

November 5, 2006  
Genesis 12:1-4, Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16  
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**"Growing Together in Christ"**

Almost every week we affirm our faith using the Apostles' Creed. The words become so familiar that we can say them without thinking about their meaning. Yet, the Creed lets us join with the church of the ages in connecting the story of our lives with God's story. In affirming our faith, we take our place with generations of Christians who have declared in the words of this Creed what is most true about the universe and our lives in it. In the Creed we tell the story of God who creates, redeems and sustains us. As we say the Creed, we are to savor the words and contemplate their meaning. Actually thinking about the words may get us into trouble.

Dr. Albert Curry Winn has said that when we come to the phrase, "I believe in the holy, catholic church," we are like a hang glider that suddenly loses the lift of air and comes crashing down to the ground. We stub our toes, skin our knees and break our backs over the earthly mass, the sheer undeniable physical reality of the church. Winn points out that we can float free in the air when we talk about God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit because we are talking about spiritual realities that are invisible to the human eye. When we talk about the church, we see it before us, "earthbound, housed in buildings, supported by budgets, run by committees, a very human, visible, concrete institution." (*A Christian Primer*, Albert Curry Winn, p. 159) Who has not had their arguments with the church? The church can be petty, troublesome, narrow-minded and brutal. The church can spend its time and resources on itself and close its eyes to the community around it. Some say it is too slow to change; others say it is too quick to take up every new cause. Some say that the church ignores the pain and brokenness of the world and the real hurts of people; others say it is not spiritual enough and shouldn't meddle in social issues. Some say it is self-righteous and cliquish; others say it just reflects the moral indifference and prejudices of our society. Even preachers get disillusioned with the church and drop out of the ministry at an alarming rate. I wonder if Abraham and Sarah would have left their home in Haran if they had known that all their efforts would end in congregational meetings in which their great-great-grandchildren argue about the color of carpet.

Let's be fair. The church is an easy target. It's easy to find fault with the church. After we have expressed all of our disappointments, wounds and frustrations with the church, is there anything left to say about the church?

For all of its glaring imperfections, the church is the body of Christ. The writers of the New Testament could see beyond the heated debates, the moral imperfection and the misguided thinking of the church into the mystery of the church's true identity and destiny. The letter to the Ephesians says it this way: "There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4-6)."

Over the past 20 months, our congregation has been engaged in a strategic planning process to discern God's leading in our life and mission for Christ in the world. As we began the process, we heard from many people about the importance of community. We heard from those who experienced the presence of community in our church and those who did not feel like they were a part of the community. In both cases, being in community is essential to the life of the church. The church is not called to be just any community. It is not a civic club, service organization or social ministry. The church is a spiritual community. It is the body of Christ. The church is a community of faith in which Jesus Christ is present. The community of faith is the living embodiment of Jesus.

The church is a community of faith, rooted and grounded in God. The church is to reflect the unity of God. In Ephesians, we hear a striking series of phrases in which the word "one" is repeated seven times. The series culminates in the oneness of God.

One body - One Spirit

One hope - One Lord

One faith - One baptism

One God

Behind the unity of the church is the unity of God. This great affirmation stands at the heart of the book of Deuteronomy and at the heart of Israel's faith, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." The spiritual unity of the church is a visible manifestation of the unity of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Yet, it is sad that the church of Christ is torn apart by differences in culture, history, doctrine, practices and belief. We confess our brokenness and we strive to be made whole. The Presbyterian Church has never claimed to be the only true church with all the right answers. We admit the limitation of our vision and our need for the vision of others. We see ourselves as a part of larger body of Christ spread throughout the world. We seek to commune with and to worship with other Christians. We can never be satisfied with the scandal of division. In spite of our brokenness, the church is the one body of Christ united in the power of the Spirit.

Christian unity is a gift and a goal. We are one body. Our unity is a gift. At the same time, we strive to make that unity visible in our life together. This is what Paul means when he calls believers "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (4:1,3) We are to grow into maturity together. Paul says that "all of us" are to come to "the measure of the full stature of Christ." (4:13) To be a Christian is not an individual endeavor. When God called Abraham and Sarah to leave the familiar world in which they lived, God promised that they would be the forbears of a great nation, a vast people. We are their spiritual descendants, called by God and growing into the full stature of Christ.

How does Jesus Christ become fully visible in the particular concrete, flesh and blood churches that we know? In spite of all the failures of the church to practice love, the gifts of the Spirit may be seen among us. The Holy Spirit has given each one of us special gifts to use for building up the body of Christ. These gifts are not our private possessions to use for our personal advantage. They are for our common life together - to encourage, to care for and to teach others.

Someone told me recently that she thought she might have to stop going to her church. She has been through a great deal of personal trauma in recent years. She is questioning her faith. The old certainties no longer mean what they used to. She is not sure what she believes or if she believes. She told me that she was thinking about getting a T-Shirt made to wear to church that would read, "I come for the people." She said, "I can't stop coming because the people who are here love me and care for me." She may not yet know it, but what she experiences in the community of God's people is the very real presence of Christ. Our goal is that we may all come to know the full measure of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

As the Strategic Planning Task Force listened to the congregation and gathered information, they learned that community is experienced in large and small groups. Certainly, the services of worship are the central moments when we gather together and express our life and identity. There are other large scale gatherings such as the picnic, coffee hour, the Bazaar, Christmas Benevolence and large classes that are important ways we express our community. There are also many small group activities that contribute to a vital sense of community. One of the major trends in American church life is the explosion of small group ministry. An important aspect of the emerging strategic plan for our church is the development of a broad-ranging program of small group ministries, so that each one of us may be involved in a meaningful spiritual community.

When Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast over a year ago, a number of our members gathered together to form ministry teams to help with this national crisis. Each team worked on a different aspect of the challenge. Some worked on providing housing, supplies and transportation. Others gathered together to serve as mentors and friends to the new residents, Still others gave spiritual support and emergency assistance. What many who participated in this effort discovered was how much they learned about how to help people in crisis, how much they received through giving, how close they grew to one another and to the people they helped and how they experienced the presence of Jesus in their midst. From that experience and from many others in the church, we have learned about how vital spiritual community happens when we are engaged with others in accomplishing a particular task for Christ. Now we find ministry teams growing up all around us to welcome those new to worship, to help families with new babies, to support persons with Parkinson's disease, to comfort those who are grieving and to care for the victims of domestic violence.

When we spend time together in study, prayer, fellowship and service, this gift of Christian unity becomes visible, powerful and contagious. In community with one another, we grow into "the measure of the full stature of Christ."

Professor Lamar Williamson of Union-PSCE, who will be our guest speaker at the 2007 Festival of Faith, tells of his experience as a missionary in the Congo. He met many African Christians whom he respected and admired and with whom he felt great closeness and spiritual unity. He noted, "But one finds congenial spirits in most groups with which he [or she] associates, and not just in the church. The fact that I cannot fully explain is the tie that binds me to people I do not like in the church in the Congo. I have known that some of them felt this, too. We can no longer ignore each other. We cannot rejoice in the other's misfortune. We suffer over the hurt we have caused each other and, inwardly, we reach out for each other. In a halting, imperfect, but undeniable way, we love each other. We know that we belong together. We can't decide whether we want it that way; but want it or not, that's the way it is. It is 'the unity the Spirit gives' in the body of Christ, and I for one stand in wonder before it - and within it. It is the soil in which genuine 'liking each other' can grow. This kind of love can bring wholeness to the world." (*God's Work of Art: Images of the Church in Ephesians*, Lamar Williamson, p. 20) When we grow together as a community of Christ, his presence rises among us, fills us and sends us out to bring wholeness to the world.