

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
“Hold Hands and Stick Together”
WRCOB 11.14.21

Robert Fulghum wrote a book entitled
All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.

It's got some good advice for the church.

Like these

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world

Watch out for traffic

Hold hands and stick together.

Holding hands and sticking together
Is sound advice for churches.

Because to truly live a Christian life
We have to be active in a local church.

Whether it is a home church with 12 members
Or a mega-church with 12,000 members!

The church needs us and we need the church.

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I was challenged by a church board member
To preach a three-sermon series
On three functions of the church

Nurture, Witness, and Stewardship
As an introduction to a new church structure

Essentially answering the question
Why do we do what we do?

And so, this Sunday and the two Sundays to follow
We will seek to understand the reason and purpose
For the church's existence.

Church functions in three ways

1. Nurture: caring for those within our circle of faith
2. Witness: caring for those outside our circle of faith
3. Stewardship: caring for the gifts God blessed us with

Today we look to the role of Nurture in church life.

As the song says

*We are pilgrims on a journey
We are travelers on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.*

Faith is a journey we take together with God.

The church is a safe and welcoming space
For anyone and everyone
To explore and experience
Gods' grace, love and compassion.

And one of its functions
Is to nurture all who gather in Jesus' name.

Church Nurture involves three distinct practices
Worship, Education, and Community

The first, Worship, includes

1. Worship
 - Music
 - Scripture Reading
 - Praying
 - Communion (Eucharist)
 - Giving of Tithes and Offerings

Worship functions to give believers opportunity
To gather together, to celebrate our salvation
And give glory to God.

It does our hearts good
As the body of believers
To join our voices together
And give praise to God

It does our souls good to join together in prayer
Seeking God's comforting and healing presence.

The Apostle Paul writes.

Ephesians 5:18a-19 CEV

¹⁸ let the Spirit fill your life. ¹⁹ When you meet together, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, as you praise the Lord with all your heart.

Church Nurture's second practice is training.

2. Education

- Preaching
- Bible Study
- Sunday school

Its goal is found in Paul's writings.

Ephesians 4:11-13 CEV

¹¹ Christ chose some of us to be apostles, prophets, missionaries, pastors, and teachers, ¹² so that his people would learn to serve and his body would grow strong.

¹³ This will continue until we are united by our faith and by our understanding of the Son of God. Then we will be

mature, just as Christ is, and we will be completely like him.

The third aspect of Church Nurture
Is found in Community

Community includes

3. Community

- Fellowship
- Communion (Sharing the Bread and Cup)
- Physical and spiritual support

In the Gospel of John

Jesus gave us a new commandment

Apart from the Ten Commandments

John 13:34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Christian community is quintessential

For the nurturing of Christian faith.

It is the place we belong!

When we unite together in the body of Christ

Through the consecration of our children and baptism

We become a part of something far greater than ourselves.

We become heirs to the promises of God.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Galatians.

Galatians 6:2 NRSV Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

And what is the law of Christ?

To love one another as Christ has loved us.

The word community in Greek is *koinonia*.

It shows up in the beautiful description
Of the first generation church.

Acts 2:42-47 NIV

The Fellowship of the Believers

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to *fellowship* (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

But as time went on, Christian Nurture took a different turn.

Marshall Shelley, in an article in *Leadership Journal*
Entitled with the long but enticing title

*Developing spiritual fruit requires being around people;
ordinary, ornery people*

She shares the story of a man, named Pachomius
An Egyptian soldier who converted to Christianity.

Serious about nurturing his faith
Pachomius became a disciple of Palamon

Palamon was an ascetic someone who practiced
Severe self-discipline and self-denial.

He taught Pachomius that abstinence and a solitary life
Would nurture his spirituality

These hermits or asectics would wander
The desert alone
Fasting and praying

As Jesus did in his own wilderness experience.

Some even went to the extreme
Of eating nothing but grass
Living in trees, and refusing to wash.

They used the example of John the Baptist.

Solitude, silence, and severity was the way to God.

But Pachomius began to question this kind of Christianity.

- *How can you learn to love if no one else is around?*
- *How can you learn humility living alone?*
- *How can you learn kindness or gentleness or goodness in isolation?*
- *How can you learn patience unless someone puts yours to the test?*

He began to see that nurturing faith
Required being around people
Ordinary, ornery people.

"To save souls," he said, "you must bring them together."

He also began to realize it required more than
Associating with your selected group of friends.

God's love was best learned and practiced
When one is forced to be a part
Of a group personally selected people.

One doesn't get to pick their families
And yet are expected to love and care for them.

So too, one doesn't get to pick and choose
Who their church family members are.

Christians learn to love God's kind of love
By being a part of the family of faith.

Pachomius left his life as a hermit

and began a community, a *koinonia*, a church

Where nurturing the spirit meant being together
Where loving neighbor became a reality.

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Today, people are drifting away from church.

People don't feel a need for church.

People feel they can nurture their faith
Without any help from others.

Why be a part of so much hypocrisy?

For that particular reason alone
We are to be a part of church.

In an intentional, loving, welcoming, accepting community
We become responsible to one another
And held accountable to one another.

Holding each other up
Forgiving each other
And if necessary, calling each other out.

The genius of Christianity is the faith community.

We can't do Christianity apart from other Christians.

Church plays such a vital role in nurturing faith.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*,
Anne Lamott shares a story
She heard from a friend.

When her friend was a young girl of seven she got lost.

She ran up and down the streets
Looking for something familiar.

She became very frightened.

Finally a police officer stopped to help her.

They rode around and around in the squad car
Until she finally spotted something familiar, her church.

She told the police officer

*You can let me out now.
This is my church
I always find my way home from here.*

Anne Lamott concludes

*And that is why I have stayed so close to [my church]—
because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely
or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my
church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my
way home.*

It is in the church we find our identity.

We belong to Jesus

We are members of his body
The body of Christ.

And within this family of faith
We come together to worship
To learn
And to be the church.

As dysfunctional as we are sometimes
This is our calling!

And so, my brothers and sisters in Christ
If nothing else remember this.

When you go out into the world
Watch out for traffic
Hold hands and stick together.