

Together: We Grow
Ephesians 4:11-16
Rev. Nancy S. Lynn
October 31, 2021

Last Wednesday, Claire Casselman and Lisa Hesse, both wise and compassionate members of our congregation, put together a retreat for our church staff. With all the change and uncertainty that has come with the last many months, this was a chance for us to be together in a different way for a time of sharing and support. A week or so before the retreat, Claire and Lisa sent us some questions to answer, one of which was “What is your earliest memory of church and how does that inform the work you do today?”

It was such an interesting question, so I thought I would offer the same question to you. What is your earliest memory of church? How has that shaped your faith journey since? I’ll be honest and say that it took me a little while to come up with an answer. Church was part of my life from the time I was born and all through my childhood so it was hard to come up with a first memory. But then, I remembered running down the hall of the education wing of Albion First United Methodist Church, making my way from Sunday School to the children’s choir room so I could put on my choir robe and get ready to sing in worship.

I always loved to sing in church - not necessarily for the attention, though I’m sure that was nice, too - but because it made me feel a part of something important, part of making worship happen, and, most importantly, part of a community, my community of faith. From the choir loft, between games of tic-tac-toe, I could look out at my church family as we all worshipped together. I could see family friends, Sunday School teachers, my mom and dad and siblings, and even people I didn’t know as we all sang and prayed and listened together. That was my church family, the community where I belonged, the people who had promised at my baptism to help me grow.

Fast forward another fifty years or so, and I guess the impact of that experience and how it informs my work now is pretty obvious. Yet, remembering those sprints down the hall, and all that came with them, has been an important reminder for me of how good it is to be part of a faith community that worships and grows and works and serves and learns together.

For almost 200 years, First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor has been just that. A few months ago, we talked about our church’s long history of vibrant worship, excellent faith formation for children and adults alike, care and concern for each other, mission and service and advocacy for social justice. We have a strong foundation as a faith community.

And, we have just been through - in fact, we are still in it - a time when the bonds that hold us together as a church family have been sorely tested. I am so proud and so honored to serve a congregation that has faced the challenges of the last twenty months and committed to getting through this time together. And, actually, not just to getting through this time but allowing it to change us as we look toward our next faithful steps as a congregation.

So, for the next four weeks as we conduct our annual giving campaign, we are going to celebrate all that we have accomplished and all that we might do in the future by working as a community together! We start this week with *Together: We Grow*.

Growing, being transformed by the Spirit of God working within us and around us, is at the very heart of the Christian journey. God created us with an innate desire to evolve during our lifetimes. We are curious, we are analytical, we are self-reflective, we yearn to be kinder and more loving and to live in a kinder, more loving world. We are drawn to Christianity because we see reflected in Christ who we want to be and we see reflected in the kin-dom of God the world we want to live in. A basic tenet of our faith is that God is about transforming the world by transforming us.

Growth can be hard. Growth requires change, and we all know that change can be very scary. Oftentimes the changes required of us as Christ-followers and as a faith community are especially frightening because God asks us to move out of our comfort zone - to care for people who are very different from ourselves, to welcome the stranger, to love our enemies, to take risks for the sake of what is just, to give up some of what we have for the sake of everybody having something. The life of a Christ-follower is counter cultural, and that can be hard, which is why we need each other in this community of faith. Just as the disciples needed each other as they took Jesus's message of love and acceptance beyond Jerusalem and into the world.

In fact, the apostle Paul was actually in prison for his faith at the time he wrote the letter to the Ephesians. Ephesus was a major urban center with a healthy trade economy and a population diverse in social class and religious groups, races and ethnicities. The church in Ephesus was a small group of Christian believers in a very big city. So, Paul wrote to them to instruct them in how grow as Christ-followers and as a faith community despite all the chaos and distraction around them. He tells them that God has given each of us gifts to contribute to the community - the body of Christ - and that the purpose of these gifts is to equip us for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. He speaks of how we are all growing in our knowledge of Jesus, maturing toward the full stature of Christ. We need each other as we grow and build our congregation in love.

The whole faith journey is about growing to be more and more Christ-like which really means to grow in how and whom we love. Jesus' love was unconditional. He loved all people as they were when he found them, and his love healed their brokenness, creating a community of people who then wanted to share that love with others.

Recently, our staff formed a Spiritual Formation team which has identified five spiritual practices that we at FUMC participate in to grow in faith and in love - worship, growing and learning, serving, giving, and sharing our faith with others. They have developed a spiritual pathway to help us each find what our next step in the faith journey might be.

So, what else have we done to continue growing in faith since the start of the pandemic? Thanks to your generosity we were able to deliver Advent boxes and Lenten brochures to every household in our congregation. The devotionals included in those deliveries helped us practice our faith and kept us connected to each other. We have continued to worship together - at first, only online. I counted them up and discovered we had made approximately 85 pre-recorded worship services plus the Vespers and Rise and Shine services. This summer, we began to offer

worship outdoors under the tents for those who felt comfortable. Then, we moved in the sanctuaries with Covid safety guidelines in place. And as of this weekend, we can really all worship together as we begin live streaming the 10:30 service downtown. Live streaming from Green Wood will soon follow.

We've continued to nurture the growth of our children and youth, as well. Our children's ministry staff took care packages to our children's homes multiple times over the last year-and-a-half. Children continued with zoom small group meetings until just recently. Our youth had online classes and both online and outdoor youth group, and we welcomed two new Confirmation classes into membership. Both our middle school and high school youth did stay-at-home mission trips where they served at organizations like the Hope Clinic in Ypsilanti and Community Action Network.

We've continued a full slate of adult faith formation classes and we've started up our adult small groups ministry which has made for meaningful connections with each other during the time we were so isolated. Plus, we've added new ways to connect like Sunday hikes and a church softball team.

Finally, we have been serving our community. Your financial gifts made it possible for us to help individuals and agencies with the challenges they faced because of the pandemic. In addition to our existing ministries like Habitat for Humanity and Alpha House, we've also started a new ministry in providing space at Green Wood for an after school learning center for immigrant children.

We have continued to grow as the body of Christ despite, or because of, a global pandemic and circumstances we never expected to find ourselves in. And, at the same time, we've done the generative work of figuring out what comes next.

Building on our heritage as a congregation who advocates for justice and welcomes all, our new church statement paints a picture of who we are and who we aspire to be. We are a congregation that seeks to know God, to love unconditionally as Jesus did, and to affirm the sacred worth of all people. We are building a community that reflects the kingdom of God. A community in which all God's people - people of all races and ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, ages and stages of life, abilities and disabilities, and socioeconomic backgrounds - feel welcome and engaged.

And just like those first disciples, just like Paul and the church in Ephesus, we believe that as we grow in faith and love, our church community will grow, as well. And so we will continue to build on the best of who we are - worshipping, learning, and loving together - even as we seek to be the church our diverse and multicultural community needs today. So that some day, 100 years from now, another little girl will run down the hall anxious to do her part in worship with her church family.

May it be so. Amen.