

“Christian Alignment”

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for ministry, for building up the body of Christ ...”

Once every two weeks, I alter my usual route to my office to visit my chiropractor, a practice I’ve been following for almost thirty years. It began when I was experiencing excruciating back pain, and other treatments were giving me no relief. When I visited my first chiropractor – Dr. Kirkland in Manahawkin, New Jersey – he explained to me that my back problems were mostly due to my height, and my need to bend more frequently than a person of average height that creates stress on my lower back. Once he was able to relieve my pain, Dr. Kirkland recommended that I regularly visit him so that the stress didn’t build up again to the “breaking point”; and ever since, whenever I’ve moved to a new community I always seek out a chiropractor to keep everything in proper alignment.

I can’t say that I understand how chiropractic works; but then again, I really don’t understand how my laptop works, and yet I still use it regularly. Chiropractic is based on keeping all parts of the body in proper alignment so that everything is working together properly to promote maximum health; and for me, it works. Indeed, proper alignment – keeping things *“in correct or appropriate relative positions; a position of agreement or alliance”* – is important in many aspects of life:

- Keeping a machine such as an automobile in proper alignment allows it to perform at its maximum efficiency.
- Keeping the rails in proper alignment is critical for the proper function of a railroad.
- Keeping parts of a team or organization in proper alignment allows it to accomplish its goals and achieve its full potential.

After summarizing the basics of the apostolic faith in the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul turns his attention to what it means for his readers to live as sisters and brothers in Christ. The apostle presumes that their conversion leads to renewal, indicated by his use of the word “saints,” in his praise for mutual love (*“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints”* – 1:15), and that the elect are “holy and blameless” (1:4) before God and have been *“created in Christ Jesus for good works”* (2:10). Paul begins his exhortation (encouragement) with a call to *“lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called”* (4:1), which echoes the Jewish understanding of divine election; God’s calling is to create a people who are devoted to God’s Law. Even though Pauline churches no longer follow the Law in the same manner (*“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”* – Romans 3:28), the teaching that election as a child of God leads to new life remains (... *you should lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.*” – 1 Thessalonians 2:12). Signs of this life a one who has been “called, enlightened, made holy, and kept in the true faith” (*Small Catechism*) are such virtues as *“all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”* (4:2-3), virtues that are the “spiritual clothing” of the saints that Paul describes in his letter to the Colossians (*“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”* – Colossians 3:12).

Those who have been called and made holy by God have been incorporated into the Church which is the Body of Christ, and Paul calls to mind the Church's confession of faith to demonstrate how essential the oneness of the Church is to its very life and mission: *"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."* (4:4-6). The principal mark of the Church is unity, and the calling of Christians is to build up the Body of Christ in all that they do. While Paul will affirm the diversity of individual gifts, he asserts that they are always to be used for the good of the whole. For Paul, all Christians share the same vocation or calling, using their diverse gifts to build up the Body of Christ and to fulfill God's intention for the Church:

- *"Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."* – 1 Corinthians 12:4-6.

The variety of gifts that Paul lists in Ephesians are some of the offices of ministry that were present in the early church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. While each gift has a different function within the Church, they all share the same purpose: *"to equip the saints for 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."* (4:12-13). Paul's choice of words in the passage is unique, for the word "equip" (*katartismos*) is found only here in the New Testament. While the English word "equip" means to *"supply with necessary items for a particular purpose,"* the word Paul chooses literally means "the setting of a bone," the manner in which various elements work together in proper alignment, the dynamic act by which persons or things are properly conditioned. It describes how members of the Body of Christ use their spiritual gifts in proper alignment to God's intentions for the Church, so that they might avoid being *"tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming."* (4:14). It means aligning our life together as the Church to God's mission and purpose for us, so that our prayer might be fulfilled as *"thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*

- *"As a follower of Jesus aligns his or her life with God's purposes, he or she grows into becoming a disciple, and this individual transformation aids in the corporate transformation of the world into the kingdom."* – G. Porter Taylor.

God has blessed each of us with a variety of gifts and calls us to be faithful stewards of these gifts so that, working together in proper alignment, we might accomplish God's Will for us as God's people here and now. It is an ongoing process that demands our full attention, because as it is easy to neglect our physical bodies so that they fall out of alignment, affecting our health and well-being, so also it is easy for the Body of Christ to fall out of alignment, with some parts not as healthy as others or not understanding the importance of our being aligned with one another and with God's purposes for us:

- *"But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."* – 1 Corinthians 12:24-26.

The means through which the Body of Christ is kept in proper alignment is the key element of the Christian faith: love. To "bear with one another in love" is to sacrifice for the other, to carry one

another's burdens, to understand that love is not an emotion but an act of will. As love is at the heart of God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ (*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life."* – John 3:16), so Christian love is at the heart of the proper alignment of the Body of Christ, where we *"share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear,"* even as we realize that we are both interrelated and responsible for each other as fellow members of Christ's body. Bearing with one another in love means that we also speak *"the truth in love, [because] we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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."* (4:15-16). We speak the truth in love to one another so that we might grow in love; *"we speak truth to one another because we are intimately related."* (Jaime Clark – Soles).

The "love" that is at the heart of a properly-aligned Body of Christ is not a mere emotion, nor does it mean that all members of the Body must feel warmly toward each other. To "love one another" means to act according to God's Will for the Church: *"Love is neither theoretical nor abstract but the glue of community; it is what knits the body together."* (Taylor). Jesus commanded his disciples to *"love one another as I have loved you"* (John 15:12) not merely for their own sake, but for the sake of the mission to which Christ has called them: *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13:35). In his prayer in the hours before his crucifixion, Jesus prays that the Church that will bear his name will be aligned in the love he has given them for the sake of the Gospel that they have been called to proclaim:

- *"The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."* – John 17:22-23.

Our call to live together in proper alignment and to speak the truth in love to each other at times when this alignment is threatening the health of the body is not merely for our own sake, for the sake of peace and tranquility among members of the church, but for the sake of the purpose and mission of the Church to be *"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* (1 Peter 2:9). We seek to be vigilant so that the Church remains properly aligned with God's purposes so that it might fulfill its necessary purpose, the fundamental reason why the Church of Jesus Christ still has a vital mission in today's world:

- *"Christianity does have a mission to the world, and that mission is the most basic reason for the existence of the church ... it is 'sent out' (that is what the word apostolic means), usually against its will, by the God who has called it into being, because of love for the world. The mission of the church is of central importance to Christian faith, so much so that it constitutes the most basic reason why the church must exist."* – Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?*

Last year, our Congregational Council read and discussed Dave Daubert's *Living Lutheran*, in which the author discusses the importance of congregations understanding their purpose as the Body of Christ, in which we *"clarify and focus on our purpose so our ministry can stay centered on what we believe God wants us to center on."* Our discussions culminated in a one-day retreat in which we formulated a purpose statement for our life together here at Zion Lutheran Church:

- “God’s purpose for Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church is to celebrate God’s presence among us and reflect God’s love. Together, we are all ministers in our church, community, and the world.”

In order to keep ourselves properly aligned to God’s purpose for us, we also formulated a set of “guiding principles” which “*articulate the things we need to remember and be accountable for in living out our purpose*”:

- Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour.
- Seeking God’s guidance through prayer.
- Think, speak, and act with love, respect, and forgiveness.
- Everyone is acceptable to God – He is Lord of all.
- Flexible, adaptable, and willing to change, but unswerving to God’s purpose.
- Embracing social justice.
- Promoting openness and transparency in all aspects of our life as a congregation.
- Generous with time, talent, and money.

Our Lutheran understanding of human sinfulness, that “*there is no distinction, since all of sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23) inspires us to constantly focus on the health and alignment of each member of the body of Christ, and to call those whose lives have fallen out of alignment to return to the Lord our God, to be forgiven and renewed, so that we might be aligned with each other and with God’s loving purpose for us so that God’s mission might truly be accomplished here in this place. Our concern for the health and wholeness of this congregation is not for our own sake, but so that we might be the earthen vessels through whom the treasure of God’s grace is shared with all people.

- “The indispensable prayer to the Lord of the Church for the unity of Christians and of the churches must not be an alibi for human sloth and lack of imagination; instead, it must be the ever-new motivation to an attitude and mind-set which is expressed in the rule of Taize: ‘Never be content with the scandal of separated Christendom. Have the passion for the unity of the body of Christ.’” – Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*.

There have been times over the years when I’ve slacked off in my visits to the chiropractor; but the twinges that inevitably occur in my lower back remind me that I must be vigilant in keeping my body in proper alignment for my own health and so that I might be healthy for those who rely on me. We seek the proper alignment of our congregations with the will of God and with a recognition that we are each members of Christ’s body so that we might experience “*the unity of hearts and minds [that] is like to that above,*” and so that the whole body might “*build itself up in love*” so that this Body might fulfill Christ’s will for us – here and now. Amen.