

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2009
Ephesians 4:1-16 (Proper 13 B)

"Just Grow Up!"

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Look for a moment at the theme for this day: "Just Grow Up!" What thoughts go through your mind when you see those words? For some of you who are younger you might say, "Yes, I cannot wait until I am all grown up. Then I will be able to do whatever it is I want to do." For those of us who have grown up, at least in physical maturity, we might respond, "We are long past that point. We have grown up." Then others might be thinking of someone of their acquaintance who has grown up physically but not emotionally. You might be thinking, "So and so certainly does need to grow up." More than a few social commentators believe that a lack of maturity is the greatest problem facing our society today. Yet as we look at the words of the Epistle lesson for this Sunday, we will see that St. Paul is speaking most emphatically about a spiritual maturity, of being grown up in Christ.

If we consider the words of our theme in the light of the text for today, then possibly we might discover that all of us still have some growing up to do. That is where the Spirit of God will lead us this day as we consider this theme prayerfully and carefully: "Just Grow Up!"

I. The Background

The Epistle to the Ephesians is considered the great letter of St. Paul about the church--the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. The words of our text are the admonition which the Apostle gives to the members of this church. He begins, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (v.1-3) These are some words that require self-examination. Are we completely humble and gentle? Are we patient and bearing with one another in love? All the time? In every circumstance? Do we make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? If that was the case, every church meeting would be such a wonderful experience that everyone couldn't wait for the next one to be held. Indeed, if we perfectly fulfilled the words of this exhortation, this church would be filled every Sunday beyond overflowing as people flocked to worship. Look around you this morning. There seems to be a lot of open space. Some have other priorities more important than worship.

In fact, it looks like the Apostle is here reminding us that the life in the church is not always as these words would exhort us. We are after all still people who are sinners as we confessed before. In the other two lessons for today, we see the people of God grumbling and complaining. The children of Israel for bread and meat, the people of Jesus' day seeking for

a sign and showing their unbelief. The exhortation of the apostle is a needed one.

II. The Basis

Yet we will most assuredly fail in fulfilling the exhortation before us if we look to ourselves for strength. The following verses of our text show the true and solid foundation for our Christian maturity. The Apostle again in a few very carefully woven sentences gives us the facts. A commentator has pointed out that there are three triads here, three groups of three thoughts. Also the word "one" occurs seven times--the Biblical number of completeness. As occurred three weeks ago in the epistle so also again here, the Holy Trinity is the basis of this description. But here the Trinity is the source of the absolute, indivisible unity of the Church. Listen to the words: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." The order this time is Spirit, Son, Father. The thought is powerful. One body, one Spirit, one Hope--the hope of everlasting life for all who are called by the Spirit of God into the one holy Christian church--the body of Christ. One Lord, one faith, one baptism--the Lord Jesus Christ is central to this church. Faith in him saves. By Holy Baptism we are incorporated into the one body. It is the Sacrament by which we are born again by water and the Spirit. This week again we are blessed in the reception of a little one into God's kingdom through this blessed Sacrament. One God and Father of all, over all, through all, in all. The power and life of the church is from God Himself, the Father who loves us with an everlasting love so great that he sent His only begotten Son.

The unity described in these verses is not something we can do. It is given to us by God himself. The church is not one because we make it so. The church is one because it is the body of Christ--it can be nothing else. So often when people speak of the need to unite the church they are seeking to accomplish something which already exists, and they often think that the only way to do it is by compromising the truth or overlooking error. The Holy Christian Church is one in spite of our weakness and faults. It is one under one Head, our Lord Jesus Christ.

III. The Power

So then what is the source of power that helps us grow up? The Lord himself is the one who provides the gifts. Listen again to the words of St. Paul as the text continues: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (v.11-13) The Lord gives us his servants to preach, to proclaim, to encourage. This passage is considered one of the key passages which speaks of the office of the ministry, the ministry of the means of grace. God uses apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to proclaim God's Word. This is also a passage that is sometimes

misunderstood in that some might say that the work then is all the responsibility of the pastors of the church. Let the pastors do it. No, the pastors are to equip God's saints for the work of ministry as the text says here. The body of Christ is not built up just by the work of pastors and teachers (as important as that work may be) Indeed, it is built up by the work of all of us, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to maturity..." It is a process that continues in the life of the church. Each of us has our part in this process "until we all grow up." The great mission hymn says it quite well:

Let none hear you idly saying
There is nothing I can do
While the souls of men are dying
And the Master calls for you.
Take the task he gives you gladly
Let his work your pleasure be,
Answer quickly when he calls you
Here am I, send me, send me.

The Word of God's grace strengthens us and empowers us to be sent and to send. The Word of Christ enlightens our hearts and minds as we grow in Him.

IV. Just Grow Up!

The closing verses of the text sum up these thoughts quite well. They present quite a contrast in the lives of individuals: "So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." (v.14-16) How often are people just like children, like infants, like babies? They get carried away with the deceitfulness of people. They do not let the truth of God direct them. It is only the truth that will allow us to grow up. As our Lord says, "The truth will make you free." He prayed in the great intercessory prayer, "Sanctify them by the truth. Your word is truth." In the truth we all grow up, like the limbs and parts of the body unto the Head which is Christ himself. What a picture we have here of the life of the church. Each one of us has a part in it. Without us, the body is not complete, not whole. It is handicapped in its work.

Just Grow Up! That is the challenge before us this day. We cannot grow up by ourselves. We grow up in the grace and power of God. We grow up unto Christ who is our Head, who is the head of the Church. And we continue to grow each and every day of our lives. I would like to share with you an account I heard the other day about the last moments of the life of Pastor Kenneth Potratz, the pastor emeritus of Pilgrim Lutheran Church. He was lying in his hospital bed with his wife by his side when suddenly he sat up and spoke very clearly, "I love you. I'm going to see Jesus." And the Lord took him home. There is the fulfillment

of spiritual maturity in Christ our Savior.

Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's head
You are her one foundation.
In you she trusts, before you bows,
And waits for your salvation.
Built on this rock secure,
Your Church shall endure
Though all the world decay
And all things pass away.
Oh, hear, oh, hear us, Jesus.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.