

STILL GROWING UP

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Ephesians 4:11-16

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, until 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. 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. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted 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. NRSV

MESSAGE

There's a story told about a preacher who, after some years in ministry, returned to his hometown to preach in the place where he grew up. Given the considerable influence that he had enjoyed previously in his ministry, there was expectation on all sides of this being a joyous homecoming. The preacher read the Scripture for the day, and the congregation was impressed by how well he spoke. But the sermon that followed soon began to irritate and rankle them. They bristled at the preacher's assertions. They interpreted his teaching as heresy. They thought him to be staking inappropriate claims for himself. Eventually, the tone in the room became intolerable, and the congregation seethed with anger. They threw him out, banishing him from the sanctuary, then took him to a mountain cliff at the edge of town to throw him to his doom. Fortunately for him, he gave them the slip and lived to preach another day.

So with that, I'm delighted to be back home in the church where I was raised. ☺

Pastor Jerry suggested to me several months ago the possibility of doing a pulpit exchange, as he knew I held many fond memories of Lake Street United Methodist Church and that he would look forward to spending a weekend in the Madison area and preaching at Milton United Methodist.

This is home. I'm looking out on familiar Lake Street faces, and even those I don't know, I know, you know?

My actual home growing up was just one block down Lake Street, but it seemed I spent as much time under this roof as I did in my own house. This church raised me.

When I discovered months ago that this was the weekend of my 40th Memorial High School reunion, it seemed the perfect opportunity for Jerry and I to exchange pulpits.

I shared with my wife Ann yesterday morning the possibility that some of my classmates might attend worship this morning, and that it would be cool for Lake Street to have an influx of all these young people coming to church. At which point she reminded me, "What do you mean young? You're all 58!" ☺

In my mind, we're still young.

Not so young, mind you, that I would be tempted today to go back into the bell tower, ring the bell and hang on to the rope, carrying me over an open stairwell and riding the rope up and down as the bell pealed. Yeah, that happened.

Not so young that we would go to the stage in the old Fellowship Hall downstairs, open the trap door and descend into the catacomb of a cellar, only to pop up and startle adults having coffee after worship. Yeah, it happened.

Despite the fact that one of our more popular high school musicals was *Peter Pan*, where Peter sang, "I won't grow up," we have, in fact grown up.

"We must no longer be children," today's Scripture says, as the Apostle Paul apparently felt the need to admonish the church to act its age.

On the surface, of course, we know it's good advice. It's not becoming to act childish. But I admit that I sometimes yearn for the simplicity and wonder of childhood.

When I was growing up in this church, I didn't know there was liberal Christianity and conservative Christianity, and how they were at odds with one another. To me, church was the place I came where life made sense, where some of the tensions we experienced in school seemed to be diminished, where there was, to my eyes, the kind of unity the Scripture talks about ... where adults were caring and guiding and where many friendships were made.

What I came to believe growing up was that the Christian faith was about encountering Christ, caring for one another, and living in such a way that the Bible was a light for our path.

I realize nostalgia is not always a factual guide to history. The past always seems a little better than sometimes was. Looking back nostalgically on our high school years, in my mind every female lead sang like Kristin Chenoweth, every basketball player was another Larry Bird, and our marching band was rivaled only by the Wisconsin Badgers.

There are just enough morsels of truth in our memories that they sow seeds of fondness that grow and blossom over the passage of time.

But Holy Scripture reminds us more than once: When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. Now that I have become an adult, I have put away childish things. [1 Cor 13:11]

My mother-in-law used to bemoan people who found their faith and lost their sense of humor. ☺ I do not believe that Scripture from 1 Corinthians or today's from Ephesians means that to grow up means we have to lose our sense of humor.

We might need a sense of humor today more than ever.

I won't single him out this morning, but one of the memories at our reunion was of the classmate who wore a straw hat during our graduation ceremony. That person is now a retired colonel from the U.S. Air Force.

A sense of humor need not detract one from growing up.

Scripture, rather, paints a rather specific picture of what it does and doesn't mean to grow up:

It doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same.

A high school class reunion is living proof of that. The gifts God gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists ... or perhaps in more contemporary language, that some would be caregivers, counselors, stay-at-home dads, volunteers, bookkeepers, retail clerks, lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs, scientists, technical experts, dancers, musicians, bus drivers, skilled tradespersons ... the list is as infinite as are our needs to live together using each of our unique gifts for the betterment of all.

That's growing up, to not cast aspersions or distinctions upon our various roles in life but that each of us, in our God-given way, is called to build up what we in the church call the body of Christ.

Growing up means moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God made known in Christ, mature within and without, fully alive like Christ.

Maybe the toughest task of growing up is what today's Scripture says is this: We must no longer be tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.

What the world tells you is true depends a lot about who you're listening to.

A woman came to my office last week despondent about her life. Now in her mid-30s, it's nothing like she had imagined. The image she carries of herself is one of failure, I suspect because she's been told that often enough that she tells herself that as truth.

I asked her, what kind of life do you want to be leading? She didn't define it by a certain job, or relationship, or money. She said: "I want to be the person God made me to be."

That is growing up. To acknowledge that we were created for a purpose, in part a particular purpose to use for good the specific gifts God has given us, and in part a universal purpose to do what we can, day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, even, to make the world a better place.

I've learned a lot from those who have and are battling addictions. Those who are in recovery say that it's like growing up all over again. I think we're all in recovery from something or another.

And we all need to continue to grow up, continue to aim for what is true.

The last section of today's Scripture says this is true: that we are joined and knitted together as ligaments hold the body together.

I love our class reunions. I leave not only grateful for the 100 or more with whom we have reconnected, but thinking about the other 300 members of our class. Some of whom we haven't heard from in years, some of whom are no longer known to us, some of whom have, sadly, passed from this life.

Growing up means recognizing that a healthy community is one that invites, welcomes and includes everybody. I love what Kenna did with the children this morning: invited them to turn and look at the congregation to see not only who is here, but who isn't.

When we come to this Communion table in a moment, all who are present are invited. It's not just because we're welcoming or inclusive. It's because the very grace of God is fully present here, and who are we to deny anyone experiencing God's grace.

Oh, by the way, as for the visiting preacher who the angry congregation ran out of town nearly to the point of his demise? That was Jesus, who didn't exactly receive a warm welcome back home in Nazareth. Growing up also means not everyone will love you.

But I can say I love this church, the people who are part of this faith community, and my friends and classmates. Though I have been blessed to know many colleagues, friends and acquaintances made in the years since leaving Eau Claire, you are family. We are family.

SUMMARY

Growing up means:

- Keeping your sense of humor
- Celebrating your differences and affirming each other's gifts
- Not believing everything you hear
- Striving to be the person God created you to be
- Making sure all persons are invited and welcomed into beloved community