

3.3.24

Imagine a Church Where...

Ephesians 4.1-16

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Has anyone ever said to you during a conversation, perhaps one that was getting a little heated, **“Grow up!”** Have you ever said that to someone? What tends to be going on for someone to say to someone else, **“Grow up!”** Implied behind that phrase when it’s said in a particular tone and with a certain facial expression is a belief that someone is being immature, childish, or foolish. Most of us can picture and feel the tension and dynamic in such a conversation.

However, what if someone said to you, **“Grow up!”** Not with anger, frustration, exasperation, disdain, or meanness, but with excitement and anticipation, as an invitation, an opportunity, a chance to transform your life for the better that you don’t want to miss but want to grab hold of? That sounds different, doesn’t it?

That’s how I invite you to hear Ephesians 4:11-16. As an invitation to **“Grow up!”** and be part of a church that’s functioning the way God designed and desires the church to function. **Imagine a church where** every person is doing what God created us to do. Imagine the power of a united church where spiritual gifts are being utilized and deployed, where every single person is striving to grow in spiritual maturity to be more like Jesus, so that the whole community of people who trust Jesus is building itself up in love. Wouldn’t that be a great church to be a part of? Listen to Ephesians 4:11-16 and notice how many words and phrases mention some variation of the idea of grow, growth, building up, and maturity.

11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 **to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 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.** 14 **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. 15 **But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,** 16 from whom the whole body, joined and

knit 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.**"

The first three chapters of Ephesians lay the foundation of the Christian faith and describe God's love, grace, mercy, and power, and God's desire to tear down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and non-Jews and how God's plan has been made clear in Christ and is shown to the world in a church that's united in love and empowered by the Spirit. Then in chapter four, Ephesians begins challenging us to live our life story in light of the gospel story.

Chapter four begins by reminding us the church is a big family with all different kinds of people, but we are one. **One** is a key word in Ephesians 4. ***"There is one body and one Spirit...one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all."*** Jesus' new family consists of many kinds of people, but we're united and empowered by the one Spirit who gives us gifts to help build up the church and to serve and love one another. There's a progression in today's scripture that's important to understand. It can be understood negatively in terms of results. A church will not be built up in love unless it is unified, a church won't have a sense of unity unless all the people in it are committed to **grow up** – to the full measure of Christ. **This passage in Ephesians 4 states that we need to Grow Up in Christ so we can be Unified as we Build Up in love the Body of Christ which is the church.** And what an amazing community there is in a church where each person is excited about the opportunity to grow up in Christ and to fulfill our God given potential.

Listen again to the words and phrases in this scripture, you may want to underline them in your own Bible: "building up the body of Christ, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

We know what it means to grow physically. Many of us have marks on a wall or a door frame where we've charted the physical growth of our children's or grandchildren's height. That's easy to see, easy to measure, and the growth or change is obvious. *"Three years ago, I was here on the wall and now I'm here."* We also know it's natural

for children to grow for a certain number of years and eventually they stop getting taller. People don't keep growing taller forever and we mark our children's growth in other ways that involve their character, their minds, their choices, and their ability to handle responsibility and relationships, to name a few categories.

When it comes to growing spiritually, we're not to be infants or children forever. We're not to be *"tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming."* We're to be wise and discerning, we're to **grow up**. When we're mature in our faith, it's much easier to spot false teaching and deceit. We are called to mature, so we reach **the full stature of Christ**. When we're growing physically, we often want to stand next to a parent, grandparent, or sibling to measure ourselves and our progress against them. Ephesians 4 encourages you to stand up next to Jesus and his character – his love, his selflessness, his humility, service, faith, courage, and generosity and see how much room you still must grow to reach the full stature of Christ. As you stand next to Christ how tall or short do you feel? Are you comfortable that you've reached the full stature of Christ, or do you feel that you're still looking up and have room to grow?

We grow up in Christ by engaging in the same kind of practices that he did - things like worship, prayer, solitude, service, knowing God's Word and being in community and by sharing his priorities. If you're looking up at Jesus and have room to grow, we want to help. That's why we offer Sunday School classes, Bible Studies, and Small Groups so that we provide opportunities for people at all ages and stages of life to keep growing and learning. Ephesians 4 declares that God gives people different gifts but for the same purpose – *"for building up the body of Christ."* Some are apostles who start and lead new ministries and faith ventures. Some are prophets who tell the truth in clear and vivid ways about what God is doing and where God's people need to confess, change, or move to be more faithful. Some are evangelists whose primary gift is telling the story of God's love and leading others to begin a personal relationship with Jesus in community with other disciples in a local church. Some of us are called to be pastor-teachers *"to equip the saints for the work of ministry."*

The work of the ministry begins first with who we are. We all have gifts to share and use and we're to use them to encourage and build up others in love. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (12 May 1828 – 9 April 1882) was a 19th century English poet, illustrator, painter, and translator. Once he was approached by an elderly man. The old man had some sketches and drawings that he wanted Rossetti to look at and tell him if they were any good, or if they at least showed potential talent. Rossetti looked them over carefully. After the first few, he knew that they were worthless, showing not the least sign of artistic talent. Rossetti was a kind man, and he told the elderly man as gently as possible that the pictures were without much value and showed little talent. He said he was sorry, but he could not lie to the man.

The visitor was disappointed but seemed to expect Rossetti's answer. He then apologized for taking up Rossetti's time, but would he look at a few more drawings – these done by a young art student? Rossetti looked over the second batch of sketches and immediately became enthusiastic over the talent they revealed. *“These, oh, these are good. This young student has great talent. He should be given every help and encouragement in his career as an artist. He has a great future if he will work hard and stick to it.”* Rossetti could see the old man was deeply moved. *“Who is this fine young artist?”* he asked. *“Your son?”* *“No,”* said the old man sadly. ***“It is me forty years ago. If only I had heard your praise, then! I got discouraged and gave up – too soon.”***

I often wonder what a difference our encouragement can make in the lives of other people to build them up and give them hope and determination to explore and use their gifts. Without our even realizing it, our encouragement may be the difference in someone not giving up too soon. We're to speak the truth in love because loving guidance, correction, and encouragement tends to create and strengthen unity while negativity and a lack of appreciation tears people down, harms unity and can create space or distance between us and others.

Rev. Martin E. Pike Jr tells this story on himself: “Three minutes had elapsed since I had taken my seat at the counter. Waitresses passed by me; two cooks and a busboy took no notice of my presence. My ego was soothed only because the truck driver next to me was ignored as well. *“Maybe this counter is off limits,”* I said to him.

“Maybe they’re short of help.” He responded.

“Maybe they don’t want our business,” I said.

“Maybe they are taking care of those tables,” was his reply. The hands on the clock continued to move. *“Maybe they don’t like us,”* I insisted.

“The air conditioning feels so good I don’t mind waiting,” he said.

At this point a harried waitress stopped to tell us that the water had been cut off, and the dishwasher was not functioning. My nameless companion smiled and thanked the waitress and left. I didn’t like him. Three times I had sought his support for my obnoxious attitude, but he had let me down. Only later did I realize that he had chosen to practice what I preach.” The truck driver was building up, the pastor was tearing down. That’s something we can ask ourselves in any situation, *“Am I building up others in this moment, in this conversation, in this relationship? Or am I discouraging them?”*

The final part of today’s passage from Ephesians 4 says, ***“joined and knit 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.”*** The key here is that we’re joined and knit together **as each of us works properly to promote the body’s growth in love**. We each have a part to play, and we’ve been given different gifts and abilities to do it. The human body has lots of parts that look very different from each other, each with important roles and functions. This past week the National Football League had an annual event called the combine at which college players who hope to be drafted in April sprint, jump, lift weights, and do other things in front of NFL scouts. One thing you notice is there are people with very different builds and body types. A defensive lineman looks quite different from a field goal kicker; a quarterback is built differently from an offensive lineman. A punter looks nothing like a middle linebacker. Much like a football team has very different types of men playing different positions, in a church we may look different, but we all have a part to play in building up the church in love. We shouldn’t expect everyone to have the same strengths and abilities, rather we’re to complement and care for and serve one another in love.

We know we've reached a level of spiritual maturity when we stop asking, *"Who's going to meet my needs? Who's going to serve me? Who is going to encourage and appreciate me?"* and start asking, *"Whose needs can I meet? Who can I serve? Who can I encourage and express appreciation to today?"* Mature believers are more concerned about serving, reaching out, and encouraging and building up others in love than about our own convenience and comfort. As we grow as disciples our attitude starts to shift from, *"I'm looking for a church that meets my needs and blesses me,"* to *"I'm looking for a church where I can serve and be a blessing as part of the Body of Christ."*

Imagine being part of a church like that. You can be and you can help make it so.

Questions for Discussion & Reflection:

1. What would it look like for you to live a life "worthy of the calling you have received" (Ephesians 4:1)?
2. What qualities and virtues are we encouraged to demonstrate that contribute to unity (Ephesians 4:2-3)?
3. What unites us with other believers and helps us to forge unity (Ephesians 4:4-6)?
4. Paul says gifts are given to each believer so that people may serve, and the body of Christ may be built up. How are you using your gifts to do this? Why is it important for all of us to do so?
5. What does Paul teach about the importance of growing up and maturing in Christ?
6. Why is growing up and building up the church in love so important (Ephesians 4:16)? How does it depend on each one doing our work?