

8 PENTECOST  
JULY 29/30, 2017

FIRST, MARSHALL  
PR. SCOTT FULLER

Ephesians 4:1-16; John 15:1-4  
*Body of Christ...*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

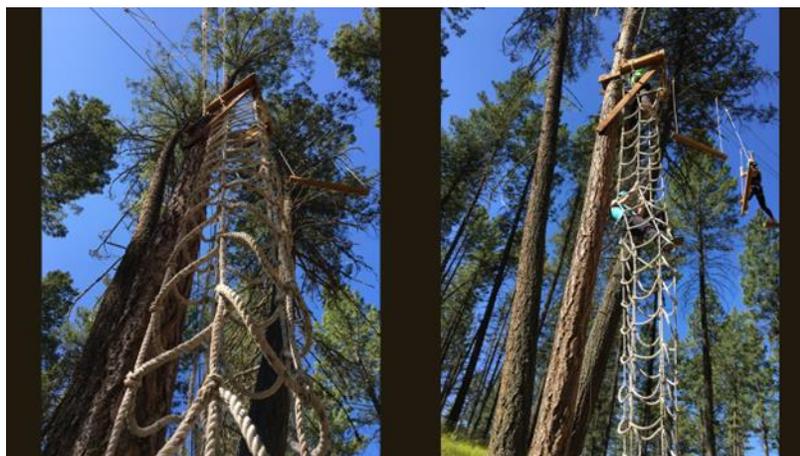
*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*



Picture this scene: a Montana forest of towering pine trees...nestled in a secluded glen...the forest floor is fairly free of underbrush. Each step you take is cushioned by layers of pine needles. The baking heat of the sun unlocks the aroma of their sweet, savory smell. Naturally, your eyes are drawn up from the ground to the ramrod straight affect of the trees, stretching from their roots all the way to the baby-blue sky above.

Eventually your eyes drift back down a bit and lock onto an overhead lattice-work of steel cables and thick ropes. Woven together, they connect a stand of trees in a series of ladders, tightropes, platforms and swings. You've come to the "high ropes challenge course" at Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp.

Yet, as stunning as it is to see the course from the ground, those who are able to ascend and accept its challenges are treated to both a view and an experience that are hard to compare. Believe me, it's tough enough just to begin.



A circular rope "tube" is the first obstacle. This vertical climb of about 25 feet will sap the upper body strength of many who try it. Few know the secret that one's legs are as important as one's arms in such a steep ascent – yet even those who've heard such advice often lose that nugget during this tough climb.

When challenged beyond what we think we can handle, our critical thinking sometimes gets thrown out the window and we revert to doing what's always worked before...or what feels natural. Even though we may know we're doing it the wrong way, the urge to prevail (or the fear of failure!) can push us to waste energy in the rush to just finish the task.

So a great many of those who successfully complete the climb, arrive at the top exhausted, with biceps burning, heart thumping and legs shaking. And yet...they don't collapse, they don't quit, they don't complain – they hear the cheers of their companions urging them on, and suddenly a new-found strength infuses their tired muscles with an eagerness to face whatever comes next.

Here is where this high adventure trip of 65 kids and 15 adults suddenly shifts, it shrinks, it collapses into the number 1...it's all up to YOU to make it through the course. What it was like on the ground, ambling up the path to the course, was a walk in the park. Those confident 3 foot strides turn into what feels like a death-defying 3 inch shuffle 30 feet up in the air.



You're strapped into a harness. You know there's no possible way, on God's green earth, to slip from the safety of its security... You know this to be true...intellectually, logically, mentally... and that's where the guts of one high adventure trip become enmeshed with a lifetime of trusting in God...

Picture a high school girl coming to a defining moment of her journey through the trees: the dreaded platform jump. It's made up of two resting areas maybe four feet square separated by about 3-4 feet. The goal is simple: just jump from one platform to the other...the only catch? A thirty foot drop to the forest floor below.

She knows that she's secured with not one but two safety ropes, independently clipped to the cable above. Her friends are cheering her on, her counselors are giving advice, she knows that she can do this... But what her mind knows and what her eyes see are fighting for control of what her heart believes. This is a dynamic experience of that ages-old one-on-one challenge, Robinson Caruso and Emelia Erhardt all rolled into one.

Granted, our experiences as individuals facing challenges may not be so dramatic and intense those two famous icons. But we all have them – we all have many such tests throughout our lives.

And though we think we'd be happiest if we could sail through life with no stoplights, no obstacles, no setbacks...the truth is that we become better people, truer children of God, more compassionate servants of our neighbors as we face our problems and learn from them. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:7 *Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.*

But here's the thing: God's grace is not a vaccination against life's pain... and that's a very hard pill for lots of parents to swallow. The temptation is great to want to protect our kids from all pain, safeguard them from any sadness, defend them against all disappointments. Admirable goals, right? But again...the more protected we are, the less able we are to face challenges and prevail over them...

So our goal should not be to eliminate pain in our children's lives, but to equip them to survive it...and thrive in spite of it...which is actually God's goal for all of us, right? That was one of the golden nuggets discovered not only on the high ropes course but in every high adventure experience of the week – to face individual challenges and come away from the experience with more self-confidence, and a greater understanding of trust in our God who promises to be with us on our journey through life.



A second experience at the camp helped our group learn another valuable lesson about life and faith: how to work together, how to reach out to a neighbor, how to face a challenge while trusting in other people to help...

Where the high ropes experience was an individual challenge to the body, mind and spirit, the low ropes experience was both an individual AND communal challenge to the body, mind and spirit. Nevermore than 1-3 feet off the ground, at first glance the task appears to be pretty simple... And yet, where strength and agility were vital 30 feet off the ground, here balance and cooperation are absolutely necessary for success...for if one member of the team touches the ground, the whole team has to start over every time.

Listen again to what Paul says at the end of our passage from Ephesians for today:

*<sup>14</sup>We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>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.*



Our group discovered this truth in so many ways. Every individual has God-given gifts, talents, blessings to enjoy – *grace according to the measure of Christ's gift*, as Paul said. But never does God call us to hoard our gifts, to keep them to ourselves, to use them only for our pleasure and success.

Instead, we are the Body of Christ, called by God to do two things: to speak of the good news of God's love for all people in Jesus Christ, and work together building each other up and reaching out to help all of our neighbors who are in need. This is how our lights can shine the brightest in a world that is so darkened by the pain of sin, death, and evil.



Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you and I have been set free from the weight of sin that can chew us up and wear us down. And at the same time, we've been given God's Holy Spirit...

The Spirit is the very essence of God's power, love and passion to do something good with our lives – as individuals, certainly, but also, and more importantly, as members of the Body of Christ in the world.

And here's the gold nugget of grace for us: this all happens through our **-ordinary** work of: serving and singing, teaching and training, visiting and listening, preaching and praying...in short sharing our selves, our time, talents and treasures, so that God is able to do the:  
- **extraordinary** work through us of blessing our neighbors near and far.

That's Paul's message in the fourth chapter of Ephesians, in which he calls us to use our gifts to build up the body of Christ, growing always in our love for one another, and in our love God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.