

It's Mothers' Day today. So, I don't know about you, but I spent some time this last week thinking about everything my mom did to grow me from a baby into a mature adult. Started while she was keeping us alive in the womb. And then we were born, all those sleepless nights waking up every three hours to feed us. All those diapers changed. And then as kids, all the battles she fought to get us in bed on time and keep us from putting metal things into electrical sockets. Making sure we were eating well, dressed for the weather, getting good grades in school.

I'm not downplaying dad's role in all this – you'll get your day next month. But today, we thank our moms for their role in growing us up from infants into adults.

I bring it up this morning, because what our moms did for our bodies is what Paul says Jesus is still doing for his body – the Church – all believers in him. More than just Mother's Day, today is Ascension Day, when we celebrate how Jesus soared through the clouds to his throne on high. But he didn't do it to be rid of us or retire from his work for us. Paul says he did it so that he could perfectly care for his body, the Church – for us – spiritually. So that he could grow us into spiritual adulthood – a thriving and mature body of believers. The Ascended Christ is Building Up His Body, Paul tells us. 1) By giving gifts to be used, and 2) by giving growth for our good.

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says:

**"When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men."**

⁹ (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

1. He gives gifts to be used

Paul begins with the truth of Jesus' ascension. He quotes a Psalm that describes it as a victory parade. Picture it: A victorious general returning to the capital with his conquering army. Behind him, in chains, are his defeated enemies. As he rides through the city streets, he begins throwing to the people some of the spoils of war – coins, clothes, food he won in battle.

What a beautiful way to describe Jesus' ascent **higher than all the heavens!** Paul says first he **descended to** these **earthly regions** – God the Son became one of us to do battle for us. To defeat the enemies that held us captive. The sin that enslaved us. The death that awaits us. The hell we deserve. It was a battle he fought every day of his perfect life with you all the way to his suffering and death on the cross for you. But then he rose and showed himself the victor. Sin paid for. Death defeated. Hell vanquished. His ascent into heaven is a victory parade – sin, death and hell are in chains behind him,

captives in his train. And now from on high, he's doling out through his word as undeserved gifts the spoils he won for us – forgiveness of sin, eternal life, salvation.

And as if that weren't generous enough, Paul says there are more undeserved gifts he doles out through his Word. **But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it,** Paul says here. Along with the gifts of salvation given to every believer alike, there are other spiritual gifts he gives – talents and abilities. These are given **to each one of us,** but vary in amount and kind from believer to believer as **Christ** in his wisdom **apportions.**

Paul begins mentioning gifts of preaching and teaching. **It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.** It's good to remember where pastors and teachers come from. In our synod, teachers and staff ministers are trained at Martin Luther College. Pastors are trained there and at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. But where do they really come from? From Jesus. The credit doesn't go to the students or the schools...this is all the work of the ascended Christ, giving gifts of preaching and teaching to people through his word, and then gifting those people to the church.

But it's not *just* pastors and teachers that Jesus uses to build up his body. What does Paul say? **It was he who gave some to be...pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for works of service, that the body of Christ might be built up.** Through their preaching and teaching, Jesus is still giving spiritual gifts to every part of the body. Gifts of teaching, evangelism, hospitality, leadership, service, compassion. And they're gifts to be used! Paul says the **body grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.**

As each part does its work. And right there we see our sin, don't we? As a pastor, I do. Sometimes I act as if this were my work, not our work. And so instead of seeing your gifts and encouraging you to use them, I just do it myself. Sometimes out of arrogance – I think I can do it better than others can. Sometimes out of laziness – it's just easier for me to do it than taking the time to train, ask, encourage.

But maybe you see your sin there, too. Maybe you fall into thinking building up the body is *their* work, not my work. Encouraging...greeting...visiting...calling...leading...content to let the pastor do it – he's trained for it. Content to let others use their gifts instead of you using yours. Content to come and have your spiritual needs met, but not looking for ways to meet the needs of others.

And that's why Paul's first words are so important here: **But to each one of us grace has been given...** I've proved time and again I'm unworthy of the gift of being a pastor. We've proved unworthy of the spiritual gifts he's given us by not using them faithfully to build up the body. None of us deserves to be a part of Christ's body. But that's the thing: We have a Savior who's in the business of loving the unworthy and giving gifts to the undeserving. A Savior who's showed each of us grace.

Grace led God the Son to descend into these lower earthly regions and live a worthy life that covers over our unworthiness. Grace led him to carry our sins to the cross and die to take them away. Grace led him to ascend higher than the highest heavens with our defeated enemies in his train, so that he could call you to faith by his gospel, wash your sins away, and bring you into his body as a holy member. Grace still today through the gospel offers and gives you the spoils he won for you: Forgiveness.

And grace upon grace, he uses us to build his body. He doesn't need us to do it. He could very well do it himself. But in love for you, he chose to make it not just *his* work but *our* work. He generously gifts us with talents and abilities and then give us opportunities to use them. What spiritual gifts has he given you? How can you use them here and out there to serve, to encourage, to speak the truth in love, and build up the body of Christ? Give that some prayerful consideration this week.

II. *He gives growth for our good*

Jesus has a glorious end goal for building up his body. Paul mentions that in verse 13: **13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.** When will we reach this goal? When will all Christians be perfectly united in faith, no divisions? When will we know the Son of God fully, even as we are fully known? When will we attain the full measure of Christ-likeness? Not here on earth. Only when we get to heaven.

But until then, there's always room to grow. Paul highlights that here by doing something kind of shocking. He talks about spiritual babies - and did you notice? He includes himself in the bunch! **Then we will no longer be infants...** He's an apostle! But he fully acknowledges his need to grow in faith, knowledge, Christ-likeness.

Maybe we can learn something from that? We might think we're spiritual adults: "I've known Jesus all my life." We may be content with where we're at spiritually. But Jesus isn't content with where we're at; he wants our growth.

But not for his sake! For ours – for our benefit and blessing. **Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.** Life can be rough – its ups and downs can toss us back and forth spiritually like a buoy bobbing in the ocean. From trust to distrust; peace to worry; happiness to heartache. But Jesus wants something better for us. He wants our trust to grow and remain constant, so that we have peace and joy in any situation. He wants us to grow for our good.

Lies threaten our faith, too. Lies from false teachers without; lies from my misleading sinful nature within. Lies that I need other people's approval; lies that my worth is in my performance or my possessions; lies about how God feels about me and what God wants for me. Jesus doesn't want me to live resting my faith on one deceit after another; he wants my faith resting on the rock-solid truth. So he wants me to grow for my good.

And the good of others. **Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.** The more well-grounded I am in the truth, the more equipped I am to share it and build others up. The stronger my faith is, the more I'll be able to be a blessing to the body and its growth.

And the growth Jesus wants, Jesus gives. The conqueror is doling out God the Holy Spirit through word and sacrament to grow your faith, knowledge, Christ-likeness. And he promises to do so until he returns. So let Jesus grow you with them as often as you can.

My mom loved me and did a great job of caring for my body; today, I say thanks. Jesus loves and cares for you, his body, perfectly – and that will be our song of thanks into eternity. Amen.