

“Growing in Christ”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 34:9-14

New Testament Lesson – Ephesians 4:11-16

W.H. Auden, writing for the religious magazine *Commonweal*, observes that it is possible for people to say, “Of course I am a Christian. There are the Gospels to prove that Jesus existed, and the existence of the church to prove that his claim to be Christ was true. So I go to church every Sunday.

What it all means, I can safely leave to the theologians. Auden compares this to a married woman who says: ‘Look at my large centrally-heated apartment, and here is my marriage license which my lawyer tells me is valid. I can’t say I remember ever having met my husband personally, but what of that? The important thing is that I can put Mrs. before my name.’”¹ Which begs the question, what’s the most important thing about being a Christian, for you – and me? Is it **in name only**; or is there **more substance** to our Christian identity. And what might that look like?

Last week we saw how Peter called all those among the earliest followers of Christ to actively participate in forming and growing the first churches ever to exist some 2,000 years ago. And we left here asking what areas of growth are available to us as a church, as a congregation. We’re going to look at now.

By looking at the goals for the early church that are given in our reading from Ephesians, we begin to get a picture of what church looks like and acts like when it’s living into its fullness, when it’s growing as God intends.

The first picture we get is of what the church must not be as it seeks to grow and reach its full potential. Ephesians says, “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.”

This concern that the church’s vision can get clouded by non-Christian ways of looking at things, and by deceitful scheming, has lead Bible commentator Andrew T. Lincoln to assume that the main problems faced by the Ephesians were “powerlessness, instability, and a lack of resolve, and (that) these are related to an insufficient sense of identity.”²

In other words, have the concerns of this world distracted the church – and us – from doing things to build up and maintain our identity as Christians, as followers of Christ and his way of navigating through life?

¹ W.H. Auden, under the pseudonym “Didymus,” *Commonweal*, reported in *Context* 25 (1 November 1993), 1-2.

² Andrew T. Lincoln and A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 82-83.

This sounds like it fits our situation today, doesn't it, as churches across the country seek greater relevance and growth in a world where "church" just isn't what it used to be. Church as it used to be.

I recently attended a church conference in St. Paul where Brian McLaren of the emerging church movement pushed back a little on our notion of "the good old days" when it comes to church growth and vitality.

McLaren reminded us that the church was still very patriarchal in its heyday of the 1950s and '60s. For instance, while we in the PC(USA) denomination have been ordaining women as pastors since 1956, this did not come without some push back from more conservative sectors. To this day, the Presbyterian Church in America, which became a completely separate denomination from our own PC(USA), does not ordain women as pastors, elders or deacons based on their reading of scripture.

And that's just one example of how people can get turned off by churches. It reminds me of a series of dueling church signs between a Catholic Church on one side of the street and a Cumberland Presbyterian Church on the other.

The first church sign to go up simply said, "All Dogs Go To Heaven." That was outside the Catholic Church. Then the next week the neighboring Cumberland church had their sign read "Only Humans Go To Heaven; Read the Bible" – because they're more theologically conservative. Well, you see where this is going; the next week the Catholic sign read, "God Loves All His Creations, Dogs Included," to which the Cumberland Church responded, "Dogs Don't Have Souls; This is Not Open For Debate." Next week, the Catholics changed their sign to read "Catholic Dogs Go To Heaven; Presbyterian Dogs Can Talk to Their Pastor." "Converting to Catholicism Does Not Magically Grant Your Dog a Soul," came the response, to which the Catholic church posted a sign that read, "Free Dog Souls With Conversion."

Pretty funny. And it supports Brian McLaren's point when he says that a lot of the push back that we experience today from people who want nothing to do with church is because of how we come off to people who are new to the church and religion. Maybe, suggests McLaren, we shouldn't be harkening back to the good old days as much as seeking out who God is calling us to be today, as faithful Christians confident in our continued relevancy in society, and the Gospel's unquestionable relevancy in people's lives.

Given McLaren's perspective – that we still have some growing to do spiritually compared to who we've been in the past – what are the areas of growth available to us today, as a church congregation?

Ephesians says "... we must grow up in every way into him who is the head (of the church), into Christ..." It says that the church, as the body of Christ, is "joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly," and that this is what "promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love," by "speaking the truth in love."

There are two key points in this part of the letter. One is that each of us has a role in building up the body of Christ, the church, just like every limb and ligament of the human body has a role in maintaining our individual health and vitality. It takes ***all of us working together*** toward the same goal.

The second key point of the letter is that to grow into the church and the people God envisions us to be, we must actively resist what Ephesians calls trickery, craftiness and deceit, and instead focus on speaking the truth in love – ***resisting lies and deceitfulness and seeking out truth in Christlike love.***

These are two very good areas of growth that this and all churches can undertake – equipping and involving everyone in ministry while combating any opposing forces with the truth of Christ’s love and grace and mercy.

The opportunity here is to shift our primary focus from concerns about attendance and giving, while sharpening our vision of what more we could be doing in reaching out to those who need us most, regardless of what that means for us and for our lives. Sacrificial giving; sacrificial living.

This is more difficult because people who need us have needs. But it’s important to remember that all people have needs – including us - *and* that all people also have talents and gifts to share –including those who are different from us. As Ephesians says, “The gifts (that Christ entrusted us with are) that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers....”

And that we are gifted in these ways in order “to equip the saints for the work of 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....”

Our biggest opportunity for growth at First Presbyterian Church is to equip ourselves and others for ministry, and to grow together in the faith and in our knowledge of God’s only son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Last week, I said we would also focus on how we can achieve such growth, and that’s what we’ll do next time – focus on how we can equip ourselves and others for ministry as we grow in our faith and knowledge of Christ.

Think about that throughout the week. In what ways are you called to be active in ministry – a ministry of caring, a ministry of giving? Maybe you’re called and gifted in nurturing other Christians to grow in the faith, or teaching Bible lessons, or maybe its mission outreach, or serving in or through the church in some other way that you are called and equipped to do.

Whatever your giftedness is, whatever special role God has for you in building up the body of Christ, this is your opportunity – our opportunity – to discover it and employ it. Or not. That’s a choice each of us has to make – whether to continue growing and stretching as a follower of Christ, or to settle back; settle for being a Christian in name only, Mr. or Mrs. “Hi, I’m a Christian.”So, how are you living that out, that identity?

Pastoral Prayer

Creator God, parent of us all, we give you thanks for all the things you have given us that make our lives full: our family, friends and church.

We pray today for those who do not share our joy. We pray for those who don't know what it's like to have brothers and sisters in faith who in tough times love us and pray for us.

Help us to share in this great cloud of witnesses that you have gathered together, not based on the color of our skin, the procession that we have, whether we are working or retired or looking for work, or anything else about our place in this world.

Help us, Father God, to remember that we are all your children, brothers and sisters in Christ, and equip us, strengthen us and inspire us to reach out to others in love and service that reflects your grace and mercy and the glory of your divine light.

We ask all this in the name of he who is the light of the world, Jesus, the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.