

TOGETHER WE GROW STRONGER

I heard the story of a guy who went to a Raptors game. The tickets he got were terrible, upper level way in the back, so he could hardly see a thing. He noticed that there was an empty seat courtside right in the center so he made his way down to the empty seat. When he arrived there, he asked the man sitting next to it, "Is this seat taken?" The man replied, "This was my wife's seat. She passed away. She was a big Raptors fan." The other man replied, "I'm so sorry to hear of your loss. May I ask why you didn't give the ticket to a friend or a relative?" The man replied, "I would have, but they are all at her funeral right now." Now that is a guy with really messed up priorities.

How about your priorities? What is important to you? Today we are continuing in our series Together. I want to speak today about maturity and growth.

Let me ask you a question this morning. What is the largest single organism in the world? Maybe some of you are thinking about a Blue whale. Others may be thinking about the giant Redwood trees in British Columbia. For those of you scientists out there, or even those who just like to read science news, you'll know there is some disagreement about how exactly to measure and decide on the largest. However, many consider this to be the largest organism on earth. Located on the southwest bank of Fish Lake in Utah, this is Pando - the biggest grouping of Aspen trees ever identified. Although it covers over 100 acres, there is a single root system uniting this entire forest. Every tree is genetically identical, a clone of the trees around it. The entire grove grew from a single seed.

As you look at it, you can see what appear to be individual trees. But below the surface they are all linked by their roots. The roots grow unseen, under the surface of the earth, but they keep the whole grove alive, together as one.

Ephesians 4:11-16 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 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.

What does it mean to prepare God's people for works of service? The word used for prepare in Greek is the word KATARTIZO (KATA - according to and ARTIOS - complete or perfect) It means to mend or make perfect. It is the same word used in this story from Matt chapter 4;

Matt 4:21 - Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets

This was something that fishermen had to do on a daily basis. After using the nets they would become torn. A torn net does not catch fish, so they would have to take the time to restore their nets in order for them to be functional. God has gifted individuals in the church with abilities which, when used correctly, help people grow. The end result is clear, that everyone in the church understand and reach their full potential. That everyone, like the threads of a net, would do their part so that many fish could be caught.

1. Our Growth is SPECIALIZED – into Him who is the Head

Ephesians 4:15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Notice that these verses start by saying that God gave SOME to be different things so that ALL would be built up and mature. There is one head, but connected to that there are many parts of the body, each having a specialized function. This is true within our physical bodies as well. We have within us many different organs that each has a very specialized function. The lungs are different than the heart which is different than the stomach which is different than the liver. Each part of our body is specialized to perform a different function.

Within the body of Christ, God has given each one of us specific gifts and abilities to use as we serve. Each one of us has a specialized part to play. To some within the body of Christ, God has given leadership gifts. Some are called to be pastors. Some are teachers. Others are evangelists, prophets and apostles. This is called the five fold ministry. Often in the church we only talk about pastors only, but for the church to operate correctly all 5 of these leadership gifts must be at work. They are like the 5 fingers on your hand. This is how I was taught this years ago;

The prophet guides. Like the index or forefinger it points.

The evangelist gathers. Like the middle finger it is the furthest reaching.

The pastor guards. Like the ring finger it shows relationship.

The teacher grounds. Like the pinky finger it gives balance and is used to remove dirt from the eyes.

The apostle governs. Like the thumb it touches all the others and is used to grip and hold.

As each leader performs their specialized function, the body grows. This means that there is no one person who has to do everything. That is a wonderful thought for me. There are things that I am good at, and things that I am bad at. I do not have to be all things to all people.

One of the great things about this church is that we have so many people serving in leadership. I do not have to lead the senior's ministry and youth ministry and small groups etc. A few weeks ago I was up at Camp Rokawah. We have a great children's ministry and youth ministry and it was great to see Pastor Mark and Pastor Bev in their element. I lead a few chapels but mostly I just help with the daily elective. I take the kids fishing out in the boat.

At camp, all the leaders have a camp name. Mine is Rapala – it is a kind of fishing lure. So the kids at camp do not call me Pastor Steve, they call me Rapala. Through the week there were a number of kids I took out fishing. One girl had a great time. She learned how to cast the line and put the worm on the hook and take the fish off the hook. The last day I said hi to her as she went in for breakfast. She thanked me for teaching her how to fish and then she said “do you go to my church?” I asked her what church she attended (since we have lots of kids from all over) and she said “Bramalea Baptist Church.” I told her “yes, I do go to your church.” She said “Great, maybe I will see you around sometime!” Bless her heart she goes to children's church every week where she is taught and loved and does not even need to know who the Lead Pastor is.

The goal of leadership is to prepare the church for service. It is to remind everyone that they need to embrace the calling God has for them. Maturity means that you learn to feed yourself. Babies need to be fed. Mature people learn how to feed themselves.

There is a small coastal town in California called Monterey. It was a pelican's paradise. As the fishermen came in they cleaned their fish and flung the innards to the pelicans. The birds grew fat, lazy, and contented. One day however a decision was made to start collecting the innards to be sold as fertilizer. They were no longer to be used as snacks for the pelicans. When the change came the pelicans made no effort to fish for themselves. They waited around and grew gaunt and thin. Many starved to death. They had forgotten how to fish for themselves.

The problem in Monterey was solved by importing new pelicans from the south, birds accustomed to foraging for themselves. They were placed among their starving cousins, and the newcomers immediately started catching fish. Before long, the hungry pelicans were reminded of how it was done and they started followed suit, and the famine was ended.

Sometimes we can be like those lazy birds. We grow fat and lazy as believers hoping that someone else is going to do everything for us. Someone else will greet in the morning. Someone else will take care of the children's ministry. Someone else will lead a small group. Someone else surely is a busy person! In community we are reminded that it is not someone else's job to do everything, you have to feed yourself. You are responsible to use what you have been given.

2. Our Growth is SUPPORTED – joined and held together

Ephesians 4: 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament ...

It says here in verse 16 that as we grow, we are supported. As we grow we are joined and held together by every supporting ligament. In order for growth to occur, there has to be connection. The individual pieces all have to be working towards the same purpose or moving in the same direction.

Imagine joining an orchestra. You are a gifted musician and have a well tuned instrument. However, if there is no conductor, there is going to be problems. If everyone has chosen a different piece of music to perform, the result is not going to be harmony but chaos. It will sound terrible. Verse 14 gives us a picture of what immaturity looks like.

Ephesians 4:14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Immaturity means a lack of grounding. It is like a ship tossed about by the waves or like a balloon blown in every direction by the wind. It has no anchor, no connection, no stability. It is like a wildebeest that gets separated from the herd. It is an easy target and does not last long.

Years ago a psychologist did an interesting experiment with teenagers designed to show how people respond to peer pressure. They brought groups of ten teens into a room. Each group of ten was instructed to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on a series of different charts. What one person in the group did not know was that nine of the others in the room had been instructed ahead of time to vote for the second-longest line.

Regardless of the instructions they heard, once they were all together in the group, the nine were not to vote for the longest line, but rather vote for the next to the longest line. They found that when the nine teens voted together, the 10th would, more than 75% of the time, look around and slip their hand up with the group. The psychologist concluded from the study that most people would rather fit in than be right.

As Christians we are not called to fit in but to stand out. We cannot simply follow every fad and whim of our culture. We need to stand for truth. We need to be grounded on the truth of God's word. William Tyndale was born in 1492. When he was growing up he was saddened to see the state of the church in England. Most people knew almost nothing of the bible. In a survey they found that even amongst the clergy there were very few that could name the 12 Disciples of Jesus. He understood that what was needed was the bible in English, that people could read for themselves. He published the New Testament into English in 1526. It had to be printed in Europe and then smuggled into England. More than 100,000 copies were smuggled in. William Tyndale was eventually caught and rewarded with excommunication, exile, and in 1535 death through strangulation and his body burned at the stake. In his final words he prayed, "...that God would open the eyes of the King of England."

Just a few years later God answered Tyndale's prayer. King Henry 8th had a quarrel with the Catholic Church because it would not grant him a divorce, so he established the Church of England and had Miles Coverdale edit a new version of the English bible. This led to other versions including the Geneva Bible in 1560. In 1611 King James ordered that an authorized version of the bible be made to replace all the different bible versions that were floating around. The result was the King James Bible which is 81% word for word taken from Tyndale's bible.

Tyndale gave his life so that we could all have access to the bible in a language we understand. So that we would not have to just listen to the opinions of other people, but so that we could be grounded on the truth of God's word. Together, we are encouraged and supported as we seek to grow in Christ. It is up to us to take what we have been given and to learn it and grow in it.

3. Our Growth is SPECIFIC – as each part does its work

Ephesians 4:16 ... grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

As we grow in Christ, our growth is specific. That means it is different from the person sitting beside you. Not only are we all different, the ways in which we grow are also all different. They are specific to each one of us. We all have different temperaments and learning styles. That means it is important to find out how you personally grow best.

Whatever your learning style, the end result should be that you not simply learn but you use what you have learned. The goal is service. Using the gifts and abilities that God has given you. If you want to grow in your faith you need to learn how to serve.

The early 20th century evangelist and teacher Oswald Chambers wrote in his famous devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest*, "As soon as we abandon ourselves to God and do the task He has placed closest to us, He begins to fill our lives with surprises."

We have called this series we are going through right now Together because we believe as a church that the best way to serve is in the context of community.

Remember the good old definition of the word TEAM. T-OGETHER E-VERYONE A-CHIEVES M-ORE!

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: 10 If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! 11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? 12 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

In a horse-pulling contest at a county fair the first-place horse moved a sled weighing 4,500 pounds. The runner-up pulled 4,000 pounds. The owners of the two horses wondered how much the animals could pull if they worked together. So they hitched them up and loaded the sled. To everyone's surprise, the horses were able to pull 12,000 pounds that's 3,500 pounds more than if they had gone solo! Here we observe SYNERGY taking place – where combining forces produces better RESULTS than individual effort. Teamwork Greater Outcome than going solo. In other words $1 + 1 = 3!$

Together we can do more. Together we grow. Together we are stronger.

I mentioned at the beginning that scientists believe the largest single living organism on earth is called Pando, a 100 acre grove of Aspen trees in Fish Lake National Forest in Utah. This ancient marvel of nature is thousands of year old, and is dying. Why is it dying? Years ago when the grove was discovered it was turned into a National Forest. Someone thought it would be nice to introduce some Mule Deer into the forest to attract tourists. The deer began to dig up the soil and eat the roots that connected the trees. Because the deer are protected from hunting and there are no natural predators left, the deer have grown in number quickly. Because of this the largest living organism in the world is dying.

It does not matter the size of the organism, or the organization. If you kill the connection (roots) you kill the community. Together we stand strong, divided we fall and die. It is amazing the things that Christians have been able to accomplish because they stood together.

Most of here know about Sick Kids hospital in Toronto. Every year more than 300,000 visits are made and more than 13,000 operations are performed. I have a niece that is alive today because of the knowledge and skill of the doctors at Sick Kids. What you may not know about is it's history.

Back in 1875 there was a women's bible study group that was meeting in downtown Toronto led by Elizabeth McMaster, the wife of Samuel McMaster who founded McMaster University in Hamilton. As they were praying one day, God laid on their hearts the needs of sick children. The group raised \$30 in initial donations and rented an 11 room house in downtown Toronto for \$320 a year. They set up 6 iron cots and declared the new hospital open. A few days later they received their first small patient, a badly burned child called Maggie. That first year they treated 44 children.

Those early day were difficult. They recorded in January of 1878, "Funds exhausted. A new stove required. Patient brought in very ill. We cried unto the Lord for help." Three days later the ladies wrote: "Met for prayer and thanksgiving. Our Lord has supplied all our needs. The gifts for the last three days have been \$50. The much-needed stove is up."

A few years later the furnace needed to be replaced. Again the ladies turned to prayer.

They wrote, "Meeting for prayer. A new furnace required immediately. Cost of putting in a new furnace is \$250, and we have simply nothing in the treasury except what is needed for daily bread. After a prayerful consideration of the matter we have decided to order the furnace, trusting God for the means to pay." By the time the new furnace was installed God had brought in everything they needed.

Over the years the work continued to grow. More people took an interest and soon the hospital grew and was relocated. Over the years it has been a blessing to so many people. Remember, it was started as a small group. A small group of Christian women meeting together were given the vision and started the work.

That story could be told of so many institutions in our nation today. Small seeds of faith planted in Christian community that have grown and blessed so many. Together we are stronger. When we as believers use the gifts and abilities that we have been given and grow to maturity. When we change our mindset from "serve us" to service, which means serving others. When, speaking the truth in love, we grow up and build up the body of Christ in love, as each part does its work.