

St. Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 4:4-16: "Jesus Gives Growth to the Body."

April 24/25, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord Jesus, we thank You that You have given us not only one Gospel but four, which present the sacred story of Your life and work on earth in order to make us sure of our salvation. Help us to become earnest and diligent in assisting the preaching of Your Holy Gospel, and forgive us all our weaknesses and shortcomings. Strengthen our faith in You, and keep us steadfast in such faith to the end of our lives. Amen. (*Meditations on the Gospels*, CPH 2009, p. 238)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fourth chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "*When He ascended on high He led a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men.*" (In saying, "*He ascended,*" what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) / And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 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. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who nourishes and cherishes all believers as members of His own holy body (Eph. 5:29-30), dear fellow redeemed:

I expect some of you have space on a wall or a special board you have used to measure the growth of your children. My parents made marks on the back of a closet door, which worked fine until we grew past the top of the door! It's fun to look back and see when the growth was the greatest and to imagine what it must have been like to keep us all properly clothed and fed.

If we look back in history and measure the growth of the Church, how would that look? Would we see consistent growth, or would the curve look something like a roller coaster ride? Where would we see it at its height? We could always go by numbers, but numbers don't tell the whole story. Numerically there are probably more Christians now than ever worldwide, but that does

not mean the Church is healthier than ever. In America, the majority of people claim to be Christian, but America doesn't exactly look like a Christian country.

The health of the Church is not determined by adding up the numbers, as though it were only the whole that mattered. The health of the Church is determined by the fitness of its individual members. We use the word "member" to describe our association to any number of organizations, including this congregation. We say that we are members here. But the word was originally used to describe the parts of the body—its members. This is a fitting way to think about the Christian Church.

St. Paul uses this language often to talk about how the Church functions here on earth. He says that each baptized Christian is a part of the whole. Individual Christians may come from different backgrounds, they may speak different languages, they may look nothing like one another, but they are all members of the same body in Christ.

In his epistle to the Christians in Ephesus, St. Paul wrote that Jesus is the Head of the body, who "*fills all in all*" (1:23). Whether a person comes from Jewish or Gentile background, in the body of Christ all are equally partakers and beneficiaries of the Gospel (3:6). All have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, they have life because of His resurrection, and they have peace with God through Him (2:13-17).

In today's text from Ephesians chapter 4, we have a description of how the body of Christ grows and matures. This chapter speaks about the body as a whole, which means it is at the same time talking about each part of the body, each member. The body doesn't grow unless each member grows. The body doesn't function well unless its members work together.

So for equipping the saints, for carrying out the public work of the church, for building up the body, Jesus gave "*the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.*" He sent servants to distribute His gifts, the gifts He won by living a perfect life under the Law, by dying for sinners on the cross, and by rising from the dead in victory. And He still distributes these gifts today.

He distributes these gifts by the hands and mouths of specific individuals whom He has chosen for the task. These individuals are not better members of the body of Christ; they simply serve a unique function in the body. They are in need of the same gifts they offer to the other members of the body. This is the duty of your pastor, of me. My responsibility is not to share any special gifts or insights of my own, but to tell you what Jesus has done for you, to declare His forgiveness, His grace, His salvation.

Through this Gospel message, **Jesus Gives Growth to the Body**. He builds it up. He strengthens each of its members. When you hear His Word, He comes to each of you, each member of the body, assuring you of His love for you and of His promise to keep you with Him. When you open your mouth to receive His sacred Meal, He fills you with all that He is and has done for you by giving you His own body and blood. Through these means of His Word and Sacraments, He draws you closer to Him and makes you a productive member of His body. He keeps you spiritually healthy, and therefore keeps the body functioning well.

Without His continued work among us, the body would be in bad shape. In fact, there would be no body at all. He joins us together in Him. If He is absent, we cannot be united in any healthy way. Even with His presence, we members of His body do not perfectly carry out our functions. Sometimes we are a blessing to the body, to our fellow believers, by the loving things we say and do. But sometimes we hold the body back, we hinder it.

This can happen when we behave selfishly, when we are proud, when we let our insecurities and worries get the best of us. We can act like we are the most important members of Christ's Church or at least of the congregation, and we expect to have things go our way. This is not how God has called us to be. In another of his letters, St. Paul says this: *"God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together"* (1Co. 12:24-26).

Today we remember the life of St. Mark, who was one of the four evangelists. Mark is an excellent example of someone who, like us, could be both a hindrance and a blessing to the Church. The first time he is mentioned by name is in the book of Acts. After Peter was arrested, the Christians in Jerusalem were praying together at the home of Mark's mother (Act. 12:12). So it is clear that Mark and his family were early adherents to Christianity. Then we hear that Mark set off with Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey (v. 25).

But something happened on that trip. For reasons unknown to us, Mark decided to abandon the work with Barnabas and Paul when they reached Pamphylia (Act. 15:38). Paul was so upset with Mark that when the time came for a second missionary journey, he refused to bring Mark along. The disagreement was so sharp that Barnabas took Mark and went one way while Paul went another way with Silas (vv. 39-40).

There was division in the body. This happens, and far more often than we want. We look around and see the visible Church fragmented in so many different pieces: Lutherans, other Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, and so on. The members of the visible Church are so often *"tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes"* as Paul writes. The devil is constantly trying to coax away God's people from His saving Word.

And even in our own congregation, bitterness and anger can develop between brothers and sisters in Christ. This is why we need our Lord to bring us together and keep us together. Through the Word and Sacraments, the Holy Spirit works to break down the things that divide us and to produce humility and love in our hearts toward those around us. Paul writes that in this way, *"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."*

Because of Christ's presence with us and the Holy Spirit's work among us, we members of Jesus' body seek to serve one another in love. A body could not function if one foot were at odds with the other, or if each eye or ear wanted to do its own thing. The Lord brings us grace upon grace, so that we realize our life is in Him and Him alone. My life is not about me. It is about Him, the Head of His body, into which He has graciously brought me through Baptism.

And Jesus is able to bring healing to the body when there are divisions. He does this more often than we realize. Whenever He mends what is broken between two Christians, He is strengthening the body. This happened also in the case of Paul and Mark. The Lord moved Paul to forgive Mark for his failings. Paul even wrote to Timothy toward the end of his life: *“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry”* (2Ti. 4:11; see also Col. 4:10, Phi. 23-24).

Mark also provided excellent assistance to the apostle Peter, who thought so much of Mark that he referred to him as *“my son”* (1Pe. 5:13). In fact, the ancient church fathers widely regarded the Gospel of Mark as Peter’s Gospel, believing that Mark recorded the accounts shared with him by Peter.

So while Mark may not have always shined as a member of the Church, the Lord used him for important work. And the words that Mark recorded by inspiration of the Holy Spirit are still heard around the world today. You likewise have important work to do as a member of the Church. Your past weaknesses and failings have not disqualified you. All those sins are forgiven.

Jesus calls you to take up the tasks He gives you today, to love one another as He has loved you (Joh. 13:34), and to *“[speak] the truth in love.”* He promises to strengthen you for this work and to help you grow and mature in the faith, so that the whole body is built up, *“until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God... to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”*

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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