

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
January 1, 2023

## **Growing Up in Christ**

Ephesians 4:1-16

On the Christian calendar, this Friday is Epiphany. The word *epiphany* means “to show” or “to make known” or “to reveal.” On Epiphany, the church remembers that the wise men, or magi, came to visit the Christ child, bringing gifts with them to express their praise and adoration. By doing so, the wise men reveal Jesus to the world as Lord and King. They help us remember that Jesus came for all people, of all nations, of all races and ethnicities. The wise men teach us that in Christ, God reaches out to all humankind with reconciling love.

On Epiphany, we remember that the coming of Christ is just the beginning. Adoring the baby Jesus is wonderful, but he won’t stay a baby forever. Before you know it, he’ll be making the transition from diapers to pull-ups. Before you can say, “Glory to God in the highest,” he’ll go from rolling to crawling to walking. In fact, some commentators believe that it may have been up to two years before the wise men actually arrived to see Jesus. A lot happens in a child’s development during those first two years.

My purpose here isn’t to speculate on the magi’s itinerary, but simply to emphasize that Christmas is just the beginning of the Word made flesh. The story of Jesus is a story that moves. It moves beyond the cradle and takes us toward the cross. And at the cross, we see most fully that what God began there in Bethlehem wasn’t just a local project. It was a plan to redeem the whole world. So the wise men arrive to remind us that the gospel isn’t our private possession. It’s something to be shared, something to be spread.

God has a plan for spreading the gospel. It’s called the church. The church means not only a local congregation, like us, but also the church as the community of believers throughout the world. Though fractured and divided by all sorts of issues and circumstances, the church universal is still precious to God and anointed by God. God has created the church and placed it in the world to be a living sign of his determination to reconcile all things to himself.

This is why the health, unity, and effectiveness of each congregation are so important. Just because the worldwide church has a larger purpose in God’s plan of redemption doesn’t mean that the strength of local churches isn’t a goal in and of itself. On the contrary, only as each local congregation lives as a vital, thriving witness to Christ can the worldwide community of the faithful fulfill its mission.

And within each local church, the members of that congregation need to be participating actively by using the gifts that God has entrusted to them. In this morning’s Scripture passage from Ephesians, the writer says that “to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (v. 7). Then the writer goes on to spell out some of the specific ministries that Christ has distributed among the individuals in the church. Each ministry is designed to benefit the entire community of believers, the body of Christ. All Christians are therefore part of the building process. Each of us has a part to play in the construction of the community called the church.

According to our Scripture passage, there's something that goes along with constructing the church, and that's maturity. As each of us practices his or her ministries in the congregation, we mature, individually and collectively. We grow up in the Spirit. We advance toward the ultimate goal of attaining "the measure of the full stature of Christ" (v. 13, NRSV).

Leonard Ravenhill tells about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village. They walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, "Were any great men born in this village?" The old man replied, "Nope, only babies."<sup>1</sup> So it is in the church. None of us comes to faith in Christ and reaches full spiritual maturity instantaneously. It takes time to grow in the Lord. It takes being fed with the Word. It takes being nurtured in worship. It takes being cared for in fellowship. It takes being challenged in service to others.

It takes a lot of patience and perseverance too. When Pablo Casals reached 95, a young reporter threw him a question: "Mr. Casals, you are 95 and the greatest cellist that ever lived. Why do you still practice six hours a day?" And Mr. Casals answered, "Because I think I'm making progress."<sup>2</sup> Now that may be a humble understatement coming from a skilled musician like Pablo Casals, but for us who are still inching toward the ultimate goal of attaining "the measure of the full stature of Christ," there's a lot of truth in that answer. No matter how long you've been walking with the Lord, there's still a lot of territory to cover. There's still knowledge for you to acquire, experience for you to gain, and progress for you to make.

And progress comes as you live out your faith within the community of the faithful. If we're going to make progress in Christlikeness, we need each other. We need the shaping that comes from living in covenant with one another. We need you to be doing your part, exercising your unique ministries, in the life of our congregation. You see, in one respect, maturity has to do with individuals growing further into the image of Jesus. But in another respect, maturity involves the community as a whole, coming together to pursue its God-given mission.

God's goal for our church isn't that we become just a loose collection of individuals who gather once a week for praise and thanks. His goal for our church is that we mature, that we continue to grow up in the way and the will of Christ. "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (v. 16). Again, maturity is a function of each person playing his or her role in the life of the congregation.

American artist James Whistler, who was never known to be bashful about his talent, was once advised that a shipment of blank canvases he had ordered had been lost in the mail. When asked if the canvases were of any great value, Whistler remarked, "Not yet, not yet."<sup>3</sup> Though James Whistler isn't necessarily a model of humility, there's still truth in what he was saying, truth about potential, truth about what's possible. So as we gather on the first Sunday of this new year, my hope and prayer is that during 2023, as each of us does his or her part in our congregation, our church will mature. And by that, I mean that we will grow in every way, numerically and spiritually. I mean that we will grow in the likeness of Christ. I mean that we will grow more into our potential.

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<sup>1</sup> Ravenhill tells this story in *The Last Days Newsletter*.

<sup>2</sup> Maxwell Maltz, *Bits & Pieces*, June 24, 1993, 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Today in the Word*, December 3, 1992.