

*Building Up and Growing Up*

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 6:31-34, Ephesians 4:11-16

Let's begin with a word of thanks to all of you. When Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, he told them something he did not say to all the churches we know he served: "I thank my God every time I remember you." I will always feel that way about you, and I feel the same way about some of the churches I have served - but not all. And I am grateful that the debts of grace do not have to be repaid, because they never can be.

In parting, I want to use these passages I have chosen to say some things to you... From Matthew...

*Matthew 6:31-33:* Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

I'm not a scholar, but I've had more Greek than most ministers], so I leave you with the Meriwether translation of Matthew 6:33: "Go after the rule of Christ's grace in all of your living, and all the other things will fall into their proper place."

Jesus chose a group of followers who have very little in common except that they were all from humble backgrounds, ...and they all "left all to follow." As I look around the room, I see many more than twelve who have those same things in common. But you have an advantage over the original bunch: you are many more than twelve, you know more, and you have more. You know more about what Christ wants for the world: the rule of divine grace to rule all things. And you have more in skill and resources to apply in Christ's direction - the rule of grace in all things in your life.

Northwood is one of many good churches with an abundance of humble people who put church at the center of your living where you decide how to live with the rest of your living. So I just want you to remember that what Cotton has been saying is true about your whole life more than about the church's checkbook: Following is "Life Management," about going after the rule of Christ in all your living together as his body, ...and each one giving your all so that Christ rules all in all.

My gentle word of warning to you in parting is simply this: Northwood is in a fragile place. There is nothing new about that. For the most part, Christ's church has been in a fragile place since a fearful season in an upper room a long time ago. Every church since has been in a fragile place that requires great trust as the center of its relationship to the head. And Northwood can look back and not see just a fragile history. You can see the way that the body has been strong in the times when everyone - which means every member - left all the other things to follow Christ

and strengthen the body. That time is NOW again - not because there is anything wrong at Northwood [there isn't], but because the demands of the times are critical = "out there" is in crisis, and we bring "out there" in here. A sanctuary is not a place to escape.

Northwood needs you - each of you - to go after the rule of Christ's grace in all of your living, and to put the other things in their proper place by making them less important in your living.

It has always been that way in every church, and I doubt seriously if a Savior is going to come in here and preach escape from the world. The first and only one never did, and your next pastor knows she is not your Savior.

Speaking of someone coming in here... Paul's letter to the Ephesians gives them advice about the role of their pastor:

*Ephesians 4:11-16:* The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

God called some as pastors to equip the saints for the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ.

Ada Muller, a wonderful Elder at my first Presbyterian call, said in a Personnel Meeting one time: "David is called to do the things we cannot do, and show us what we are supposed to do. If we don't do what we can do, he never gets to do the things we cannot do."

Rev. Traci Marie Smith is called to the work of pastoral ministry - to pastor as you cannot do and to lead -to EQUIP - you to do what you are called to do. The more you do the work you can do, and the more of you who do that work, the more she will be able to leave that work to others and do the work that only she can do: her equipping and your ministering will add up to full maturity in the stature of Christ.

She can do that. She is skilled and committed to her calling, and she is a very good match for what you need for your future. She is dedicated and she will do more than her part because she genuinely goes after the rule of Christ's grace in all her living. She does not have every skill, but you can assume one thing: She has been trained the way Presbyterians are good at preparing, and she has been through enough ministry that she knows more about most church things than you do.

You must do your part of the bargain. The building up is yours. You must remember that she is the equipper, teacher, leader, pastor. Young as she is, new as she will be, she will still know more about equipping and leading the body than you do. Your task as "the saints" is to learn and follow - and DO "the work of the ministry." So whenever she wants to lead you in a direction

that you may not want to go, your first reaction should never be a reflex to doubt her. She will lead you in many ways...

...a theological idea that challenges what you have heard before.

...a direction for service that is a different direction from what you have thought before.

...a priority to ministry to younger families that changes some old tradition of activities or organization or worship.

...a selection of songs from the new hymnal that may not contain your favorite old hymn

...or putting prayers and confessions in the bulletin in the language that a child can read and memorize. by repetition.

The Reverend Smith will not change things around here just to shake things up, or because she is “just different,” or because she is “young,” or because she does not know better - meaning, she does not yet know “how you have always done it.” She will change things around here so that Northwood will be *better* in the work of your ministry, better at “building up” for service to the community that needs you, better at telling the good news with a clearer message to the people who are not here yet, better at listening to God in more effective ways in critical times. The next ten years are your critical times.

It is no accident that Paul connects building up of the body of Christ with growing up to spiritual maturity. Your individual responsibility to the whole body of Christ is a mutual accountability to help each member of the body to live their better selves for Christ’s sake. Some time back, a member who has loved this church for a long time said that Northwood’s weak spot was that “we have been kind to each other until we have become *lackadaisical* and too content with however we are.”

Are we afraid to challenge each other to growing up for building up? We we ask questions of each other that build the Spirit in the body?: “How has Christ helped you grow up in your spiritual life in the last year?” “How are you more mature by Christ’s measure than you were three years ago?” “What is the tender spot where Christ is trying to grow you up right now?”

The better way Paul recommends is for us to recognize when we are ask for indulgence by others of behaviors and habits that are simply self-centered or immature. We may all be “children of the heavenly Father,” but Christ does not want us to stay that way. So whenever someone wants to be excused because “that’s just the way I am,” simply remind them that we are all called to measure ourselves by the way Christ is. We are all too old for the message of Mr. Rogers to little children: “I love you just the way you are.” Paul’s word to the Ephesians goes further: we are called to love each other enough to expect more from ourselves first, and to call each other “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

Northwood is like Ephesus and Philippi and Corinth and Colossi. When you read the letters to those churches you can see Northwood in its spiritual immaturity and in its growth through time toward being conformed to the image of God’s son. It takes each one, every one of each one, doing your part to grow up in Christ to build up the whole body. I know Traci will do her part, and I think there are plenty of you here who will grow into her equipping so that you give yourselves to the future that God is already putting in front of you.

And if you ever have cause to doubt, just look back to what Christ did with twelve who had little in common except that they were humble and had left lesser things to follow. Remember that you are more in number than they were. Remember that you know more about Christ's grace and the Spirit's power than they did. Remember that you have more to give than they ever did. And remember that Christ Jesus, working through you as his body, really can do more than you can ask or even imagine.