



“Growing Together”

Ezekiel 36:25-28; 1 Corinthians 12:12-16; Matthew 16:24-26

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Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

We continue today...with our series of Sermons...lifting up the three parts of our new mission statement...the full version of which is on the front cover of the Order of Worship.

This week we will look at...as the title of the sermon says...“Growing Together.”

Mainline Protestant churches...which have been shrinking materially for the past couple of decades...are...not surprisingly...very focused on how to attract members...and strategies to start growing again.

In fact...there is an article in the current edition of the Christian Century magazine...that focuses on exactly this topic. It’s entitled... “Mixed motives...why people join a church.”

But it’s important to be clear here at the outset. This issue of church growth...it isn’t what we mean by “growing” in our mission statement.

While continuing to grow our Plymouth community...is undoubtedly a good thing...something we want to do...that is not what this mission statement is getting at.

Nevertheless...why people join churches...this still might be a good place to start.

And so...thinking about what attracts...or doesn’t attract...people to a church...I don’t think...today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew...would be among the biggest draws.

In this passage...Christ pushes his Disciples...saying: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves...and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life...will lose it...and those who lose their life...for my sake...will find it.”

In today’s secular...me first...consumer driven culture...this notion of denying ourselves...and picking up a cross...and losing our lives...

 this isn’t exactly the stuff of a Madison Avenue marketing campaign...

For many years...I’ve been keeping a running diary...of...various theological reflections and religious ideas...sort of...stream of consciousness...reflections.

The other day, I came across something...in this diary...that I think is relevant to what I’m talking about here.

I had been musing about why people might want to join a church...and also...some of...the hurdles that might keep people away.

At first I had written...an upbeat entry...asking rhetorically...“what’s not to like?”...and then listed some things many churches do very well...things like:

 providing a supportive network for members...being a place where we make life-long friends...and where we help ourselves...while at the same time...helping others.

All good stuff...important stuff...undoubtedly the kind of stuff...that...truly does attract members.

And then...as I turned to some of the hurdles...that I had written down...one in particular...jumped off the page. I had written this simple shorthand statement: “hurdle...fear of what have to do...if really follow Gospel”.

To elaborate on my shorthand...I was basically saying this:

a notable hurdle...in attracting people to become a follower of Christ – is that when we really dig into the Gospel...we find that following the Gospel...is challenging...is provoking...is meant to change us in profound ways....and that can scare off potential members.

What I was getting at...in this sort of simplistic marketing assessment...is the ongoing tension that mainline churches feel in this day and age:

the tension between...on the one hand...wanting to attract members...and on the other hand...preaching the full impact of the Gospel...an impact that can indeed seem daunting to folks.

One of the first things David did...when he came to Plymouth...seven years ago...was give the council a book to read. The book was entitled “Transforming Congregational Culture”...by Tony Robinson.

And Robinson addresses this tension head-on...calling on churches...to reinvigorate...by re-engaging in what he terms “human transformation”.

He says that we...are supposed to be...“in the business of ‘Christian Transformation.’ We want to change people in such a way that the Christian story...becomes the lens ...through which they can see and understand all of life.”

And then he adds this: “Although mainline Protestant churches may be reluctant to use the word, what I am talking about is ‘conversion’...turning around, being born anew...changed, made new, given a new heart....”

Another contemporary Christian theologian...Walter Brueggemann...likens this “Christian transformation” process...to an “identity crisis”...where we question...accepted views of ourselves...and of the world.

He sees it as a process in which...if we take scripture seriously...we are initially disoriented...before ultimately...becoming...as he says...“surprisingly reoriented”.

Thinking about our passage from Matthew...a more blunt way to say this...might be...we have to lose our life...in order to find it.

And I think the beauty of this second piece of our mission statement...that we are talking about today...is that it...lifts up...both...what attracts people to the church...while also getting at...what might frighten them off.

Growing by...learning...serving...and caring for each other...this is all very attractive. It is foundational for our spiritual growth.

And when we combine this with the rest of the mission statement...Knowing God...by putting Jesus Christ at the center of our lives...responding to God’s call...listening to God’s word...and then ultimately Living out Our Faith...

Yes...when we put it all together...this Christian transformation business...it does indeed...challenge us...to change.

And no matter how comforting it is...to hear that we are going to serve...and care for each other...this idea of change is nevertheless...likely uncomfortable...for many of us...precisely because...Jesus asks a lot.

And so yes...growth and change...it is about...losing our lives...in order to find...new life.

But Christ is not unreasonable...or unrealistic. Christ...knows that this kind of transformation can make folks anxious...and that we can't snap our fingers and be changed.

Instead, Christ knows that this transformation business...that it is a process...a journey...in fact...it's meant to be a lifelong journey.

No less than Martin Luther...the one who set the entire Protestant Reformation in motion...Luther has this to say: "We are not yet what we shall be...but we are **growing**...toward it. The process is not finished...but it is going on. This is not the end...but it is the road."

Luther described baptism...as a once-in-a-lifetime experience that takes...our entire lives...to complete.

Yes...this idea of Christian transformation...it is...supposed to be a journey...a journey of...as Paul so often says...**maturing in Christ**.

And so here we are today...all of us **together**...having just covenanted...to work **together**...to help Steve and Andrea's beautiful daughter Hayden...

on her path...on her journey...in her lifetime of **growing** "into" her baptism.

And the beauty of baptism...and communion...and so many of the other things we do **together** in church life...is that we do them **together**...whether all **together** during worship...or in smaller more intimate settings.

And as our mission statement says...the goal...seems to be...not only to grow...and to learn...and to serve...but also...to do it **together**.

And...if you are at all like I am...whenever I take on a challenging task...I prefer to do it with others.

And this is...precisely what our reading from 1st Corinthians...is getting at...when Paul speaks about the church...as the Body of Christ.

His point: we are not alone...on this journey.

Paul says: "For just as the body is one and has many members...and all the members of the body, though many...are one body...so it is also with Christ."

This is such a rich description of what church life is supposed to be like.

The implications are remarkably varied...especially when we try to imagine ourselves...as truly being...Christ's body on earth.

To begin with...the church is to seek to replicate...as best it can...Christ's work on earth...and this is of course...daunting. But we are also supposed to do it together as one...and this is greatly comforting.

And despite the fact that...the members of this body...are not alike...we are nevertheless...inseparable from each other. For as Paul says, how can a foot say... "because I am not a hand...I do not belong to the body."

And to carry the implications even further...how can we feed one part of the body...without feeding the entire body. Or to say it differently...when one of us grows...all of us grow.

One of the books I've been reading about Small Groups ministry puts it this way: "The common bond that links Christians together is not the similarity of our past...but the convergence of our future. We are family...now and forever."

No...we are not alone...on this journey.

Almost exactly ten years ago...to the day...about three weeks after 9/11...I went on a three-day Christian spiritual retreat...run by an interdenominational group called "Tres Dias"...which means "three days" in Spanish. A number of other Plymouth members have also participated.

Just last week...I found...in that running diary of mine...notes I'd taken...about the retreat.

And the first thing I noticed was my questions. I was amazed by the questions I had at the time. They were so fundamental...so basic. So basic in fact...that I'm not very eager to share them with you today.

And seeing those notes...also brought back to mind...the retreat itself. During those three days...at the retreat...we worshipped...sang...heard lectures...and sermons...had small breakout groups...and prayer sessions.

It was a weekend designed to foster...exactly what we are talking about today...Christian transformation.

But what I remember most clearly about the weekend...was not the lectures...even though I learned a lot...even though they set a crucial foundation.

No...what I especially remember...was the sharing...whether within my own small group of 5 men...or around meals...or even late at night...talking with my roommate.

I remember the personal testimony of many of these men...their honesty...whether it was about their struggles...or about their faith journeys.

I met so many men who were living in difficult circumstances...and yet whose faith in Christ pulled them through.

It was these stories...that made such an impression on me...and have stayed with me for so many years.

Especially one from a man...who in front of the entire group...in tears...admitted that he had hit his daughter...and then talked about how he was mending that relationship...and mending his life...with Christ.

And so...as I was reflecting on this sermon...and the notion of "growing together"...and "learning together"...it struck me...that what really made the difference in this retreat:

it was...the fellowship...the sharing of the journey...that helped redefine my own personal path...to the point where...within two months of returning from Tres Dias...I decided to apply to seminary.

And my experience in seminary was almost identical. The reading...the lectures...and the papers...they were all...of course...essential. They set the foundation.

But it was the sharing in community...the sharing with fellow students...the fact that we worshipped...and prayed together...in every class. And it was hearing so many moving personal stories...that made the education complete.

In fact...without the stories...without the fellowship...without the togetherness...it would have been...an ivory tower experience...and far less transforming.

And so...what I'm trying to say about our mission statement...a statement that sets a challenge of...growing our faith...of changing ourselves...

What I'm really trying to say...is that there is such beauty...and such power...in taking on the challenge...together.

The history of our faith...is indeed a profoundly communal faith. Ours is a faith about community...about doing things together.

The Christian story...going all the way back to Abraham...and Moses...and the prophets...and to John the Baptist...and to Peter and Paul...and ultimately to Jesus Christ...it is about being "a people".

It is about...as God says so many times...and as we heard in Ezekiel today..."you shall be my people...and I shall be your God."

It's about feeding 5,000...and about...where two or more are gathered. It's about "Our" Father...who art in heaven.

Yes...it's about being the Body of Christ...about growing into maturity as Christians...by feeding ourselves...as we feed each other...growing together...as one people.

Amen.