



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sue Hamilton - May 20, 2018 Sermon

Spirit Gifts: Growing and Building Christ's Church

Focus: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." —1 Corinthians 3:6

A couple of weeks ago, with the help of her mom, our granddaughter, Evie, called us on a Sunday evening. "Nana, Nana," she excitedly repeated, "My seeds grew!" She was thrilled at this discovery and wanted to tell me about the amazing thing that had happened. The week before, which happened to be Earth Day, Evie and her family had come to our house for dinner. Afterwards we helped her plant Zinnia seeds in small containers, the ones that you can put right into the ground. Before she left that evening, I reminded her to put the pots in a sunny place and water the soil each day.

Observing growth is an amazing thing, whether that be a tiny green shoot pushing its way through the dirt, a fuzzy little duckling waddling beside its mother in the park, a bud beginning to flower on a tree or bush, or a child tying their shoe by themselves for the first time. Such scenes are rich in invitation, beckoning us to pause and marvel at what is unfolding before us.

Not all growth can be caught through a camera's lens. More often it is gradual and largely invisible to the human eye. It may take a big event or milestone for the realization of just how much has occurred to set in. Ask the parent of any graduating senior. Sometimes growth arises out of struggle or following a season of difficulty or loss. Identified later, you don't know exactly when it happened, it just did, over time and usually aided by the support and understanding of a specific individual or individuals. There is the satisfaction of learning and perfecting a skill and the desire to try something new. There are the gifts of deeper understanding, awareness and tolerance which can come from working through conflict or division. There is no end to the possibility of growth.

It is this latter challenge that seems to be at issue for the church in Corinth. Jealousy and quarrelling have arisen among the members where some have developed an affinity for following Paul and others, Apollos. It is not wrong to appreciate an individual who has taught or shaped one's life, and to want to learn and spend more time with that person, but this narrowed alliance was shading, distracting, from what was most important.

This week I came across a wonderful painting by a Scottish artist, William York MacGregor, whose great work, considered to be his masterpiece, interestingly offers a fresh way to consider the farming metaphor Paul uses as he shepherds the Corinthians. With our church's tie to Scotland through travel and the knowledge of art within this congregation I am hoping some of you know of the painting. If not, I hope my words will help paint a pic-

ture. Titled, *The Vegetable Stall*, it depicts a cart filled with cabbages, rhubarb, leeks, potatoes, onions, carrots and other vegetables, all a reminder that those seeds planted by Paul (or whomever) are seeds for a variety of produce.

What is fascinating is that originally there was a figure on the right side of the painting featuring a young market girl counting her sales. This use of a figure reflected the influence of earlier French and Flemish paintings. MacGregor decides to paint over the human figure and to concentrate on the still life instead. The effect is powerful. As Presbyterian pastor, Lynn Miller, comments; "MacGregor chose to paint out that figure, just as Paul painted over the role played by himself and Apollos. It isn't that the roles of the people aren't important; it's just that God's work is more important. One plants. One waters. But it is God who gives the increase."¹

Each of us has roles, opportunities to use the gifts we have been given to bring joy and blessing to those we love and to further God's work of healing in the world. This morning we have recognized, through the ordination and installation of elders and deacons, two of these roles in the life of the church. To those just ordained and installed, the work to which you are about to embark is important as evidenced by the questions you were asked and the promises made. Through class discussion, you have conveyed your willingness and readiness to embrace this challenge, recognizing that learning is continual for all of us.

Thinking back to last Sunday, I was not surprised to hear your collective desire to serve God here at Westminster, yet I appreciated how comments offered, regarding what you wish to take with you as you begin this journey, reflected the uniqueness of your experience. One of you mentioned how your reading from the Book of Confessions helped you recognize more fully your love for this church and the opportunity to be a part of something much bigger than yourself. Another spoke of the importance of the scriptures and that they are not to be taken lightly. Noting our early reading on the nature of call, one of you shared how this article made a personal impact, specifically marveling how Jesus chose to proclaim himself through the often clumsy and clueless thing called the church. The desire to make a difference in our neighborhood and the city of Dayton was expressed by several and it was suggested that the Brief Statement of Faith offers a good road map on how to live and to share faith with others. There was the delightful comment; "No more Sunday Golf outings for me!" which brought a laugh then and smiles now, yet with humor speaks to the importance of commitment and dedication.

You took on the challenge of reading three questions each day from the larger catechism and one of you mentioned being particularly drawn to the section on baptism. A death had occurred in the family, yet now, because of your reading, there was fresh realization that through the waters of baptism this loved one who had been cared for by God throughout life was now risen with Christ in glory. This was comforting. When words read connect with personal experience learning is integrated in a meaningful and lasting way.

Martin Luther frequently told those around him to remember their baptism and be glad. It is said he would frequently touch his head and say aloud, "I am baptized." Why does this matter? It helped him remember who he was and to whom he belonged.

The church in Corinth needed to be reminded of this. Christ was their sure foundation, the one whom they worshiped and served. The jealousy and quarreling that was hurting their fellowship was not a good use of their energy. Both Paul and Apollos had an important role in the sharing of the gospel, but as Paul makes clear, it is God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose; together they are God's servants, God's field, God's building.

So too it is with us. Serving God is what unites us and give us our common purpose, yet we do not go about it on our own accord. The gift of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, that empowered the early disciples to proclaim the life and message of Jesus still moves among us today. It is this Spirit that generously bestows gifts for ministry and enables young and old to dream new dreams. The spirit guides us in our teaching, and in in how we care for those who hurt and suffer. The spirit empowers us to be a voice of justice in the world, acting for the well-being of all, and it is the spirit that quietly brings the unvoiced prayers, the groans of our hearts too deep for words, before God. The Spirit reminds us of all that Christ said and leads us in the way of truth.

Many languages were spoken on the day of Pentecost reminding us that there are no peoples on this earth for whom God's love does not extend, whose cries are not heard. The work before us is on-going, as together we seek ways to live out gospel love, to give life. Paul offers us a good formula for us to remember as we go about our ministry. "One plants. One waters. But it is God who gives the increase." To close I would like to share words of a prayer composed by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw for a celebration of departed priests. Titled, *Prophets of a Future Not Our Own*, they are both insightful and wise.

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

It helps, now and then to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Miller, Lynn. I Corinthians 3.1-9: What's Not in the Picture; Art and Faith Matters, <http://artandfaithmatters.blogspot.com/2017/02/growth-art-lectionary.html>

ⁱⁱ Bishop Untener, Ken. Prophets of a Future Not Our Own, <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own.cfm>