

“Walking in Balance”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Sixth in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 4.1-16

February 16, 2014

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to walk in a way that is worthy of the calling you received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love, eager to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But to each one of us grace has been given to the measure of the Messiah's gift. This is why the psalm says: *“When he went up on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”* (What does “he went up” mean except that he also went down to the lower, earthly regions? He who went down is the very one who went up higher than all the heavens, in order to fill all things.)

So the Messiah himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for works of ministry, so that the body of the Messiah may be built up. This is so we should 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 the Messiah.

Then we will no longer be babies, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, the Messiah. 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.

Ephesians 4.1-16

New International Version, adapted by GSY

Walking is way of talking about living. Life is like a walk.

Walking comes naturally, but it takes time to learn. We need help with it. No matter how good we get at walking, at times we all need help again. Of course, some of us can't walk with our legs. Remember, though, I'm using “walking” to talk about living. In that sense, we are all walkers (or rollers). Walking can be tricky, the ground shaky. We need good balance to walk well. To live well too.

“I urge you to walk . . .” Paul says. This part of his letter is about walking with balance, walking together, and the help Jesus gives to walk well.

To get into this, let me talk about three things: a scale, a mistake, and a coach.

I

Start with the scale. It’s the kind with two pans. You put a weight in one, and what you want to measure in the other. Someone wants to buy a pound of candy from me. I put a one pound weight on one side. On the other I pour candy until the pans balance. One pound of candy!

If we were speaking Greek, we’d say the weight and the candy are *axios*. They balance. They match.¹ My shoes are *axios* with my feet. A wedding ring is *axios* with the groom’s finger. An Olympic champion is *axios* with her gold medal.²

Paul urges us to walk in a way that is *axios* to our calling. Keep these two things balanced, matched: how we live, and God’s call.

God calls us. God does not just tell us stuff, or just help us out, or just say “Greg, you’ve been naughty!” God calls us, eagerly and expectantly.³

For us, God-in-Jesus has defeated the powers of sin and death, the powers that twist creation. For us, God-in-Jesus has won victory over everything in us, and everything around us that takes us from God. Also, everything that robs us of the flourishing life God has made us for. Including the powers that drive us away from each other. Jesus has defeated them. He is making us into a new humanity, giving a new way of living, reconciling us with each other and, especially, with God.⁴

That’s one side of the scale. The other is our walking, our living this out. We live Jesus’ victory. We live as new people, together in community. We live it humbly and gently, patient with one another, even putting up with each other. By how we live, we show and celebrate what God has done in Jesus. Others will see this, and be blessed, and rejoice,

¹ See the definition of ἀξιόσ in Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1889). Found online at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0058%3Aentry%3Da%29%2Fcios>.

² Eugene H. Peterson, Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 31-32.

³ Ibid, 32.

⁴ Central to Paul, and the biblical story, is the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles.

and hopefully join in.

So like a scale, our walk needs to be *axios*, so our living fits with what Jesus has done.

II

That's the scale. Next, the mistake.

Right in the middle of the reading, Paul remembers Psalm 68. It's one of the ancient wisdom songs treasured by God's People. Another is Psalm 23. You might recognize it. Here's how it starts.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He helps me stand in fierce deserts,
he holds me beside stormy seas. . . .*

"Wait a minute!" you might be saying. That's not it. This is how Psalm 23 really begins!

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside the still waters. . . .*

I switched "green pastures" to "fierce deserts," and "still waters" to "stormy seas." It is still about God's care and protection, but the sense is different. By taking that familiar Psalm and changing it, the twist really stands out!

Paul does the same thing with Psalm 68. This Psalm pictures God triumphantly marching up God's holy mountain, the victorious King. God, who sides with the poor and vulnerable.⁵ God, who rescues the lonely and redeems the captives. God, who brings us to a new home. Line after line, the Psalm calls on us to celebrate God's victory.⁶

⁵ "widows and orphans."

⁶ "Stanza after stanza proclaims God in action." Peterson, 39.

Then, Paul gets to this line:

*When You [God] went up on high,
You took many captives
and received gifts from people.⁷*

Except Paul messes with it:

*When [Jesus] went up on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to people.*

Paul made a “mistake,” on purpose. He counted on at least some of his readers, who knew the Psalms well, catching the changes.⁸ Paul changed it, made it about Jesus going up.⁹ Jesus, the victorious King who, instead of receiving gifts of tribute, gives gifts.

Jesus descended to us. He became a servant. He gave himself for us, even to execution on a cross, an emblem of shame and defeat. It was, in fact, his victory! God raised him from the dead. His weapons are his death and resurrection! Jesus defeated the powers that twist and destroy, taking them captive. Victorious, he now reigns over all things.

When a new king was enthroned, people brought gifts of tribute. But King Jesus gives gifts. Paul wants us to see Jesus’ victory. And he wants us to know that Jesus gives gifts!

III

He gives these gifts to help us walk well. To live *axios*, in sync with what Jesus has done. In other places, Paul lists many of those gifts.¹⁰ Here he shows us five:

- apostles: the first followers of Jesus, who guarded and carried his story.
- prophets: people inspired to bring insight and wisdom from God;
- evangelists: those who proclaim the good news;
- shepherds (or pastors): who care for people in the Jesus-community;
- teachers: who teach us the ways of God, especially in Scripture.

Paul says Jesus gives us these people, these roles, so they can do “*works of ministry*.”

⁷ Psalm 68:18a.

⁸ “Most of the readers (or listeners) to Paul’s message to the Ephesians would be familiar with Psalm 68, especially the Jews who had grown up with the psalms as their prayerbook. Would there have been a startled, even shocked, surprise at hearing ‘gave’ instead of ‘received?’ I think so.” Peterson, 45.

⁹ In v. 8, Paul uses the pronoun “he,” but it is clear from v. 7 that he’s talking about Jesus the Messiah.

¹⁰ For Paul’s other lists of gifts, see Romans 12.6-8, 1st Corinthians 12.4-10, 12.28-29 and 14.26.

Except, that's not quite what he says. He says "*the Messiah himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for works of ministry. . . .*"

"*To equip God's people.*" That's all of us. All of us, Jesus calls to ministry. Not just a few. All of us.

That gets me to our last image, a coach.

What does a coach do? A good coach helps the players to play the game well, as best as they can. A good coach equips her players, teaches them, encourages them, challenges them, organizes them, and supports them. But who plays the game? Not the coach. The players.

We make a mistake when we call only certain people in the church-community "ministers." The word means "servant," and Jesus calls all of us to serve. We are all players. Some of us are coaches too.

Alison and Jeff are ministers.¹¹ Like all of us, they are learning to walk the victory of Jesus in their day-to-day lives: in their family, their workplaces, their community, their church. Same with Lucas and Graham. They are ministers, as much as I am. They're learning to live in *axios* with what Jesus has done and is doing: in their home, with their friends, in their neighbourhood and in our church.

Jesus gives them, and gives us all, gifts to do this. Including those people Paul listed, roles like mine. But know that I have my shepherds, teachers, prophets, and evangelists who coach me.

Jesus the Victorious King rules by giving gifts. He calls us to share in what he is doing, to live out his victory, to walk *axios*, in sync with him every day.¹²

Let's continue to celebrate him, in the Spirit and to the glory of God. Amen.

¹¹ At Elora United Church, we celebrated the Professions of Faith of Alison and Jeff, and the baptisms of Alison and their sons Graham and Lucas.

¹² Peterson, 49.