

SERMON

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10/14/18

Bringing our gifts and growing edges before God and one another

Texts: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16 & I Peter 2:4-5

This morning, we'll be celebrating that oddly-named ritual that the Church calls "installing a new pastor". This term often makes people hearing it for the first time ask, "Install? Like a dishwasher?" (No, I did not bring along one of those heavy duty electrical cords needed to install an appliance!)

This morning, Dave and I will also be joining the church.

For these reasons, Susan and I decided that it would be good and right to pause in the series she introduced so well last week. We'll return to *Job* next week with a guest speaker who's studied the book; then Susan will close this series with additional reflections on the last Sunday of October.

When people join this congregation, I understand that they are invited to share some of their faith story to help people get to know them. With this in mind, I'll share some highlights of my own faith journey this morning; and then reflect on what the texts I chose for this morning may have to say to us as we begin to walk together on our ongoing journeys of faith and life.

Some early faith story highlights

I'm grateful for a faith story that has included Christian parents, grandparents, and different denominational church homes over the years of my life.

My first distinct memory was when I was three-years-old, and living in Youngstown, Ohio. A burglar had broken in while we were sleeping, and stolen meat, milk, and some money. When I woke up, I found two policemen talking with my mother in the kitchen; and looked to my mother to help interpret this experience. Should we be scared? Upset? "Whoever did this must have needed that food and money more than we do," my mother told me. (She was 24-years-old at the time; and, with three children under three, was pinching pennies herself.) In this (my first conscious memory), I learned about God's mercy - and I will always be grateful to my mother for that.

At Sunday school at an Assemblies of God church in Mount Ephraim (yes, that's the name of a town!), New Jersey, a focus in the early 1960s was on child evangelism. At a very young age, I was encouraged to "accept Jesus". I was too young to understand what my Sunday school teachers meant, and was puzzled by some of what I heard about heaven and hell. But what I remember most from that church was the story of Jesus saying, "Let the children come to me."

That was the clearest and most enduring message I got. In this, I learned about God's love for me and all - and I will always be grateful to those teachers for that.

At 12, I was baptized and joined First Baptist Church of Coatesville, Pennsylvania. In my high school years, we attended Oxford Presbyterian Church. "To whom much has been given, much is expected," my parents and Sunday school teachers told me at that time. In this, I learned about God's call to discipleship – to live out the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Around this time (age 12 or 13), I decided that it would be good for me to read through the entire Bible. Got through Genesis. Then got bogged down – daunting! So I simply switched up my strategy and decided to focus on the short books!

How do I know this after more than 45 years? Have that Bible – *The Living Bible*, Copyright 1971 by Tyndale House Publishers in Wheaton, Illinois. ☐ In the front, I marked off the books as I read them. After Genesis, I see that I skipped to Ruth (3 pages) and Esther (7 pages). I did read Job and also made it through Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Then I jumped down to Lamentations and mowed through most of the prophets.

The New Testament was much more interesting to me - starting with the good news of Jesus' life and teachings (the spiritual bread and butter that I was raised on). Then there were all those conveniently short books - I zipped right through 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John!

I have to smile when I think of myself reading the Bible this way. Looking back, however, I realize that the letters of Paul – especially passages like the ones from Ephesians and 1 Peter that we heard this morning - turned out to be formative for me in good and important ways.

Read through the lens of the life and teachings of Jesus, these kinds of passages from Paul's letters to the early churches taught me who God is; and helped me to understand the kind of healthy, honest, and nurturing place the church can and ought to be.

A deep and lasting conviction about God

What I took away then - and what has stayed with me since - is a deep conviction that God is always seeking to pick up the sharp and broken pieces of our lives – including our growing edges - in order to make something beautiful and whole again in us and in all of creation.

Moreover, God has also given us each unique gifts and then calls us to use them to join God's big purpose – works of beauty through healing, health, and justice - for our own good and for the good of the world!

This conviction was reinforced when I was home from college between my freshman and sophomore years. That summer I remember reading *New Wineskins* by Bruce Larson and Keith Miller; and *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* by Elizabeth O'Connor of Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. In this, I learned anew that being a Jesus-follower is about much more than

heaven or hell. Instead, it has more to do with seeking to better know God while also joining God at work in the world.

This understanding of living the Christian way as an inward/outward journey has helped faith remain alive throughout my life and up to the present. It always puts before me the question: *How might God be moving and working in me, in others, and in the world?* Whether in moments of pure joy or when confronted with unimaginable pain, my strongest and most faithful stance is one of holy wonder - asking God: *How might you be at work (or want to be at work) right here and right now - in this place, in this experience and this moment in time?*

For me, the most abiding and life-giving vision of doing and being church is gathering honestly before God and each other to open ourselves up to join what the Spirit of God is doing - and to be changed ourselves in the process.

When I was 21, Dave and I visited Frazer Mennonite Church in Chester County where we were warmly welcomed - and promptly stayed for 38 years! Folks there are certainly not perfect (some of our small group are here this morning and they'll keep me honest!) At the same time, this is an emotionally and spiritually healthy congregation with a community of people who have helped to form me in all the most important ways. There a strong theology rooted in the Bible - especially the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount - has nurtured me into adult faith. In this, I learned to be part of "a compassionate community walking with Christ toward peace and wholeness" - which is Frazer's vision).

When I was in my 40s, Jason Kuniholm, the pastor at Frazer Mennonite then, taught a series on spiritual disciplines. I was drawn to these practices, especially the devotional reading of scripture and prayer journaling which I continue to find meaningful. In these, I continue to learn to quiet my spirit in order to better hear and know God and myself.

"Be alert. Be alive! Be at peace."

At my ordination at Frazer in August (which a number of CMCLers attended ☐), Karen Sensenig (who is Sylvia Yoder's sister) brought the message. She encouraged us all to *Be alert. Be alive! Be at peace.*

- Be alert - to what God might be wanting to do in and through us.
- Be alive - to the gifts God has given us that bring us joy. (I really appreciated this way of understanding the part we are to play in the good healing and just work of God.)
- Be at peace - to find peace by bringing ourselves and our gifts to the world - while also trusting God's work in and through others in ways we can see and also in ways we may never know.

Today, I am here seeking to live out the wisdom of *Be alert. Be alive! Be at peace.*

During my conversations with the Pastor Search Committee about the possibility of joining the pastoral staff here, I sought to be alert to what God might be wanting to do, and to be alive to my gifts and the many gifts of this congregation. With my spiritual director and friends, I

wondered and prayed about the ways that coming together with you might be joyful and life-giving, and part of something God might use within and also beyond this community.

In the process, I was very much drawn to CMCL's vision prayer and covenant, and can strongly affirm the core values posted on CMCL's website:

- Here we are known and loved by God, and called to follow Jesus.
- Here we are nourished through worship, relationships, & the biblical story.
- Here we are open to new voices and new dreams.
- Here we seek to be responsive to human need through justice, peacemaking, and compassion.
- Here we are drawn into a new creation – believing that the transformation of ourselves & our world is ultimately the work of God's Spirit.

This morning, I find that I'm at peace and happy to be here. This is a lively interesting congregation with a talented staff. The variety of gifts here is amazing! The first five weeks with you have been full and good. I'm filled with gratitude for being called here and anticipation for what lies ahead.

Bringing our gifts and growing edges before God and one another

As we did together at retreat, I come before God and you this morning ready to offer my gifts and my growing edges – symbolized by this broken piece of stained glass which I will give to Larry Groff who represents you.

- My painful growing edges include residual effects of domestic violence in my home growing up and a #MeToo experience when I was 19, as well as old losses and more recent grief.
- A gift I bring is a yearning for and commitment to what John Pavlovitz has called “messy, authentic, and hopeful spiritual community”.

Together with the colorful broken pieces that are the gifts and growing edges that each of you bring, I trust that God will do something good and just and beautiful in and through us as we move forward together.

For me, the colorful swirling stained glass image on this morning's bulletin cover is a helpful reminder of God's movement in each of us and in the world. If it might be meaningful to you, I invite you to put that image where you'll readily see it this week; or use it to prayerfully wonder about your own gifts and growing edges, and what God might want to do in and through you right now.

The good news this morning is that God has equipped us with gifts for the good work of building up and being the Body of Christ in a troubled world.

May we seek to be:

- alert to the calling to which we have been called

- alive to our gifts and growing edges (and the gifts and growing edges of others); being church together with humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another in love; maintaining the unity of the Spirit
- at rest in the bond of peace

Thanks be to God. Amen.