



Expecting to Be Formational: Body Building

TEXT
Ephesians 4:11–16

August 12, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Y. Nishioka

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

At the Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, for the prayers of the people, the pastor asks the congregation to speak out loud their prayer concerns. When I was there as a guest preacher, one young girl, whose name I found out later was Leslie, asked the church to pray for her pet turtle

who was sick. After the worship service, when I was greeting her at the back of the sanctuary, I told her I was sorry about her turtle, but was curious as to how she knew the turtle was sick. I remember this seven-year-old actually rolled her eyes at this apparently ridiculous adult question and said, with attitude, "Well, because he is moving so slowly."

I thought to myself, "Look, you are seven. Lighten up on the attitude." But before I could respond, another little girl ran between us heading out of the sanctuary. I thought it was amusing, but Leslie was not impressed. She yelled, "Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" And before I could tell Leslie to calm down, she ran up to the girl, who was looking terrified, and Leslie said to her, "Hey! This is my church. And in my church we don't run like that! In my church, we don't run by ourselves. In my church, when we run, we hold hands!" Then Leslie grabbed the hand of the little girl, who was now smiling, and Leslie said, "Come on! We're getting cookies." This is my church. And in my church, we don't run like that. We don't run by ourselves. In my church, we hold hands and run together.

Surely Leslie's wisdom would help guide the church in Ephesus. These new Christians are struggling with holding hands and running together. Earlier in Chapter 4, the writer tells the church seven times to be *one*. *You are one body, of one Spirit, with one hope, serving one Lord, with one faith, one baptism under one God*. Then beginning in Verse 11, the different gifts are named. Some are apostles, persons who are sent out. Some are prophets, persons who call the people to God's righteousness. Some are evangelists, who show the good news of Jesus Christ. Some are pastors who care for the people. Some are teachers who shape and educate the people. But no matter what gift you have, all the gifts are for one purpose: body building. We are to grow up in every way into Christ who is the head of the church.

I have been preaching a series titled "Great Expectations," and each Sunday, I am preaching about one of the four expectations given to us in our new strategic framework. Two weeks ago, we talked about how we expect to be invitational — meaning we do not just sit back and wait for people to come to us. We invite them. Last week, I

preached about being magnetic — that what we do as the body of Christ would be done well and with intention, and that we would welcome difference because that is how magnets attract: when they are different charges.

Today, we focus on formation. At Village Church, we expect to be formational. We expect to grow. As the body of Jesus Christ, we are to be about body building. Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Jesus Christ, building up the church which is the body of Christ. At every turn, we are to promote the growth, the formation of the body as we build one another up in love.

So that means what we do here is body building. In our worship, in our teaching, in our fellowship, in our mission, in our ministries of pastoral care and social witness and justice, we seek to grow as we build the body of Christ. So that means when someone asks you, “How was your weekend?” you say, “I was body building.” When they say, “Excuse me?” you say, “Yes. That’s right. You heard me. I was body building.” And when they say, “Well, uh, I think you may have more work to do,” you respond with, “Absolutely.” Because we never stop growing, building one another up to be more faithful followers of Jesus.

That’s what the adage means: God accepts you just the way you are and loves you too much to leave you that way. Formation. Growth. Building up the Body of Christ — the

church. That means we must be agile. We must be willing to change. To be honest, Presbyterians are not known for that. Innovation. Change. There is a reason we are often called, “the frozen chosen.” We even have the Presbyterian version of the Doxology. You know the Doxology. It goes like this: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below.” Actually that is not how we really sing it. Here is the Presbyterian version of the Doxology: “It has always been done this way before. It shall be done this way for evermore.”

Formation means we must be willing to grow, to explore, to change — all led by the Holy Spirit. This is not change just to do it. That is pointless. That is what the writer means when he says that we should not be “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” The goal of any change is to help us to be more faithful to Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. The criteria for any change, any growth is if it helps us to build the body of Christ.

Several years ago, I was preaching at a Presbyterian church in Ocala, Florida. Ocala is north of Orlando and is a popular retirement location. The congregation was mostly older adults. They were declining in number, and so eventually, after two years of meetings and by a narrow vote, the congregation decided to take out the last two rows of pews in the sanctuary and put in rocking chairs for the

older adults, for whom it was difficult to sit in the pews.

It turns out that people liked the rocking chairs. Then a young couple with an infant came to visit. They had just moved to Ocala. They walked in and saw the rocking chairs and thought, “This church is so wonderful, they have put in rocking chairs for young parents with infants.” They sat down in two of the chairs with their baby. Thank goodness no one came up to them and said, “Excuse me, you are sitting in my chair.” The older adults just sat around them. Then one offered to hold the baby, and for the rest of the service, they passed the baby back and forth. The young couple was so charmed they told some of their new neighbors, also young parents, and they started coming to the church. Body building. Growing. Changing.

This expectation of formation, of growth is not just for our own sake as the body. This is not insular only focused inward. We build the body of Christ so that our participation in the world might be more true, more vibrant, more courageous. When we grow, when we are formed more in the likeness of Jesus, then we live that way in the world.

After graduating from college, I was called to teach at a middle school in Seattle. In my second year of teaching, our school district adopted a new plan called “mainstreaming.” The goal was to bring “special needs” students into the regular classroom. As teachers, we went through three days of training to

help us prepare. To be honest, I was not worried about how the teachers would handle the addition of these students. I was worried about how the other students would handle these new students in our school.

When I received my class list, I had only one new student in my classes. His name was Travis, and he was born with Down's syndrome. Travis had developmental cognitive challenges. Some concepts were hard for him. He also bore the telltale physical features of a person with Down's syndrome. He and his parents came to school the day before school started, and he walked through all seven periods.

I had Travis for third and fourth period, which included lunch. I taught English in third period and History in fourth period. We gave Travis all of his books and a color-coded campus map to help him travel from class to class. The next morning, his parents dropped Travis off, and the mistake we did not catch was they had him walk through the 800 building to get to his first class. The 800 building is the 8th grade lockers.

Travis is walking through the building and a kid sees him, this obviously different kid, and he tripped Travis and kicked his notebook. His books went scattering across the floor. Kids are laughing. The tragedy of those first few moments of his new school was that Travis lost his copy of the map. He was 15 minutes late to third period English.

When he came in, he was clearly frustrated. He apolo-

gized and explained that he had gotten lost and was in another classroom, but he didn't know it because he lost his map. I told him it was fine, and I was so glad to see him. Then it was time for lunch. Travis went to the lunchroom and tried to find a seat, but no one would let him sit with them. So Travis, who is not stupid, knowing that no one wanted him to sit at their table, went to go sit on the floor to eat his lunch.

School was hard for Travis. He was handling his class work just fine, but he was often picked on and laughed at. He got into some fights because he did not like being called names. He hated lunch most of all. After a few weeks of this, I remember he came to my classroom at the end of the day and stood in front of my desk. I looked up and said, "Travis! Good to see you. What can I do for you?"

He looked at me hesitantly and said, "Mr. Nishioka, I have a question."

"Great!" I said. "Is it about English or history?"

"No," he said. "It's about something important."

"Well, what is it?" I asked.

"Mr. Nishioka, this school is hard. Last year, at my old school, everyone was my friend. I am a good friend. But here at this school, I can't seem to find a friend. How do you find a friend here?" he asked.

"Travis, I'm sorry you are having a hard time finding a friend," I told him. "Hey, I could be your friend."

Travis shook his head in disbelief. "Mr. Nishioka, you are

a teacher. Teachers make lousy friends. I need to find a friend."

It was two weeks later that a transfer student entered my third and fourth period classes. His name was Bernie Johnson. In the sixth grade, he was 6'2" with blond hair, blue eyes and a big set of braces. He had not been held back a grade. He came from Santa Barbara, California, where he was on his middle school football team. He tried out and in mid-season, he earned a spot on our eighth grade varsity football team as a linebacker. This earned him a seat during lunch at the eighth grade jock table. There were no labels, but every group had tables except Travis.

At lunch, Bernie went to sit at his place at the eighth grade jock table. Travis went to go sit on the floor. There was an open seat next to Bernie. He looked over at Travis on the floor, and Bernie yelled across the whole lunchroom: "Travis! There is a seat here. Come sit here." Everyone was talking for the rest of the day. "Did you see what happened with that cool kid from California? Yeah. He invited that 'retarded' kid to sit with him."

The next day at lunch, Bernie went to sit at his place at the eighth grade jock table. Travis went to sit on the floor. Bernie yelled at him again, and Travis came over. Then the next day, Bernie sat down and just looked over at Travis who was standing in the corner of the lunch room. Bernie gestured, and Travis came over and sat down.

They began to act like an old married couple. Bernie

made Travis eat all of his crust because he wanted Travis to bulk up. Travis made Bernie separate his Oreos carefully to end up with double the number of cookies.

This had been going on for over a month when Travis came to my classroom at the end of one day. He stood in front of my desk and waited for me to notice him. “Travis. Good to see you!” I said. “How may I help you?”

“I have something to tell you,” he said.

“Is it about English or history?” I asked.

“No, it’s about something important,” he said. “Mr. Nishioka, do you remember a while ago when I asked you about getting a friend?”

“Yes,” I told him.

“Well, Mr. Nishioka, I wanted you to know that I have a friend,” Travis said.

“Travis,” I said to him. “I am so glad. Who is your friend?”

“Mr. Nishioka,” he said proudly, “Bernie Johnson is my best friend.”

We are the body of Christ. We grow. We change. We are formed more and more into the likeness of Christ.

And by the grace of God, we will be invitational. We will be magnetic. And we will be formational — not for our glory, but for the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.