

Growing for Christ

21st Sunday after Pentecost – October 24, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Ephesians 4:1-6,11-16 (NRSV)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until 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. ¹⁴We 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. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from 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.

We continue this four-week series entitled "Growing for Christ." In this series, we are looking at growth – in our ministry, in our commitment, in our relationship with Christ and one another, and in our life as St. Andrew.

In the last two weeks, we've taken a look at the stories of two individuals: the boy Samuel and a poor widow. Today, we turn to one of Paul's letters as we consider what it means to grow as a church, a community ~ as the body of Christ.

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Zygyology. Be honest, you never knew there was such a word. Neither did I until the other day. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, zygyology is the branch of technology dealing with fastening and joining things together. An expert in rivets or post-it notes would be a zygyologist!¹ In today's passage from Ephesians, Paul is a spiritual zygyologist of sorts.

We at St. Andrew are a congregation within the larger body of Christ. We now have nearly 5,000 members of our congregation. What holds us together? What binds us into the community we've named St. Andrew? Is it our political affiliations? Our race? Marital status? How about our pastor? The warm welcomes we extend to one another on Sunday mornings? Perhaps our doctrine or our sacraments?

A life worthy of our calling

This series began with a look at God's calling of young Samuel as he lay sleeping in the tabernacle. We considered our own call to ministry, a call that God extends to each of us. In this letter, Paul pleads with his readers to lead lives worthy of this calling. But what does Paul really mean?

First, Paul's use of "calling" echoes the Jewish understanding of election, the belief that God had formed a people whom he would teach to walk in God's way, so that they might always be a light for others. Try to really grab hold of that – God, Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, has chosen us, you and me. What a stunning claim to make. No wonder the Romans thought the Jews to be a bit nutty!

Second, Paul points to five virtues that characterize the life that is worthy of God's calling: humility, gentleness, patience, mutual forbearance (our kids would say, "cutting each other some slack"), and love. All but one of these was often lifted up as a virtue in the Greco-Roman world. In the Greek literature, humility is never used as a virtue nor even in a positive context. To a non-Jew, humility connoted a demeaning lack of social stature.

Why these five virtues? Because they promote unity and harmony in the church. They are like five foundation stones upon which rests the oneness of Christ. Christians who devote their lives to harmony within the church are living lives worthy of their calling.

¹If you are going to check me on this, you better have a really big dictionary.

No, none of those are the glue that holds us together. We are one body, of one faith and one baptism, empowered by one Spirit. Our unity, our oneness, arises from the unity of God. There is one God, one Father, one Lord, one Spirit – who is “above all and through all and in all.” In Christ and Christ alone lies our unity!

We all be very different people, with different backgrounds, given differing talents and skills by God, but we have been called to the unity of the Spirit in the knowledge of Christ. I have been part

Being Grown-up

We are growing for Christ and toward maturity. In our efforts to grow, we are blessed by having centuries of Christians who have come before us and can guide us in our growth. But most of the Christians to whom Paul wrote this letter were young Christians, new to the Gospel and certainly new to each other. So Paul spoke to them of the need to continue growing, not just in numbers, but in their Christian discipleship.

One of my favorite Amy Grant songs is “Fat Baby,” about Christians who warp themselves in the symbols of the faith but make no attempt to grow to maturity. In contrast, Paul says, “We won’t be babies anymore,” tossed about this way and that by the latest fads, theories, or books. Instead, we must speak the truth in love. By speaking the truth in love, Paul writes, we will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (v. 15).

But, of course, to speak the truth, one must know the truth. Even Paul, a learned Pharisee, would not believe that he could know all truth fully, but Paul did believe that God reveals truth to us that we would otherwise never know. The truth that there is a God who created all that there is, who created us in his image, who longs to live in a right relationship with us, and who gave his only Son that we might do so. – and who created a church to do God’s work.

When we come to Christ, we take on the responsibility to begin a lifetime of learning and serving, of worshiping and loving, so that we might be able to speak the truth in love to all those whom God invites to his table.

And the truth is that our willingness to commit our energies, our time, and, yes, our money, to the work of Christ’s church is a mark of our maturity. Are we grown-ups?

of many churches and never before have I encountered the strong fellowship and harmony that characterizes St. Andrew. We’ll talk more about this week, so for now, we’ll simply hear Paul’s plea that we can preserve our fellowship if we are patient with one another, humble and gentle, lovingly giving one another the benefit of the doubt. It is our strong connections to one another that Paul describes as the ligaments in the body of Christ. We grow in love when we are well-connected to one another. Hence, the St. Andrew vision statement speaks of inviting others into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ *and* one another.

Growing for Christ

Paul urges us to be a mature congregation, marked by the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Why? Why not stay as children, with an innocent and simple faith? One could come at these questions from many directions, but Paul is consistent in urging young Christians to grow up, to become mature in their faith and in their ministry.

And we can be sure that we are to grow *for* Christ so that we might be equipped to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). We are not to withdraw from the world, we must engage it. We must be out in the world speaking truth in love and inviting others to come to the knowledge of Christ. Little wonder then that Paul urges us toward maturity, indeed, to grow to the “full measure of the stature of Christ” (v. 13).² And bear in mind, that this maturity extends to every part of ourselves. Jesus was the truest human and as we grow toward Christ, we too increasingly embrace our own humanity.

St. Andrew has come a long way in seventeen years, not just in numbers but also in discipleship. Behind all the growth numbers are real people. I was stunned when I sat down and added up all the Bible Academy enrollments since we created the program three years ago. There have been more than 2,000 enrollments for our mid-week Bible studies! Everything that we do here is aimed at helping us and others to become ever-truer disciples of Jesus Christ – and this involves us all! Hence, we’ve been challenged to have every family/member turn in a pledge card this year. This is about commitment.

²What a remarkable statement. What could Paul possibly mean by growing to the “full stature of Christ”? This probably reflects Ephesians 1:23 where the church is the fullness of Christ. For Paul, our rebirth in Christ and our incorporation into the body of Christ is real and concrete. Christ’s fullness is a gift which he bestows on his church, making the seemingly unattainable, attainable.

Daily Bible Readings

(Paul urges Christians to live as Christians and to grow as Christians)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Ephesians 4:1-16 Building the body of Christ (This is the full passage from which this week's Scripture reading was drawn.)</p>	<p>Day 2 Ephesians 4:17-24 Off with the old, on with the new!</p>
<p>Day 3 Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2 Rules for the new life</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Corinthians 3 The divisions among the Corinthian Christians result from their immaturity. Paul can't even feed them solid food.</p>
<p>Day 5 Ephesians 6:10-24 Be strong in the Lord and the strength of his power. Wear the full armor of God.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Mark Your Calendars – Nov 7th and 14th: Dismantling the DaVinci Code

At 9:30 in Wesley Hall on Sunday mornings Nov 7th and Nov 14th, Scott Engle will take a look at many of the claims made in Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*. Though this is a work of fiction, many Christians have taken seriously Brown's claims of impeccable research. Was Jesus married? Was the claim of Jesus' divinity invented hundreds of years after Jesus' death? How did we get the New Testament? Who was Mary Magdalene? Do the gnostic gospels help us understand Jesus?

I have a blog! www.scottengle.blogspot.com Check it out!

I recently got intrigued with the world of internet blogs. My blog is a place where I can post some thoughts and links about living a Christian life in a complex world. I will try to post something new most days and I've set it up so you easily look over the topics of recent posts. You may also comment on them yourself. I get lots of e-mail and phone calls with questions about the Bible and theology. This blog will be a good place to participate in some of these conversations. I'll also be posting links to some of the best materials on the web related to all things Christian.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What do you think it means to be a mature Christian? What are the marks of a mature Christian? Paul's emphasis in today's Scripture passage is on the community, not the individual. Thus, how does our individual growth toward maturity affect the maturity of our congregation? What do you think are the marks of a mature congregation? What do you think you would find happening if you were to visit a mature congregation?
2. Paul tells us not to be like children, blown here and there, ever susceptible to con-men (the Greek is a reference to a dice game). I couldn't help but think of *The DaVinci Code* (yes, many people think it is a novel built upon a foundation of solid scholarship) and most televangelists ("get your check in and get your blessing"). What can we do to guard against such snake oil? A church member recently wrote me and said that she had come to believe that "We all need to be amateur theologians." What do you think she means? What would be involved in becoming an amateur theologian? Perhaps this would seem less intimidating if we remember that "amateur" is from the French word for "lover."
3. The theme of this commitment campaign is "Growing for Christ." I think these words remind us that we are not growing for the sake of growing. They also remind us that growing is our calling. Growth is to be embrace and encouraged. We are to do all we can to invite all persons to come to faith in Christ. What are the most important ways we go about this? What does this demand of each of us? What are we doing well? What are some things that we could be doing better?