

**GROWING PEOPLE**  
Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

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(online worship only)

Every now and then, it's a good exercise to go back to basics, to a discussion of fundamentals, to remind ourselves of our core beliefs and values. It's recommended for individuals, couples and families - to pause for the purpose of remembering and re-stating, "This is who I am. This is the way we want to live. This is how we relate to one another in this family." Many corporations - both profit and non-profit - hold retreats to focus on their mission, vision, and values.

The gift of those times of reevaluation is that it keeps us from simply swaying in one direction or another according to what's popular. It's always been hard for human beings - and institutions - to stay grounded and centered, and live out of core convictions. It's especially difficult in our media-saturated culture.

Social media, as I'm sure you know, has its blessings and its curses. One reason I like to use Facebook is because a lot of ministers I admire use Facebook to share ideas, from program ideas in congregations to book and movie recommendations. It can be a helpful resource, but also - I can peruse what a couple of dozen other churches are doing on Facebook and come away with a couple of dozen ideas. Without thinking about **OUR** congregation's priorities and goals, I can run in ten different directions.

So, for the next three weeks, I am going to preach on our church's mission statement. It will be an opportunity for us to remind ourselves of our core purpose and

identity, and also to ask the question, “How can we live out our essential values at this particular time?” Our mission statement is, literally, set in stone - on the cornerstone of our building. But that doesn’t mean that our mission doesn’t adapt to changing times and changing needs. HOW we fulfill our mission MUST change. In fact, if we are not easily and quickly adaptable, we will die. That may sound dramatic, but here’s a statistic that will show you how many churches are dying, and how fast the decline happens.

This is a statistic from the United Church of Christ, but there is a similar pattern in many other denominations. In 1958, there were 8,248 congregations in the UCC. In 2018 (60 years later), there were 4,882. We lost almost 50% of our congregations in 60 years. There are many reasons why churches close, but unwillingness to change is a major factor.

When we look at our mission statement, we’re looking at what is a living, breathing value statement. Our mission statement isn’t long - it’s only seven words - but yes, I am going to preach three different sermons based on those seven words. Our mission statement reads, “Growing People to Serve God and Others.” For today, my focus is the first two words: “Growing People”. Part of our mission is to grow people. Which means that when **WE** choose to become a part of this church, we are affirming that we want to grow. It’s really a rather bold statement. We are acknowledging that we’re not finished products, that there is room for growth and change.

That idea, that the Christian life is a life of growth, is spelled out eloquently in the 4th chapter of the book of Ephesians. This letter - which was probably intended not so much for one particular church with a particular set of problems but for general

circulation - gives timeless advice to people who bear the name of Christ. I want to repeat a couple of the phrases; they bear repeating: "I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together."

Those phrases say to me that the author of this letter knows that being in community requires work. Whether we're a small community or large, a community is a living thing and it requires daily careful tending if it is going to be healthy and thrive.

The author goes on to say that God intentionally creates a community made of people of different gifts - some are apostles, some are prophets, some are evangelists, some are pastors and teachers. We see it in our own community now - we have gardeners and Thrift Shop volunteers, those who love to work with children and those who love to teach adults. We have budget experts and we have a worship decorating team. What kind of a church would we be if everyone had the same gift, if everyone wanted to serve in the exact same way? But that's not really the hard part. The hard part is the other ways in which we're different. Tensions arise in churches because some people only feel comfortable if the church has a lot of money in the bank, and other people think the church should give most of its money away. Tensions arise in churches because of different ways to interpret the Bible, different ways to worship, different preferences in music. And tensions arise because the differences we espouse outside the church come into our church life with us. It doesn't happen often here, but it happens sometimes that the political polarization our country is experiencing right now doesn't stop at the doors of our church; it walks right in.

One biblical scholar comments on this part of our passage: “Differences are not the same as divisions. In the church, differences can give us an opportunity to learn and practice how to speak the truth in love.”

The Avon Lake UCC is not diverse in many ways, but we are diverse politically. I firmly believe that it is one of our unique challenges to find ways to use our political diversity for good - to learn how to listen to those whose life stories and perspectives are different from ours, to engage with one another in an atmosphere of civility and respect. Allen Hilton, a UCC minister who has spoken here, calls our kind of church a “big tent church” and he, too, believes that big tent churches can help its members live out their faith. Let me be clear - accepting political diversity does not mean that anything goes under our tent. This church will not be a place where people can express views that demean others or use language that takes away anyone’s sense of dignity.

But what if our church could be a place where we listen to one another, even if we disagree politically? Where we feel safe to ask one another probing questions. Where we avoid labeling people or jumping to conclusions or assuming things about one another. Might we begin to find some common ground? I can’t think of any other place in our society where such conversations take place.

Is our nation ever going to come close to achieving its promise and potential if we continue to be so divided that we vilify people who think differently than we do? I am not suggesting that we compromise our values whatsoever. What I know is that the status quo isn’t working. We are so polarized, so angry with each other, that actual physical fights are breaking out over the wearing of masks. What have we come to as a nation? I refuse to believe that this is the best we can do, the best we can be. People

on the left continue to talk among themselves, listening to news sources they agree with. People on the right continue to talk among themselves, listening to news sources they agree with. Meanwhile, those who are most vulnerable fall between the cracks. The very people God told us to care for become more poor, less healthy, and what is called the American dream is further from reach for so many, including so many people of color.

But let me move on to the rest of our passage - Ephesians says that God's goal is for us to become mature adults - fully grown...don't get misled by other people - instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ...that way, the whole body builds itself up with love."

In Ephesians, **GROWTH** is all about **LOVE**. Growing people are more loving people. We are called to grow in every way into Christ. That means we are to keep growing in our understanding. We help one another do that through lifelong faith formation - Bible Study classes, CrossTraining classes, book studies. The goal of this adult Christian Education is not just to become more well-read; the goal is not to be able to win a debate with someone who thinks differently; no - the goal is to expand the way we act in love. The writer Bob Goff says that Bible verses are not meant to be thrown like grenades at each other. They are meant for us to use to point each other toward love and grace and invite us into something much bigger.

I would love to hear from you about how you are growing in this time, how you would like to see our church grow, and how our church can help you grow.

I want to close with two readings about growth - one from Martin Luther in the 16th century, and one a poem written during the pandemic.

First, here's Martin Luther: "This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed."

And, this poem from a person named Leslie Dwight:

"What if 2020 isn't cancelled?

What if 2020 is the year we've been waiting for?

A year so uncomfortable, so painful, so scary, so raw -  
that it finally forces us to grow.

A year that screams so loud, finally awakening us  
from our ignorant slumber.

A year we finally accept the need for change.

Declare change. Work for change. Become the change.

A year we finally band together, instead of  
pushing each other further apart.

2020 isn't cancelled, but rather  
the most important year of them all."

Let us pray. Holy God, you create us to grow and change, not for the sake of change, but for the sake of love. It is the work of a lifetime and beyond. To that work we recommit ourselves today, in Jesus' name. Amen.

