

**Sermon by Rev. Martha Shiverick
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Lessons in the Recession
August 2, 2009
Ephesians 4:1-16**

Almost like oppressive heat and humidity normally felt in August, the recession has surrounded our lives and world and there is no escaping it. For a year now, we have lived with an economic crisis not seen since the great depression and everyone has been affected. Our retirement accounts are diminished; our friends and many of us have lost jobs as companies downsize to stay alive in a downturned market. Middle age people usually at the height of their earning potential, are being laid off and finding it next to impossible to find new employment. Benefits usually taken for granted in salary packages are being taken away and where we might have complained a few years ago, employees are now just happy to be employed. The mortgage crisis meant that many, who thought they had achieved the security of home ownership, are now with out homes and their life savings. The trickle down effect is felt as consumers no longer can spend so more people loose their jobs as restaurants and stores cut back. And of course the poor and the near poor have been hit worse by this as they always are. My youngest sister and her friends are finding that they need to teach their elementary age children about the recession by making all members of their families give up things to help the family budget. You can feel the recession everywhere you go and in every conversation you have. It's even here, in this beautiful sanctuary. You can feel it. You look at the person sitting next to you in the pew and you know they feel it too. You can't escape it. And although we might want to escape our feelings of fear, of insecurity, of panic, that this economic climate has brought on, we know deep down that it is not the church's place to escape the world but to face it and equip each other to live within it doing God's work. It is the churches place to be a part of ministering to those affected by our recession and the pain it is causing.

The Fairmount congregation does not want to be like the one I read about in Christian Century magazine, where members silently left the church when they lost their jobs out of embarrassment. We want to respond to our congregation, our neighbors and our world in its time of

need, so when I saw that Paul's Letter to the Ephesians was this week's lectionary reading, I knew it would speak to us in our time as well. Ephesians is not a letter in the sense of Paul's other epistles. It is not addressed to any one particular congregation and the issues they were facing but is addressed to the larger group, to Christian congregations as a whole. Commentators write that no part of the New Testament has more contemporary relevance than Ephesians. The audience to whom the letter was written are people who come from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds and their faith is competing with Gnostic beliefs and astrology. It is important to the writer that Christ is seen as the lord of the cosmos and the final point toward which history is moving. The writer of the epistle does not see the church as a place where people go to escape the world, but a place where spiritual gifts are given to help the church move the world into a better place. It is a letter which spells out a theology that has been recognized as important to the modern church as well as the earlier one to whom it was written. The underlying belief that runs through the letter is that God rules the entire universe. It is Trinitarian in its doctrine speaking of God the creator, Christ the ruler of the whole cosmos, and the Holy Spirit who is moving us to a final point which is the kingdom of God. This morning's scripture speaks to the purpose of the church. It answers the question of what can we do together as a group of believers that we can not do alone. Or as our pew Bible's title it, 'The Church's Vocation in Light of Its Unity'.

Listen now for God's word as it is written in the Letter to the Ephesians 4:1-16.....

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Certainly, individually we are called upon to lead a life worthy of God. But according to this scripture lesson, the place in which this life plays out is the church, where God has given each of us gifts to move the world toward God's plan and destiny. Christian virtues have a communal orientation. They are given to enhance the unity of the Christian community. The writer of the epistle talks of 'the unity in Christ', but this 'unity' does not mean that every one is the same. We know very well, that what he writes is true... Everyone's gifts are different. Just like Paul's wonderful description in Corinthians of the spiritual gifts being like body parts and all needing to be different in order for the body to work effectively and the epistle writer here

expresses the same belief for the good of the church. The writer sees the church as a living organism made up of living individual people who are personally responsible for their growth of character and personal development. Christ's purpose for us is to reach a maturity in the use and direction with our spiritual gifts God has given us. These gifts are designated to benefit the entire body of Christ and to take on the character of Christ, that character being love.

Ephesians teaches us that the church has a place in the world and that each of us has been equipped by God with different gifts to be God's presence in the world. We corporately as Christ's body, must use these gifts to bring about God's plan and purpose. This means that for us today we need to be with our brothers and sisters in this time of economic uncertainty. We live in this world and our task is to bring about God's realm. We need to realize that in a world were an individual like Bernie Madoff without ethics and scruples can effect individuals and non profit organizations throughout the world, a group of individuals with God's spiritual gifts can do God's work and can truly make a difference in all of creation. We can move the world to an ethic of love. The last issue of Christian Century magazine was devoted to the church's response to these economic times. One author wrote that the church now more than ever has a role in helping people clarify their core values. A climate that has been rewarding competition and greed has proven to be fallible and the church needs to stand in and hold up the values of faith, family, and friendships that in the end are stronger and of more valuable than money, power, and personal prestige. Mainline churches like our Presbyterian denomination are very good at responding to natural disasters. Perhaps we might need to look at the fallout from the recession in a similar way. Truly we can be the difference.

Mark Douglas, the editor of Columbia Theological Seminary's e-newsletter "@ this point" recently wrote an editorial titled, "Capitalism, the Crash, and Christianity". In it he points to three types of economic practices for Christians. First he points to faithful discernment, saying that the first question of Christian discipleship is not what should I do, or even what should the church do, but what is God doing. Just as the writer in Ephesians states, God is at work in the world and we need to be a part of it. A good way to always start this discernment process is through prayer. Our Lord's Prayer starts off asking for God's

kingdom to come and to give us our daily bread. This may help us to slow down, to realize that God is in control, to remind us of others in our concern, and to orient us to God and to see what God is doing. The second practice for the Christian is to hope. We are to engage the world in hope as we know that the world is God's and that God will transform even a slow market economy into God's kingdom. The third practice Douglas writes about in his editorial is to have loving patience. Douglas says that the huge questions such as "how can we fix this?" or even, "how can we escape this?" can not be easily answered. But because we have faith that God is in control, we can wait it through and wait it through with love and concern for others. In the midst of our current economic turmoil, the church performs most lovingly when it does the same things it has always done. That is to not to ignore the situation and act as though economy and current hardships have nothing to do with our churches but to attend to the poor, the hurting, and the oppressed by providing immediate aid, to host programs aimed at bringing the unemployed or under employed to employment, to offer pastoral care, and to offer hope to all. It is easy for the church to give when times are good, and it is extremely important for the church to give when times are tough.

Diana Butler Bass, the author whose visit to Cleveland in September is announced in your worship bulletins this morning, writes in a Soujourner's magazine article that God does not provide for us as individuals but as a community. She writes, "we are in this together in suffering and reward. We are not alone but are a community who welcomes God's provision. We are a community who cares for one another, we work side by side, and we share the bounty of grace." And we here at Fairmount have shown compassion to those most affected by our economic time and have tried to use our spiritual gifts in bringing hope and love to others. Our Thursday AM job seekers group was exactly what the epistle writer meant about spiritual gifts being given by God and used to bring about God's work. So is the wonderful "Skill Bank and Skill Needed" link up that Deborah Nash has put together linking peoples needs to others skill sets. Dick Clewell and Eric are talking about an Adult Christian Education series this fall which will deal with the current economic crisis and how people can respond to it and also deal with the stress. And, we know we have not done all that we can do. As faithful followers of Christ, we need to continue to pray to God to show us how to use the gifts and skills we have been

given to bring about God's realm. We need to know that even though individually we might not be able to change the world recession and comfort our brothers and sisters, we CAN as the body of Christ. We have the Spiritual Gifts it takes to bring about God's kingdom. As it is written in the epistle to the Ephesians, we need only to use our Spiritual Gifts together as the body of Christ and we will build ourselves up in love! Amen.