if we could be a charging station for children who will inherit a world of chaos and fragility? What if we could be a charging station for all who long to be equipped for the work of ministry?

In my mind, this is *urgent* work. In my heart, this is *hopeful* work. So Second Church, let's get serious about equipping the saints for the work of ministry, no longer satisfied with tracking attendance, attracting attention, growing the budget, or beautifying the building. Let's take the charge we receive on Sunday into the places where you spend the vast majority of your time. Let's make the most of the chance to serve and lead, to transform, to bless as we've been blessed, to equip as we've been equipped.

For when we are charged up, our senses are attuned to the whispers of the Spirit that come in mundane moments. When did it happen to you? When did the God who equipped you for ministry send you beyond your comfort and ease, beyond your self-obsession and your careful plans, to embrace the work of ministry? When were you called to take a risk to be faithful to the One who claimed your life? Could it

be that for you that moment is this moment? Could it be for us that that time is this time? Is there some tug on your life even now that you've been ignoring or resisting, some ministry for which God has already equipped you?

The preacher on that ordination day in January of 2008 in Atlanta, Georgia, the one who chose that text that has shaped much of my ministry, was my father. Of course, his shaping of me didn't begin that day, nor has it ceased since that day. Dad was the first preacher I ever heard, and his preaching has surely formed my life in ways I'll never fully understand. Two weeks ago, my dad retired after four decades in congregational ministry. As I've reflected on the impact of his ministry, I'm convinced that it will never be told in numbers, nor in the stories of those he brought to faith or brought to the church. No, Dad's ministry is described in the testimony of those who were equipped and sent into the world fully charged as followers of Jesus Christ. One of those, now in his fifties, who was in Dad's first youth group, summed it up so beautifully. "Thank you for being Jesus to all and sharing the Gospel in word and deed." Beloved, our charge is nothing less than that. Equipped for the work of ministry, we live in the world as Christ calls us to live.

I have no doubt that I am here today because my father preached and lived a compelling gospel that captivated me. And having been thus blessed, I'm determined to pay those gifts of the Spirit forward in my life and here in this community. Having been equipped by God, I'm compelled to pursue the work of ministry with everything I have, and that is your call too. God's equipped and sent saints. So don't be discouraged. Don't be distracted. Don't be divided, and don't be depleted. Keep your eyes firmly fixed on the One who has called you, the one whose life is at work in your life.

Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis: a charging station for God's saints. Your ministry begins at the doors of the church. Let's get to work. Amen.