

“REDISCOVERING OUR IDENTITY (#3): GROWING”

(Ephesians 4:1-3, 11-16)

© 2008 Dr. Brian Germano

[Prop Needed: (#1) Body of Christ Photo-Mosaic, w/focus on Head; (#2) Plant & its seed]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 10-19-08]

–I–

1. Read Text: Ephesians 4:1-3, 11-16 and Pray.
2. **[WATCH BODY OF CHRIST PHOTO-MOSAIC:** *Zoom in from pictures of church members in Discipleship/Sp.Growth activities, then out to HEAD of Jesus, then to entire picture of Jesus with others]*

A–“A Mosaic of God’s family... *Gathering, Growing, and Going*” – As you may know, this is our church’s recently adopted mission statement (on the front of the bulletin) that not only describes who we *are*, but also who we believe we’re called *to be* as God’s people.

B–And currently we’re in the midst of series called Rediscovering Our Identity in which we’re unpacking the meaning of this mission not only for us *corporately* (as a church) but perhaps even more importantly for us *personally* (as individual Christians).

C–After a first week celebration of the “mosaic” of our diversity as a church, last week we began a discussion of our “3-Gs” by referring to the fact that as human beings, every one of us is created first & foremost to *worship* God and have *fellowship* with each other – or, what our statement calls “*GATHERING to embrace God and all people.*”

3. Today our discussion turns to the second “G” (“*GROWING*”), and how we as God’s people are called to become more and more like Jesus every single day.

A–We’ll talk about what this is, why we need it, and how we can go about fulfilling it.

B–Now, in the Bible, this dimension of our identity is described by the theological word “*Sanctification*”; in the church we sometimes use the words “*Discipleship*” or “*Spiritual Growth.*”

C–But in our new mission, we’ve tried to avoid using complex theological jargon, and instead have described this process simply as “***GROWING in faith, love and joy.***”

1–“*Faith*” because God calls each of us to grow in our *knowledge/understanding* of Him.¹

2–“*Love*” because God wants each of us to grow in our self-less *actions* towards others.²

3–And “*Joy*” because God wants His people to cultivate an increasing ability to be content regardless of our outward circumstances.³

–II–

4. So, to better understand WHY we need this dimension of Christian growth, let me call your attention to this Marigold plant. [SHOW PLANT] It's beautiful now, but we all know that it certainly didn't start that way.

A—In fact, here's how a plant like this starts out... [SHOW SEEDS] just simple, plain seeds, with little color or beauty, ...BUT with great potential!

B—So what, then, does it take to go from this (*plain seed*) to this (*healthy grown plant*)? Like last week, just call out your answer... [Wait for responses... like soil; rainwater; sunlight; air; etc.]

1—Let me ask: If I tossed these seeds into the air, & they could somehow just magically hang there, would they ever sprout into a healthy plant? (Probably not)

2—So, let's think about what makes possible the birth and growth of a healthy plant. For one, it takes fertilized *soil* and the nutrients provided by it; only when planted in *soil* can a *rainwater* begin to break through the protective shell so that the seed begins to soak up nutrients, causing it to sprout.

3—And when that sprout finally breaks through the top of the soil, it begins to receive *sunlight*, causing a process called photosynthesis where light is transformed into energy that the young plant uses to grow and mature.

C—Now let me ask a related question: even though it needs soil and water and sunlight, if I just threw these seeds on the ground outside of this building, would they automatically grow into a plant like this? (Maybe. Maybe not)

1—But if I wanted to nearly guarantee success, what would I have to do?
(Possible responses: plant it, tend to it, care for it, water it, weed around it, etc.)

2—The point is: if I want to end up with healthy plant, I can't just start with soil, water, and sunlight. No, I have to have ...*intentionality*!

5. Friends, I want to suggest that what we talked about last week (worship & fellowship) are the "soil" into which the "seed" of our spiritual lives can be planted.

A—And yet, like this plant, if we want to grow into strong, healthy, mature Christians, it'll take the *intentionality* (on our part) of *Christian Discipleship* —...

1—That is ...we have to not only *make time* for worship & fellowship (to be sure), but we've got to also *make time* for opportunities to stretch our understanding ("*faith*"), to stretch our compassion ("*love*"), and to stretch our trust in God ("*joy*").

2—And when we do this (like a plant), we'll find that the living "water/light/energy" of God's Holy Spirit will work a sort of "spiritual photosynthesis" in our lives – to transform us so that over time, we grow & more closely reflect Jesus in what we say and do. ⁴

B—Now friends, this is what we in the church mean by “Discipleship” – or in the words of our mission, “*Growing in faith, love, and joy.*”

6. [For Trad. Service...] Did you hear how Paul put it in today’s Ephesians 4 scripture reading?

A—He talked about the importance of “*equipping⁵ of the saints [that’s US]... [for the] building up of the body... until all of us come to the unity of faith... [and] to maturity.*”

B—And he goes to say that we’re to “*grow up in every way into him who is the head [Remember what our photo-mosaic zoomed in on at the beginning of the sermon? The head of Christ] into Christ, from whom the whole body.... promotes... growth in building itself up in love.*”

6. [For Contemp. Service...] Listen to how Paul puts it in today’s scripture from Ephesians 4:

[READ Ephesians 4:1-3, 11-16 from THE MESSAGE]

A—Do you hear what he’s saying?

B—“*Don’t be sitting around on your hands...*” like a seed thrown on the ground somewhere with no intention a growing or being changed by the soil.

C—No. He says that we’re called to become “*fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ...*”

D—...That “*God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth,... to take our lead from Christ* [our “head” as another translation says ...remember what our photo-mosaic zoomed in on at the beginning of the sermon? The head of Jesus]... *who nourishes us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.*” (I love that, even if it does sound like a coffee commercial!)

7. You see, Paul’s point in all of this is while worship and fellowship are a good start to the Christian life (like planting a seed in the soil), ...

A—...If we want to really develop into healthy, mature Christians, then it takes *intentionality* –

B—...That just as sure as growing a healthy, mature plant takes *intentional* watering, sunlight, and weeding, so growing a healthy, mature Christian doesn’t just happen accidentally on its own, but instead requires an intentional choice to *grow* in our Christianity.

–III–

8. So how, then, do we do this? How do we practice Christian Discipleship, or go about “*Growing in faith, love and joy*”? Let me briefly suggest just a few ways:

A—I would hope we understand that one of the most obvious avenues of Christian growth is our participation in CLASSES AND STUDY GROUPS who’s primary purpose is to expand our knowledge and understanding of God and His ways – this is, in fact, one of the measures of a mature, growing Christian (e.g., ...participation in such a group).
Are *you* active in one?

B—Another such measure is the nature and extent of our personal & corporate PRAYER life, because prayer grounds our intellectual *understanding* of God in a personal *trust* of God. So I ask: what’s your prayer life like lately? Rich and full? Or short and shallow?

[If you want to grow in this, why not try out some of our new prayer ministries... like our Prayer Retreat next Saturday, prayer during worship, and prayer counselors]

C—And yet another way to grow in discipleship is by learning to be people of GENEROSITY (financial and otherwise), because it draws our focus away from ourselves to the needs of others – this is why one measure of a growing Christian is the extent of their generosity. So let me ask: as you generous in the giving of your time, talents, and money? Or do you merely give God the “left-overs”?

D—Now do you recognize these methods so far? ...They’re part of the promises we make as United Methodist Christians: “*Prayers*,” “*Presence*,” and “*Gifts*” – meaning that as we fulfill our vows to God through our church, we’re actually practicing Christian Discipleship!

9. You see, the bottom line is that God doesn’t call us (either as individual Christians or as a church) only to a life of Worship and Fellowship, but also to a life of Discipleship... a life where we are continually “*GROWING in faith, love, and joy.*”
10. So, how intentional are you in this? **[REFER TO PLANT...]** What are you doing to plant yourself deep in the soil of God’s love, where God Himself can water and nourish your soul, and transform and grow you into something beautiful for Him?
11. [PRAYER]
12. [CLOSING SONG]

ENDNOTES:

1. Of course, “faith” in the Bible means more than simply the intellectual / rational understanding of something or someone. More properly, it refers to one’s entire commitment to Christ. However, as used in our mission statement, rational knowledge and intellectual understanding of God is the primary focus.
2. Biblical “love” (Greek *agape*) refers not merely to having *thoughts* of love, but to our ability to ACT in love – to put the needs of others ahead of ourselves – to become more self-less, rather than self-ish. Love refers to ability to love one another through our differences. It also means an ability to seek the good of the *whole* people of God, rather than seeking our own self-centered desires and preferences. This is why Christian “*unity*” – the ability to live in peace with those who differ from us (Read Verse 3 in today’s Ephesians 4 passage) – is also one of the measures of a growing, mature Christian.
3. “Joy” is not the same thing as happiness and comfort. As Christians, we’re neither called nor promised that we will be happy and comfortable in life. No. Sometimes being a follower of Christ means that we will be called upon to make sacrifices of ourselves and our resources for the greater cause of the kingdom of God. So growing in joy doesn’t guarantee that we’ll be people of happiness and comfort, but that we’ll be learning how to grow in our ability to have inner joy and contentment no matter what the outer circumstances. For examples, read Philippians 4:11-13 and James 1:2-4. This means that one of the measures of this kind of joy is generosity (Read 1 Corinthians 8:2).

4. Another purpose / reason why we need Christian Discipleship is also obvious from a plant: ...if you're not growing, then you're dying. What's more is that Christian spiritual growth helps us to guard against being lured away by the cares and temptations of the world. The famous Scottish theologian William Barclay once wrote, "*There is only one way to avoid being blown about by the latest religious fashion and to avoid being seduced by the specious arguments of clever [people], and that is by continual growth into Christ... The only thing which can keep the individual Christian solid in the faith and secure against seduction, the only thing which can keep the Church healthy and efficient, is an intimate connection with Jesus Christ who is the head and the directing mind of the body*" (William Barclay, Bible Commentary: Ephesians, p. 151).

5. The Greek word translated as "equipped" (Greek *kartartismos*) comes from the root word used in surgery for the setting of a broken limb or for putting a joint back into its place. In politics it is the word used for the bringing together of opposing factions so that government can go on. In the New Testament it is used to refer to the mending of nets (Mark 1:19), and of the disciplining of an offender until they are fit to take their place again within the church fellowship (Galatians 6:1). The essential idea has to do with putting a thing into the condition in which it ought to be, so that in this case the role of the discipleship is to help be so educated, guided and cared for that we become what we ought to be (and are called to be) in Christ.