

“Growing Up in Christ”

A Sermon for the People of Seaside Community Church

Ephesians 4:1-7 & 11-16

February 28, 2010

Well, here we are, at week three into our in-between period. If I am appreciating your response to my remarks over the last two weeks correctly, then I can say that we are *celebrating* this time that God has given us. This time, too, will end, of course. The work of the Search Committee in finding an interim minister for us is progressing. This is good. Meanwhile I have agreed to be available over each of the next two weeks, to “fill” the pulpit, as I am needed. But we will trust how things go as *God’s process*, and, as Paul says somewhere, “rejoice in all things.” We are in God’s Hands, and God is taking care of us.

But if I may add a personal note about what these three weeks have meant to me: I want to say that I believe that God brings people together, for reasons and purposes that are nearly always beyond their ken, to accomplish God’s will in this world. That is how I would describe our relationship, and what having the opportunity to speak with you these last few weeks has meant to me. When I first came to a Taize service, I was seeking anonymity and refuge. I wanted to be able to pray and worship in a contemplative fashion, without the “burden” of the offices I held at the time. I wanted to come “just as I am.” I had no idea then that Pastor Paul would leave (wasn’t he always a “fixture” here?), nor that you and I would have developed the relationship we have that would allow me to speak to you personally at a crucial time in the life of our church. But I have to believe that *God* did. I believe that God anticipated this time and our relationship. Being part of this congregation has added to my life. And your acceptance of me tells me that I have added to yours. This is not “luck.” It is not “fortune.” It is not even serendipity. It is blessing—God’s blessing, in the fullest sense.

And so we rejoice! We praise God, and we thank God. Amen!

...Now last week, I said that it had occurred to me that what I was speaking about was the “emotional process” of our life together as church. I’ve borrowed that term, “emotional process,” from my work in “family systems.” Emotional process means the way a family, a group, or a church *feels, thinks, and behaves*. All three.

However, since we are a church, and not just a family, but a “family of God,” and more particularly, the “body of Christ” and a “system” in that way, we might do well to substitute for “emotional process” the term “spiritual process.” In other words, in our life together as church, our *spiritual process* entails how we feel, think, and behave.

So it has been that, two weeks ago, on Valentine’s Day, I spoke to the *feeling* aspect of our spiritual process. I encouraged us to “feel everything” in our grief about Pastor Paul leaving. And I used the Apostle Paul’s second letter to Timothy to remind us that God has *not* given us a “spirit of cowardice” but a spirit of power, and love, and self-discipline. I urged us to make the most of these three gifts of God’s Spirit.

Then, last week, I spoke to the *thinking* aspect of our spiritual process. I urged us to think *differently* about our life together as church. Again I used the Apostle Paul, that time his first letter to the church at Corinth, where he shifts from speaking about spiritual gifts to remind us of our *incarnation* as church. He told us we were brought together as one body; that we both *belong* together and *need* each other; and that therefore we both honor and respect each other, and suffer and rejoice together.

To Paul's points I added one of my own: that our incarnation as church means that we not only suffer together (which means to me that we are "crucified" together in Christ), but we also can think that we are "resurrect-able," as Christ was. ...Now to be fair, thinking our way through what it means to be "resurrect-able" might be a tall order! And I have to tell you, that I am not entirely sure what I mean!

But I will say this: Years ago, in Long Beach, I went to an Assembly of the Worldwide Churches of Christ—my denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is one of those. I went to hear one of the leading lights of the Disciples, a man named Fred Craddock. Fred Craddock was a *preacher* of the first order. When he spoke, it was the next best thing to the Gospel itself! People listened—as if he were EF Hutton!

Anyway, what Fred Craddock said that day was that the major failure of the Christian Churches in our day was that they did not truly believe in resurrection! That resurrection was God's way of continuing to "raise" and renew the body of Christ—if only we would believe that it could happen to us, and in us, and with us, and for us. *Thinking* about resurrection, and *believing* that resurrection can and will happen to us as an activity of God's working within us—this is one of the challenges we are facing in our present time.

I never forgot what Fred Craddock said that day—and last week, I found him speaking to me again. So I pass that message, too, on to you...

Now! This week, I want to speak about the *behavior* aspect of our spiritual process. To do that, I've turned once again to the Apostle Paul, this time his letter to the Ephesians. Today's reflection begins with our asking ourselves: *How are we to behave as the Body of Christ?*

I suspect that when we talk about our "behavior" in our life together as church, *usually* that is the context for a conversation about missions. And so we tell ourselves that we should be of service to others, and we promote One Great Hour of Sharing, and we show pictures of how other people live, and we talk about how we ought to be sending money to help them live better, or maybe even how we should go there ourselves to help them build and re-build their communities. So the typical conversation we have around our behavior in our life together as church is about missions, I would think.

And missions are good! But I'm not going to talk about missions today.

Or maybe sometimes when we talk about our behavior as Christians, it is more of a conversation about en-acting our faith—bringing our beliefs into our daily lives, actually forgiving people who have wronged us, for example... This kind of conversation usually appeals to the Epistle of James, and talks about being “doers” of the Word, and not “hearers” only. You know: accepting the challenges of “doing” Christianity, not merely “being” Christians.

This, too, is a worthy conversation—but this, too, is NOT what I’m going to talk about today!

The reason why I’m going to talk about our behavior in our life together as church and not talk about either missions or faith enactment, is that the Apostle Paul does not concern himself with either of those things here in this passage from Ephesians.

Instead, what Paul concerns himself with is our *maturity* as Christians, and more than that, our *collective* maturity as the Body of Christ.

I suspect that this might be a little bit difficult for us to get a handle on, this notion of our “collective maturity,” since we do not usually think in these terms. Most of the time, I would guess, we think of our Christian faith as being more or less a matter of personal belief and individual responsibility. Thus how we behave takes on the same connotation: we are each responsible for our own spiritual development, our own spiritual growth, and thus we are each responsible for how we bring our personal faith to bear.

This is very “Jamesian,” and not very “Pauline!” At least not the Paul here in Ephesians!

Here in Ephesians there is a tension between our individual behavior and how that is expressed collectively in our life together as church.

Let me recall for us a story, a kind of parable, really, that illustrates what I mean, and what I think Paul meant. This is an “old” story, and maybe you’ve heard it before.

Once upon a time, long ago, in a distant galaxy... (OK, I’m adding some contemporary embellishment!) ...there was a monastery. This monastery once thrived as a spiritual center. Lay people would flock there for retreat, and leave impressed and imbued by the spiritual character of the monks. The monks themselves were humble, and gentle, and patient. The reputation of their capacity for love was great—and attracted people to come to the monastery as a place to foster their own spiritual growth. In a word, the monastery was a place of great spiritual vitality.

However, over the years, the monastery began to decline. Fewer folks opted for the religious life, so the numbers of the monks became fewer. With numerical decline came spiritual decline, and the monks were often testy with one another. Personal ambition and interest became more common, as each one sought to make his own imprint on their life together. (You know—sort of like our State and Federal governments!) With spiritual decline came financial decline, and the monastery itself

began to fall into disrepair. Pilgrims stopped coming as the monastery lost its reputation as a loving, spiritual center.

Finally, the Abbot became desperate. He had come as a young man to the monastery when the life there was thriving, and had stayed through the years of decline. He could remember those early days when the monastery last was doing well and he felt so in despair for the current state of affairs, that he sought the advice and counsel of the local rabbi. The Abbot went to the rabbi and asked his help.

The rabbi gave the Abbot a good bit of his day. He asked questions, and allowed the Abbot to share his thoughts and frustrations. After many hours, the Abbot asked: “Rabbi, what do you think we should do?”

The Rabbi thought for a while, saying nothing. So long was the silence that the Abbot was not sure that the Rabbi had heard him, but he kept the silence with him. Then at long last the Rabbi spoke. He said, “I do not know what you should *do*. But I do know this: the Messiah is among you.”

With that, the Rabbi sent the Abbot on his way. All of the way back to the monastery, the Abbot questioned himself: What did the Rabbi *mean*: “The Messiah is among you”? When he returned to the monastery, the other monks wanted to know what the Rabbi had said. So the Abbot told them. The Rabbi said: “The Messiah is among you.”

At first, the monks were puzzled about what the Rabbi meant. But soon they began to look at themselves differently: “What if the Rabbi mean *me?*,” they asked themselves. “Am I the Messiah among us?” Some of the monks embraced this as a possibility—and began to act more messiah-like. Other monks dismissed this as absurd for themselves—but began to think that maybe one or the other of them *was* indeed the Messiah—and so they began to treat the other monks with greater deference and respect, just in case.

In a short while, visitors to the monastery began to notice the change. The capacities for humility and patience had returned. The monks were gentle with each other, and with the visitors. New initiates began coming; slowly, the monastery regained both its numbers and its reputation. As they experienced spiritual growth, their finances took care of themselves, and the monastery buildings were repaired and improved. Pilgrims once again began coming to the monastery for spiritual direction and solace.

So important were the Rabbi’s words, that the Abbot had them made into a carving, and displayed outside the chapel: *The Messiah is among you*, it read. The monks never forgot them, and the monastery was once more an established center for spiritual growth and discernment.

...Something like this is, I think, what the Apostle Paul is saying to the Ephesians, when he “begs” them “to lead a life worthy of [their calling], with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to

maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” As I speak today about our *behavior* in our life together as church, these words of Paul describe what I mean. They are the aspects or qualities of our behavior we can recognize among ourselves.

What comes next in this passage is Paul’s exceptional rhetoric about how unity and diversity in the church are in service of one another. If I’m remembering my Bible history correctly—and I could be wrong about this; it has been many years since I studied the Bible, and I didn’t pay that much attention to it as it was when I did!—Ephesians was written before Corinthians, so Paul might have been working out some of his ideas and concepts here that came to expression in the passage we looked at last week.

Paul says, on the one hand: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

Then he says, on the other hand: “BUT to each of us was given grace according the measure of Christ’s gift. . . . [And:] The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

What I hope we take from this is that we have already been given gifts of the Spirit more than adequate for our facing our present in-between time. We ARE the Body of Christ, and as we live into what that means for us, we will experience both the *unity*, the one-ness-es Paul named, and the diversity of spiritual gifts he names. Enough has been given us, more than we may know, for the “building up” of the body of Christ.

So I’m not going to elaborate on what Paul is saying there. Rather, I want to draw our attention to what he says next—and the way he says it: “Until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

I like Paul’s emphasis on “ALL of us” and his use of the word “maturity,” especially as a description of our *collective* behavior as church. You know that, in my book, I am interested in applying a certain perspective on the family as a “system”—taking the *whole* and looking at how the parts interact. I think Paul is doing the same thing here. He is not interested in applauding or decrying any particular individual’s “maturity” in Christ. He is interested in how the *whole* of the church behaves as the body of Christ.

It is in this context that I hope we will ask ourselves: *How old are we as a church?* Meaning: *Do we as a church behave in a way that is “mature”—or “immature”?* Maturity means something to us as we are growing up. I remember my children saying, “I can do that! I’m a Big Boy (or Girl) now!” And I remember how important it was to me to be driving, as a sign of my own maturity. And I remember scolding my kids, saying something like: “How old are you now? Do you want to be a baby? Or do you want to be the age you are?” Because, you know, our maturity and our chronological age do

not always correspond! Regardless of our chronological age, our maturity is the measure of our *spiritual and emotional* age—how much we have “grown up.”

Paul underscores this point in v14: “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 is the thing about being a childish church: an immature church is *reactive*. Its emotionality gets the better of it. An immature church is easily influenced by outside forces: by fads and latest-things; or by inner personal and doctrinal squabbles. In the life of an immature church, a great deal of the pastor’s and leaders’ efforts are spent trying to keep people happy. People-pleasing becomes the norm, maybe because the church feels vulnerable to threats, say, of members leaving if they do not get their way. The quotient of belonging and being called together by God is low, so less effort is put into the mutuality of building up the body of Christ, and more effort goes into simply trying to keep everyone together.

When I was a pastor, other pastors would complain openly with each other about how their job was like “herding cats!” Well, when our life together as church devolves into “herding cats,” then instead of being the body of Christ we end up more like cats in a bag! Not a pretty picture!

And the point is, when a congregation is immature, power goes to the most childish, the most reactive, those most likely to be anxious. We can see this in our nation, in our social and political processes, where matters are not addressed in ways that advance the commonweal, but instead appeals are made that are replete with emotionality and doomsday, worst-case possibilities. The result is that we, the public, are constantly alarmed by our elected leaders. With our fears heightened, we lose confidence in *anyone’s* ability truly to lead us,

These days, the emotional process of our life together as a nation is declining, and we are becoming more reactive, childish, and immature. This does not have to happen to us in our life together as church! Instead, we can find a balance that is both mature and centered on Christ.

We can do this if we remember that our spiritual process as a church turns on the three factors of our feeling, thinking and behaving. If we permit ourselves to “feel everything”—yet not are ruled by our feelings nor overcome by emotionality... If we encourage ourselves to think things through; to think of our life together as church differently; and if we give due, rational consideration to the questions of our life together as church... And if we aim so to balance our feeling and our thinking that we rise to the “measure of the full stature of Christ”—that is, if we maintain a spiritual maturity among ourselves... Then, I believe, we will find ourselves to be an “adult” body of Christ.

Paul’s way of expressing this balance of feeling and thinking that epitomizes the mature church is the capacity to “speak the truth in love.” ...Wow... What it takes to do *that!* Look at the balance in that statement!

Haven't you experienced in your relationships what too often happens when someone wants to tell us the "truth" about ourselves? I know I have! That so-called "truth" speaking can come across in quite an unloving way!

On the other hand, I also have experienced, and maybe you have, too, this sense that someone is "loving" us—but all they are really doing is placating us, or hiding their own feelings... And I just get the sense that there is not much "truth" in what they are saying!

So our *behavior* in our life together as church needs to be guided by an ever-growing ability for our speaking "the truth in love." As a spiritual capacity, this is very mature indeed! Yet, in terms of our spiritual process, it is the best way to name and to recognize when we are balancing our feelings and our thoughts in a manner that nourishes our behavior as the body of Christ.

Paul goes on to say: "we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, who is the Christ!" I like Paul's sense of imperative: We simply **MUST** grow up! And not just in this area of that, but indeed we **MUST** grow up in **EVERY** way! When it comes to the spiritual process of our life together as church, we can rule nothing out. Nor can we focus on only some areas and not on some others. If we think of spiritual fitness as akin to physical fitness, being selective about our attentions would result in a very unbalanced and distorted body—like continuing to smoke as we try to run farther, or overeating when we are trying to work out in order to lose weight. No, we **MUST** grow up, in **EVERY** way! This is how we are to lead a life worthy of our calling...

And *why* have we been called together by God? What is the ultimate purpose of our life together as church? There is only one reason why God has "arranged" us as the Body of Christ—and it is a reason we too often forget.

We have not been brought here to for historical purposes, to perpetuate the institution of Seaside Christian Church. We have not been brought here to be fiscally responsible, and maintain a budget, and be adept at the *business* of being church. We have not been brought here to perpetuate any personal habits of worship; we have not been brought here because we have been coming to this church for years.

No, we have been brought here for one reason and one purpose only—and that is **to grow in love**. We have been called to be the Body of Christ, and we have been given spiritual gifts, all for the single purpose, as Paul says, of "[promoting] the body's growth in building itself up in love."

The name of our spiritual process is love. We are worthy of our calling when we grow as a church in our maturity and in our capacity to love.

May we grow in love, even as God first loved us.

Amen.