

For many of us who have school age children, we are in ‘back-to-school’ mode, aren’t we? We’re reviewing school documents, we’re updating records, we’re signing forms, making sure we have proof of residency, going ‘back-to-school shopping, etc.. We’re generally doing everything that’s required to get our children ready for the new school year, which begins in less than 2 weeks! In our household, this is a bittersweet year, as the last of our 3 children will be a high school senior. That’s hard to believe.

As we move out of Summer and into Fall, my practice has been to preach a Fall Focus sermon series. This Fall, I’ve decided upon the theme: “Regular Maintenance Required.” And, like many teachers do when the school year begins, I’d like to revisit some key concepts about what it means to be a part of the community we call ‘church.’ And how, if we’re going to be the church God calls us to be, it entails all of us doing what we can to ‘regularly maintain’ our membership vows so that our church – St. Paul’s – is in good condition, running at an optimal level.

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If you’d turn in your hymnals to page 38, I want you to take a look at the commitment we make whenever we have new members join St. Paul’s. It’s under section 16. After those who are joining the church take membership vows, I turn to the congregation and say these words: “Members of the household of God, I commend these persons to your love and care. Do all in your power to increase their faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love.”

And then you respond – and let’s say this together: “We give thanks for all that God has already given you, and we welcome you in Christina love. As members together with you in the body of Christ and in this congregation of The United Methodist Church, we **renew** our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the Church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.”

A Couple of things about this: first, note the ‘why’ of this commitment: ‘that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.’ That’s the aim, that’s the goal: that in everything and in every way possible, God is glorified in Jesus Christ! When any one of us attends to our membership vows, it helps us attain that goal; but when each and every one of us attends to these vows, that’s when the Church is actively becoming what God wants it to be.

Secondly, quite a few years ago there was a little change to this wording, adding the word ‘witness’ to the list of things we “covenant faithfully to participate in.” So, if we had newer hymnals, the final line would read: “We renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the Church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, **and our witness** that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” These are the five things I want to focus on over the next few weeks; how our attention to these five practices – our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and our witness – are the regular maintenance checklist each of us needs to attend to so that our church can fulfill its goal: to glorify God in all things and in every way.

So, the first act of required maintenance St. Paul’s needs you to attend to is regular prayer. This church, our church, needs your prayers. Going to God in prayer, of course, is an important spiritual practice, but sometimes we may forget that we’re called to pray specifically for our church. I think this is so because it’s easier to remember to pray for individual people or families than it is to pray for an entity or an institution, which the church is.

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Let me point us towards three prayers I believe scriptures invites us to regularly lift up on behalf of our church. The first comes straight out of our reading from Philippians, as Paul says, beginning in v. 3, “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you...”

Paul, who happened to be locked in prison as he wrote this letter, begins by offering a joyful prayer of thanksgiving for the church. And this isn’t the only time! Paul begins his letter to the church in Colossae saying, “In our prayers for you, we always thank God...” and then he begins his 1st letter to Thessalonica: “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers constantly...” I could point to even more examples, but let me ask that you to take a moment, right now, to write down in your bulletin 5 things about St. Paul’s for which you can offer prayers of thanksgiving constantly.

Now, I have a confession to make. When I was working on this sermon, I was also working with the Trustees to get our Sanctuary air conditional repaired. So my immediate thought was, “Well, I don’t thank God for this air conditioning issue...” But then I had a memory flash of the time I worshipped with a congregation in Rwanda, a church with no walls,

certainly with no air conditioner. I believe it was well into the 90's, and we worshipped for about 2 hours with at least 500 people gathered. When I remembered this, I was suddenly grateful, both for that memory of worshipping with brothers and sisters in Rwanda, and for the opportunity to worship here in Coronado in this beautiful – albeit – overly warm sanctuary.

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A second, no less important, prayer we need to offer is prayers for unity. For this, our role model is Jesus himself. In the gospel of John 17:11, in a final prayer before his arrest, Jesus prays, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given them, so that they *may be one, as we are one*." This is Jesus' prayer for his disciples who will establish his church following his death and resurrection.

As both Pastor Susan and I have pointed out, even though the gospels are written in and translated from Greek, Jesus actually spoke Aramaic. But Jesus' religious education would've come in hearing and reading Hebrew scripture, and so his teachings would've been rotted in Hebraic ways of thinking. In Hebrew, there are two words for 'one.' There is 'yachid,' which refers to a solitary number – one, and there is the word 'echad,' which means a oneness made up of many parts – a multifaceted oneness. I would think that 'echad' is what Jesus had in mind in his prayer that his disciples would be one. I say this because it is the Hebrew word 'echad' that is used in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one [echad]." That is the foundational affirmation the Jewish faith makes about God.

And this may help us make sense of how we can say both that God is One, while at the same time affirming the doctrine of Trinity; that while God is one, we know God in a multifaceted way – as Creator, as Christ, and as the Holy Spirit.

All of this leads me to point out that there's a difference between oneness as unity and oneness as uniformity. Unity is a oneness that can include and handle 'diversity' and differences. Uniformity cannot. So here, I have another confession. There are times where I wish all of you agreed with me – that you all saw things the same way I do. And I can get a little jealous of churches where the members all 'fall in line' behind their charismatic pastor. But then I remember this prayer of Jesus, that our oneness is rooted in Him, regardless of where we might diverge on scriptural and theological perspectives. And so our church needs your prayers for unity, not uniformity.

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A third prayer our church needs is prayers for receptivity. I base this on the simple fact that early on, Jesus' disciples were surprised that Gentiles – outsiders – were accepting the gospel. Acts 10-11 tells the story of how Peter, in prayer, discerns that God's enterprise of salvation in Jesus includes Gentiles, and then, how the other church leaders heard Peter's testimony and concluded that God had given "even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." If the apostles had not been prayerfully receptive, we would not be here, some 2000 years later.

As I was sharing with a group earlier this week, one of the things I discovered, even before our bishop assigned me to be your new pastor, is that the church here had begun to pray for whoever the new minister would be. I saw that in your bulletins, that there were prayer gatherings for this. These were prayers of receptivity and openness, and I am grateful for these prayers.

As you might suspect, I have one more confession to make. Early in my tenure here at St. Paul's, I would come into the sanctuary when no one else was here and pray over the seats. I prayed that God would fill the seats of our sanctuary with those who needed to receive the love of Christ in a church community like ours. Well, over the past couple of years, the pews have become more full. Sure, we have room to grow, but a few months ago I got a bit intimidated by all the growth, and so I suspended that practice, filing it under, 'be careful what you ask God for in prayer.'

Anyway, a few years ago I read a statement attributed to a former archbishop of the Anglican church, William Temple. Temple said, "The church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not it's members." With this in mind, I came in yesterday to again pray that our seats will fill with those who are not 'members.' I also prayed that all of us would begin to make room in our hearts for those God will bring to St. Paul's in the coming months.

So, my invitation for you this week is pray for our church: prayers of thanksgiving, prayers for unity, and prayers for receptivity. Amen.