

August 1, 2021

Grow Together series

Stewardship of the Body

Ephesians 4:15-16 (Ephesians 4:14-16, Psalm 139:13-18)

[Intro:]

My friends, it is a great joy to be in worship with you all this morning bringing the Lord's word. Today we wrap up a series of messages which call us to "Grow Together," and we look forward to a series of messages calling us to "Grow Out." Last week Pastor Tom shared with us that "Unity Tells the Truth in Love." We saw that to maintain Christian unity we need to speak directly to one another with both a loving spirit and honest clarity, which is of course easier said than done. This morning we are going to take another look at the same Scripture text which uses the human body as an illustration for the Body of Christ, and talk a little more about the way that body grows. At the same time we will look at some other Scriptures which talk about the human body itself.

ESV:

"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."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. [Thanks be to God.]

Amen.

The call of God in this scripture is to grow up in every way into Christ. Grow Up. And then be joined and knit together – Grow Together. And then as each part is working properly something else is going to happen. The body is going to grow; it's going to built itself up. It's going to Grow Out.

When we abide in Christ, we grow. It just happens naturally. When we abide in Christ, when we are rooted down deep in the love of Jesus, we grow. When we are connected to the Lord who is our head, when we are faithful in speaking the truth in love, then growth happens, but it is not about us or our labor. When we speak God's truth in a spirit of love, the power of God takes over and brings the growth. When we speak the truth – when we get the message right – and when we have genuine love in our hearts for our neighbors – when we get the love right – there is a spiritual dynamic which is beyond our control in a good way. The body of Christ grows up, together, and out.

I want to tell a story of spiritual fruit, of growing together and out. I'm going to embarrass someone today, someone I've only gotten to know in the past couple years since I've been at Asbury, yet someone who indirectly impacted my life well over 20 years ago. And that someone is Pastor David Thomas. Many of you know David from the Seekers Community, or from Tweenagers (now Asbury Senior Adult Fellowship), or from him teaching your Community, or receiving his excellent pastoral care.

Well, what most of you probably DON'T know about David is that over 50 years ago he founded a Christian youth movement which is still going strong and which has shared the grace and love of Jesus Christ in the lives of somewhere on the order of 10,000 different young people over those 50+ years. Those are just my back of the envelope calculations because I'm sure nobody has kept a careful tally. That movement is called Dayspring Camp. Around 10,000 different young people have attended, usually around 600 campers per year, figuring the average camper goes 3 times in their 5 years of high school. That's actually a conservative estimate of campers; it might be closer to 20,000. How many of those have made a first-time commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord in that time? Certainly in the thousands. How many have been called to full-time Christian ministry while worshipping and praying at Dayspring? Certainly in the hundreds. I know many of them; I am one of them. Hundreds of Oklahoma Methodist young people have been called to vocational ministry at Dayspring, and many thousands have received solid Biblical teaching and experienced a taste of Spirit-filled Christian community. And Pastor Dave seriously started the whole thing.

Now, he didn't do it alone. He's probably really embarrassed right now because he's a humble man (though I did warn him I would be talking about him). David didn't do this thing alone. So many other faithful servants played a part, and the Holy Spirit took over. The actors change out every few years but the Holy Spirit remains the same. I went to Dayspring in 97 and 98, experienced assurance of my salvation in Christ and the first stirrings of my call to ministry, and then I worked it as an adult leader from 99 to 2005. Then I came back 9 years later in 2014, in a completely different location with mostly different people, and it was like I had never left. The Spirit and the worship and the mission and the focus were all still there.

Not too long ago I had lunch with David Thomas. The man has been many places in ministry, has served many churches. I asked him in particular about the beginning of Dayspring, and the story he told me... was nothing like the story I just told you. Although both stories are true. To hear Dave tell it, he was just serving on the evangelism committee for the Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church, and they asked him to start a camp for young people whose churches were involved in Lay Witness movement – which was another huge movement of Methodist people of God in Oklahoma. Churches were being renewed and the cabinet thought it would good to get as many young people together as possible. So they called up David Thomas and said “Hey, Dave, get something going, do something with this.” And so David the very young preacher got some college students together who he knew from his time in youth ministry, to watch over the youth, to set up and tear down, to lead groups, called everyone together at Canyon Camp in Hinton, OK, and the rest is history... 50 years and 10 or 20 thousand changed lives later. David will tell you the story like it's no big deal. But let me tell you, I've been involved in a lot of Conference committee meetings... and none of them had that kind of results. 😊 But when you speak the truth in love – when you speak the life-transforming grace of Jesus Christ, and take time to truly love people, to be with them and be there for him – when the Church speaks the truth in love, and ever part is in its place, growth happens. And sometimes that growth is beyond our wildest imagination.

On the flipside, not ALL growth is from God. And not all growth is evident in numbers. It is possible to have a very large, very full, yet spiritually empty and unfaithful church. That can happen if the church is

designed to please people rather than God. There is a well-known passage from 2 Timothy 4:3 which says this: “The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will run away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.” As a large and well-known church we do well to heed these warnings in Scripture and do a self-check now and then. Are we just trying to please people? Are we avoiding the hard topics? If the church is all about consumerism then people will collect the teachings that please them, and that can bring growth, but not the right kind of growth. So numerical success is not always a sign of faithfulness. There can be very popular speakers, authors, bloggers, and podcasts, beloved by thousands of people, who nonetheless amount to nothing more than people “accumulating for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.” We must be on guard and grounded in the truth of God found in Scripture so that is not us!

On the other hand you can have a very small in size, yet very faithful and fruitful church. A good and faithful congregation will not necessarily grow to be very large, but they will grow to make an impact on the Kingdom. When church members listen to the Holy Spirit and continually speak the truth in love, they can have an outsize impact. [Example: small church in Woodward most people have never heard of – New Horizons - led to the formation of the whole VIM movement which most Methodists in Oklahoma are familiar with, mission opportunities for thousands of people, and an enduring partnership with the Bolivian Methodist Church.] Whenever we speak the truth in love, whether as a large church or a small one, there will be spiritual fruit. The Kingdom of God will grow. People will come to know Jesus. People will come to faithfully follow Jesus.

I give those examples of churches and movements to help us see the possibilities for growing together and growing out, and to help us see the possibilities for faithfulness and unfaithfulness. But I don’t want you to be judgmental of other churches – or of your own church! Most churches will be somewhere in between totally unfaithful and totally faithful. Jesus taught us that God will let the tares will grow among the wheat (Matthew 13), and that judgment is delayed so that the wheat can grow. And Jesus also taught us to judge ourselves more than we judge others, and before we judge others (Matthew 7). If another church is growing we should assume they are doing something right; assume the best about them first. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard Christians complaining about another church’s success. “Oh, they’re taking all the young people. We’ll never be as cool and hip as them. They must be watering down the message.” The temptation is to be jealous and then to assume that there’s something wrong with a big growing church. Well, most likely, the growth is a result of doing something right. Most likely it’s the Body of Christ building itself up in love, because they’re speaking the truth in love. Another temptation is to try to copy what another church is doing, which can lead lots of churches both large and small down the wrong path. Better to faithfully be the best version of who WE are. When “each part is working properly,” we at Asbury, and Christians at every other local congregation, will grow the Kingdom of God in the specific way that God has planned and equipped for us to grow.

So we should be charitable toward those in other churches; and in the same way we should be charitable toward our own church. Right? [This isn’t just a pastor talking, ok, this is for your own spiritual health too.] If you see or feel something wrong in your own church, don’t just assume that it’s everyone else’s fault. Biblical wisdom calls you to look at yourself first. How are YOU functioning? Are you taking your place in the Body that God has called you to? Are YOU growing spiritually? Are you giving yourself

spiritual nourishment so that you grow into maturity? Are you connected to the vine of Christ through regular worship and Christian community? I mean, you're here now, or tuned in, so that's a good sign, right? But the Lord calls us to ABIDE – to spend good quality time with Him, and that means with His people. In both regular weekly worship AND in Christian community where we share our burdens and joys with one another and put up with one another. If you abide in Christ, together with the Church, then there will be growth in you and around you. If you aren't abiding in Christ, together with the church, then the problems you see in your own church or the Christians around you might just be a matter of your own perspective – a perspective which will change when you begin abiding deeply in Christ, both speaking and receiving the truth in love.

I want to read one of our other Scriptures from the Sermon Journal this past week. The human body is used in Scripture as a metaphor or illustration for the Church. But the human body is also very important in its own right. This is Psalm 139 vs 13-18. I'm taking it a couple verses farther in than the journal did:

ESV:

*“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret,
Intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, ever one of them,
The days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you.”*

I share that Scripture to make a pivot right here for this reason: We live in a cultural moment in which beliefs about the physical body are actually dividing the spiritual body! Changing and conflicting beliefs about the human body are causing great divisions in both the Church and in the broader culture around us.

[The Truth About Sex: This particular topic looms large in our culture today. Traditional Christian teaching is being challenged like never before. We will carefully lay out the foundations for what Christians believe about sexual relationships, beginning with God’s creating our bodies good. This series will equip believers to speak the truth in love in this very important area of human life.]

If I could sum up in one sentence the message of Psalm 139 it's this:

God made you carefully, intricately, on purpose.

God made you, not by accident, not haphazardly, but with tender love and care. And God is a master-worker.

Just as we are called to care for the Church which Christ has made and built it up in love, we are called to care for our own body and give honor to its maker. We are stewards of this body we have been given.

And one consequence of this truth that God made us carefully, intricately, and on purpose, is that when our Maker speaks to us about the nature and purpose of our bodies, we need to listen. When the Maker speaks, we need to listen. And the Maker does speak in Scripture. Scripture is the Big Story which keeps us growing in the right direction: growing up, together and out.

Many Christians know more or less what they are *supposed* to believe about controversial topics such as sex and marriage, yet they don't necessarily know *why* they should believe these things, and that often has to do with not being grounded enough in the overall narrative of Scripture and the story of God's people. In about a week and a half we will begin Disciple Bible Study, led by Rev. Vaughn Story. Disciple is a 33-week tour through the whole story of Scripture. It will help you form an anchor in the big story of God, which will keep you from being "blown about by every wind of doctrine," as Paul warned us about in Ephesians 4:14. Learning this story will allow you to walk confidently in God's truth. You can sign up at asburytulsa.org/events now through August 5th.

["Truthing in Love" – John Stott 1979 solid gold:]

The last big thing we are going to look at today is OBSTACLES to this natural growth of the Body of Christ. As I was reading this past week I found this great quote from John Stott. John Stott was an English bishop who served the church in South India. He was a great missionary and writer and a superb communicator. I'm going to read you something that he wrote because I simply can't say it better myself. Stott wrote this in the year 1979, but it could very well have been written yesterday. If you were with us last week this may sound pretty similar to what Pastor Tom shared toward the end of his message, but I want us to hear especially what comes at the very end, because it's going to add a new element. Let's hear Bishop John Stott lay out the truth in love for us:

"Thank God there are those in the contemporary church who are determined at all costs to defend and uphold God's revealed truth. But sometimes they are conspicuously lacking in love. When they think they smell heresy, their nose begins to twitch, their muscles ripple, and the light of battle enters their eye. They seem to enjoy nothing more than a fight. Others make the opposite mistake. They are determined at all costs to maintain and exhibit brotherly love, but in order to do so are prepared even to sacrifice the central truths of revelation. Both these tendencies are unbalance and unbiblical. Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth. The apostle calls us to hold the two together, which should not be difficult for Spirit-filled believers, since the Holy Spirit is himself 'the Spirit of truth,' and his firstfruit is 'love.' There is no other route than this to a fully mature Christian unity."

So powerful. So powerful! My friends, if you belong to Christ, then the Holy Spirit is in you! And Scripture tells us that the Spirit in you is "the Spirit of truth," and that "the fruit of the Spirit is love!" So you can do it!

As Christians living in the world we have to hold together truth and love. We can't just pick the one that's easiest for us, and be a truth person or a love person. It's possible to look at this struggle, to contemplate and stew on it, and become discouraged. But friends I encourage you, don't be discouraged. We might seem like we're getting it wrong 80% of the time. It might seem like we are losing people left and right – we being the Big C Church. We might look around and see people hurt by the church, casualties of lack of Love. And we see other people watering down the Truth, giving in, rejecting God's Word, giving up on the only thing that can help us, in a misguided attempt to love. We might get it wrong a lot of the time.

But the great thing about the power of God is... he can do a lot with a little. And He can do a lot with us! Throughout Scripture, again and again, God uses imperfect, messed up people, who get it wrong a lot of the time. If we can just get it right even 20% of the time... even one percent of the time... he can use us to do great things and to bring many people to know Him. When we DO get to that sweet spot of speaking the truth in love, of "truthing in love," watch out. Watch out. Because the harvest is going to great. The harvest is going to be GREAT... why? Because people are hungry!

Final challenges:

~ Where are you growing right now? Is your small group, Community, family, or personal influence bearing fruit in the Kingdom of God? Where are you being called to speak and receive the truth in love?

~ Are you taking your place in the Body so that each part can work properly together?

Because when we do speak the truth in love, and when each part is working properly, growth happens.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.