

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF UPLAND

WHY WE ARE HERE

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EPHESIANS 4: 11-16 *NRSVue*

For most of the 20th century, Kodak was the name in photography. Their engineers were brilliant at film technology—they knew how to make film cheaper, sharper, more reliable than anyone else. But when digital photography emerged, Kodak clung to film. They were obsessed with their technical know-how in chemical processing and film production, forgetting the deeper why of their company: helping people capture and share memories. By focusing on film instead of photography's purpose, Kodak missed the digital wave—and a company once synonymous with memories went bankrupt. In short, they forgot why they do what they do, and they paid a terrible price for it.

We should ask:

What is the church here for? What does it do? What is it supposed to do? What does it actually do?

Churches, perhaps more than most communities, spend enormous attention and energy on the “whats” and the “hows” of ministry: What programs should we run? What time should worship start? What mission projects should we initiate or support? How can we balance the budget? How do we attract new members?

These are important questions—but, if we only ever start with the whats and the hows, we risk missing the deeper heartbeat of the church. We risk mistaking activity for purpose, or confusing busy-ness with faithfulness.

Plenty of churches spend most of their time explaining what they do and how they do it, but the most enduring—and inspiring—churches are those that regularly communicate a clear idea why they exist in the first place. Why must always come first.

So before we as a church get lost in what programs we should run or how we should organize them, we need to pause and ask the deeper questions: Why are we here? What is God's purpose for us in this place and time? That's the heart of starting with why, and that's what we're exploring from now through the end of October—right up to Reformation Sunday—which is when we will dedicate our pledges as a congregation for the 2026 year.

[Read Ephesians 4: 11-16 *NRSVue*]

EPHESIAN DISUNITY

It took nearly no time for the early church to fall into disunity. Despite the clear desire of Christ that the Church be one, people—it's always people!—mess up everything. Conflict is as normal as kids arguing in the backseat on a long drive (by a long drive, I mean anything more than 3 blocks).

Ephesus—the setting for our text—was second only to Rome in size and importance. It was prosperous and multicultural, which means it was also a hotbed of new ideas and a major influencer of the Greco-Roman world.

As the Gospel spread in that world, bright minds of many backgrounds were eager to contribute and make their mark on this new Jesus movement. These elaborations were a problem—especially as they created divisions. The epistle to the Ephesians calls the community to disregard the hype—all the pagan ideas that had been tarted up and passed off as part of this new good news movement.

Ephesians tells us:

14 We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people's trickery.

I once worked under a pastor who got very excited over every new book on ministry that came out each year. Every year, the book he was reading was THE book to read, and its recommendations were to be implemented immediately and enthusiastically by the rest of the staff. It drove us nuts because we knew it would lose all its steam in about three months, which it did. We found ourselves constantly catering to his enthusiasm with little trust of its long-term significance.

That's because there are very few new ideas out there—certainly not in theology—but old ideas get tarted up and re-hyped up every few years as the cure-all know-how solution to rescue a declining church and magically revivify all its members. The result tends to be disappointment after disappointment.

Instead of hype, God's Word tells to speak the truth in love—that is, never veer from sharing the good news of Christ's salvation—and furthermore, that we must:

grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ

Here is our why—the central why of the Church universal—that we grow into Christ.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Of course, for anyone who does not already know, that is part of our Mission Statement. The Mission Statement of First Presbyterian Church is Growing in Christ, Making Him Known.

It's equally appropriate to substitute that tiny preposition, in, with into, and I'll try to explain why. To say we "grow in Christ" only says that while we are in Christ and part of His Body, we grow. This may be good for us, but it doesn't say anything about the direction of our growth, and not all growth is the same—in fact, not all growth is even good.

Tumors can grow, and so can an extremely unhealthy waistline. So growth itself is not our aim.

Growing into Christ is precisely what God expects of us. And there are two phrases in our text that make this clear with almost disturbing clarity.

Verse 13 says that we are to grow...

...to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

And again from verse 15, we are to

grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ

"Into Him?" Into the "full stature" of Christ? That's a far cry from just "growing;" it is very specific and focused. It is the Church's basic why statement. Why do we do what we do? Because we are growing into the full stature of Christ.

Well it's hard to imagine a higher bar! So how do we do that? How do we imagine growing into the full stature of Christ?

Well...we have to start somewhere.

GROWING INTO CHRIST

I'd like to suggest three(not seven) basic ways we grow into Christ.

1. We are rooted in Relationship with Christ

Relationship, relationship, relationship—this is faith. Faith is a relationship and always has been.

It's not knowing about God; it's about knowing God personally.

It's the difference between the president of the Tom Hanks Fan Club versus being one of his close personal friends who visits his home, knows his family, eats at his table, and vacations together. People who are part of the Jesus Fan Club may be the kind of people of whom Jesus will one day say, "Depart from me; I never knew you." That should worry some otherwise comfortable believers. (Just a reminder: the Gospel is not here to make us comfortable; it is here to make us into Christ!).

Growth begins with knowing Christ personally. We know Christ personally through prayer, worship, and reading Scripture, but also through the subjective and intimate work of the Holy Spirit.

An unbeliever may ask us: “How do you know God?”

We can answer “I just do!”

And perhaps we should add, “and I believe you can, too.”

In John’s gospel, Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself...”

Spiritual growth is relational: we cannot grow into Christ’s fullness apart from abiding in Him.

2. Immersion in God’s Word

The Bible shapes our mind, character, and convictions.

Understanding Scripture allows us to see God’s ways, internalize His truths, and begin thinking and acting a bit more like Christ.

500 years ago, John Calvin told us that the Disciple’s heart comes to reflect the heart of God, for as we grow in Christ, we take on the affections of Christ as well as the exhortations.

Our hearts are reshaped so that we long for the goodness of God and grow up into a deep distaste for the things of this world that fail to glorify Him.

The follower of Christ who has no interest in God’s Word may be someone truly committed to another master.

Those of us committed to Christ are like the sheep who know and hear His voice. And not only do we know His voice, we long for it—it is our joy and spiritual nourishment.

3. Engage in Mission

Imagine a man who is really into making candles. At first, he is focused only on learning: how to melt the wax, center the wick, and artfully work with different shapes and colors. He enjoys the skill, and his candles accumulate into a fine collection, admired mostly by himself.

One day he learns that one of his neighbors—an older woman living a few houses down in this heavily forested, mountain village—had stumbled on the path outside his house, took a fall, and had a terrible struggle getting home.

“I wish I could have helped,” he thought, as he sat there surrounded by hundreds of candles whose wicks had never been lit. And then it dawns on this genius—“Wait!”

he thinks, “I can actually light some of these candles and place them in my windows so my neighbor can find her way home!”

What else were the candles for, if not to help someone in the dark? How had he missed that connection?

In the same way, a Christian who is growing into the full stature of Christ comes to see that their faith is not just for personal holiness. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not ours to enjoy in isolation!

Our faith and gifts are meant to illuminate a darkened world—We are given our gift of faith in order to love, serve, and point others toward Christ. Spiritual growth naturally leads to mission: once we understand what Christ’s love is about, we can’t keep it to ourselves..

TO THE TABLE

What’s true for us as individuals is also true for us as a congregation. We—collectively—are meant to grow into the full stature of Christ. As we individually seek to grow into Him and be like Him, we are connecting and reconnecting with the Head of which we are the body.

This is the only way genuine unity is created. We must be united by our common connection to the same Head, who is Christ.

Or, to take again that biblical image from vineyards, He is the vine; we are the branches. Apart from him we can do nothing, but as we abide in Him, He abides in us, and we grow and bear fruit to His glory.

Why are we here, First Pres?

We are here to grow into Christ and to make Him known.

We are here to bear fruit and glorify the Father.

And we are here in preparation for an eternity that Christ promises and even now prepares.

This table is a visible demonstration of God’s grace and His intention for us.

It is here we gather to break bread with one another, but more importantly, to commune in Christ’s promised presence.

We eat and drink to be nourished in our relationship with Christ and empowered to participate in His mission.

And whenever we do His work in this world, we are fed to full, and feel the joy of God’s own heart. †

QUESTIONS

1. Judging from the second half of the text, what is the source of the Ephesians' disunity?
2. What does it mean to come to "maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ?"
3. How do we measure our maturity?
4. How does "speaking the truth in love" apply to a congregation's life together?
5. What are some different sources of unity for a congregation?
6. What is THE correct source of unity?
7. How do we "grow up in every way into him who is the head"?