



“A PLACE FOR YOU...TO GROW”

Ephesians 4:11-16

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Back in my days as a student at Adrian College, I had a good friend with whom I shared interests in music and theater whose name was Matt. While Matt was a music major and I was a religion major, we still connected in some classes in the religion department as well as in some discipleship groups. Matt was the son of a United Methodist pastor in Pennsylvania. He was a “PK,” or “preacher’s kid.”

Matt loved to tell stories of being a “PK.” One of his favorites was the day that his father, the pastor, was sitting on the steps of the chancel sharing the children’s message with the kids who had come to worship that week. Like many pastors, Matt’s dad condensed the message of the sermon and the scripture for that day into tiny bites that the children might understand. He had carefully thought through his opening line for the kids.

Reaching back into the Old Testament book of I Kings, Matt’s dad prepared a wonderful children’s message about King Solomon. Now, perhaps some of you might remember that King Solomon was the son of King David. It was under the rule of Solomon that the first temple was built in Jerusalem. Before that, however, there was something else that made King Solomon so great. One day, Solomon offered a prayer to God. Does anyone remember what Solomon prayed for? WISDOM! That’s right, the powerful King Solomon did not pray for riches or wealth. He didn’t pray for victory against his enemies that day. Instead, he prayed for wisdom. There are plenty of stories from the scriptures that talk about the greatness of King Solomon’s wisdom and how he used that gift throughout his reign. You see, when Solomon prayed for wisdom, God gave it to him...**in abundance.**

As Matt’s dad sat down with the kids that Sunday to share a story about King Solomon with them during the children’s message, he began with a question. He said, “Today, I’m going to tell you a story of the wisest man who ever lived.” Then he asked them, “Does anyone know the wisest man who ever lived?” Now, you all know the answer because I just gave it to you, right?

Since it was a children’s message, Matt’s dad was prepared for almost any answer. He probably figured that some might name historical figures like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. Others might say “my dad” or “my grandpa.” That morning, the children were kind of quiet at first. Eventually, young Matt’s hand went high into the air. Asking a second time if anyone knew

who was the wisest man who ever lived, Matt's dad finally relented and called upon his son. You see, preachers know their own children well. They understand that, as with any kids, you never know what your child will say in front of the congregation.

When his father called upon him, asking, "Matthew, who was the wisest man who ever lived," Matt stood up with confidence and pride as he shouted out for everyone to hear: "Jesus!" As the congregation finished chuckling, Matt's preacher father recovered quickly, saying, "Well, kids, today I'm going to tell you a story of the second wisest man who ever lived."

When Matt told that story, he said that as a United Methodist pastor's kid, he grew up knowing that the answer to any question in the church was either "Jesus" or "John Wesley." One of the two had to be right. It's amazing what children pick up on as they learn and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, isn't it?

Our scripture begins this week as Paul writes to the church in Ephesus using words that are similar to those we heard last week in his letter to the church in Corinth. He reminds the Ephesians that there are a variety of gifts that people might have in the body of Christ. He writes, "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."¹

PHEME PERKINS, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, notes that the gifts Paul points out in this passage can be divided into two categories. Some of the gifts "extend beyond the local church" while others are useful within the local church.² For instance, apostles are "those who are sent out." Prophets often speak to the society to call them back to the heart of God and to the beloved community. Evangelists are those who share the gospel in the world. On the other hand, teachers serve the local church to bring growth in discipleship. Pastors provide spiritual care for the local church.

These gifts, both inside and outside the local church, help to provide growth for the entire body of Christ as others are gathered and nurtured together in Christ "to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." Last week, we talked about how all of our gifts are needed on the team. This week, Paul helps us to understand the purpose of God's diverse gifts to us. This great variety of gifts that God gives to us are intended that we might grow up as the body of Christ.

Did you know that God not only wants us to grow in our faith, but gives us one another so that we might do exactly that? God has given us not only what we need to come to faith, but to continue to grow in our faith when we come together with a variety of gifts to make our journey of faith as a community.

In his paraphrase *The Message*, Eugene Peterson summarizes Paul's words at the end of the passage, saying, "No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to *grow up*, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood

flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.”³ Paul is not excluding children here. Rather he’s saying that lifelong spiritual growth is important for us as believers.

For Paul, God not only gives us everything we need to grow, but expects that growth is a natural part of our faith journey like our physical growth is a natural part of the experience of our bodies. We grow in knowledge and understanding as we move in life from being children to adults. God gives what is needed for spiritual growth that we might become more mature in love, or “robust in love” as Peterson refers to it. God intends that when we grow, we reflect Jesus’ love and image more boldly.

The other day I came home for lunch and Ella, my four-year-old niece, was sitting at the lunch table with my wife, Dawn. Ella had only two small pieces of chicken around which she had nibbled on her plate, along with some macaroni and cheese, and a few carrots. She was eating the carrots one after another. She also ate some of her macaroni and cheese. I was surprised that she only had two small pieces of chicken on her plate and she wasn’t eating them.

I asked her why she wasn’t eating her chicken and she told me that she was full. When she asked to be excused, I told her that she needed to at least eat her two pieces of chicken. She ate them and was then excused from the table because she was “full.” As we expected, within the next hour, she asked Dawn for a snack. Dawn said, “You just ate and told me that you were full.”

Ella said, “Well, Aunt Dawn, I am full on that side, but I have two stomachs. One is for lunch and the other is for snacks. The lunch stomach is full, but the snack side is hungry.” I’m so glad I wasn’t home because I would have laughed so hard that I may have been in trouble. Some kids are too smart for our own good, aren’t they?

As parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles or caregivers, we work hard to make sure that our kids eat well so that they grow up. I was glad that Ella finished the few carrots on her plate, but we knew her desire for a snack would eventually come after lunch and there were healthier choices for her than a sweet snack.

In a similar way, God gifts us with a variety of gifts and people in the body of Christ that help each of us to continue to grow and be healthy in our faith. God’s desire is that we get all that we need to grow.

At Birmingham and Berkley First, our purpose is “to gather, nurture and equip disciples of Jesus Christ for ministry and mission in the world.” We know that when we gather people in, nurture them, and then equip them to be sent out into the world, others throughout the world are better able to experience the greatness of God’s transforming love. Nurturing disciples of Jesus Christ is key to what we do here. One of our core values is to “encourage lifelong spiritual growth.”

One of the strategic initiatives of our FORWARD vision that the Administrative Council has adopted is “Growing in relationship with God through discipling ministries.” We know that God has given us the gifts within the body of Christ to grow and we want to help people find ways to do faith and life together. As a goal, we’re working towards increasing the number of active

worship attenders that participate in small group ministries over the next three to five years. Our hope would be to increase the number to 50 percent of active worship participants, which would be about 500 different people connecting through small group ministries here at Birmingham and Berkley First.

On Sunday morning, you often hear during the announcements that we encourage everyone to participate in what we have come to call “Worship plus Two.” You’re invited each week to participate in worship as well as to do something to feed yourself (nurture) and something to feed others (service). I don’t know if you’ve had a chance to look through our Fall Program Guide, but it is filled with over 200 opportunities for you to connect with each of those experiences.

In the area of feeding yourself, we have Bible study groups, fellowship groups, book study groups and so much more. Small groups are one of the key ministries that help us to connect and grow together as members. In a small group, you find those who pray for you, lift you up, and grow alongside you. Even Jesus was a member of a small group, wasn’t he?

I don’t know about you, but the more I grow in my faith, the more I realize that I have more questions than answers. That’s why I belong to a few different clergy covenant groups. Some of them study together with me. Others help me as we share sermon ideas. Still others allow me that place to share my faith struggles, prayer concerns, and even my greatest joys.

We cannot do our faith journey on our own. We’re a part of the body of Christ so we don’t need to do faith and life on our own. We don’t operate separated from the body, but deeply connected to it. The people in my small discipleship groups help me to discern the scriptures and what God may be speaking to us together. They love me, they challenge me, and they make that journey with me.

This fall, we’ve expanded our discipleship opportunities with a variety of ways for you to connect with others. I hope that you have signed up (or will sign up) for those that work best for you. In addition, Pastor Lindsey is helping us to identify discipleship pathways, or avenues, that help us to continue our growth in faith. So if you’ve had some spiritual carrots and need some spiritual protein, we can help you find that easier.

This week, several women are going on retreat together. At the end of October, we have an amazing men’s retreat planned. There’s a wide assortment of opportunities for you to grow in God’s grace and love together at Birmingham and Berkley First. Why?

Perhaps, one of our greatest reminders happens later this morning as we baptize one of the youngest among us. This is one of the holiest moments in our life together. Together, we will promise that “With God’s help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” This is where we begin to fulfill our purpose to “nurture disciples of Jesus Christ for ministry and mission in the world.” In the precious moments that we spend around the font, we begin that journey of lifelong spiritual growth with a child and his or her family.

Living the example, we exhibit the pathway to growth. Some day, some of you may be Sunday School teachers or small group leaders for those we baptize this year. Every day, I hope you are praying for them. One day, they'll be praying alongside us in the pew as we say together the words of "The Lord's Prayer." And beyond the day when they professes their faith openly for themselves, we will continue to journey the life of faith with them because God gives us one another that we might grow together into the fullness of Christ.

Here at Birmingham and Berkley First, we're committed to make sure that there's a place for you to continue to grow in your faith journey. Are you full yet? Or are there a couple of bites still left for us to share?

¹ Ephesians 4:11-13, NRSV.

² Perkins, Pheme. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. XI., ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 2000), 422.

³ Ephesians 4:14-16, *The Message*.