

PENTECOST XI, 2018
Ephesians 4.1-6

In our reading from Ephesians today St. Paul describes the life of Christians in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ has given us His Spirit "... to equip the saints [that's us!] 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 maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...

Christ desires that we grow into full maturity of faith, hope, and love. It implies that, though we are baptized and have the promise of God's grace and eternal life, believers can be immature in their knowledge and living of the Christian faith. There is always room for growth, so that we are not "tossed about," as Paul says, by false teachings and the anxieties of our time. The goal of becoming mature Christians is that the Church "grows as a body and builds itself up in love."

So then: what are the marks of mature discipleship in our life in Christ? What follows are observations by me and writers on spirituality I have read. As I go through these, ask yourself: Which are my strong points (though you can always grow better and stronger in them)? Which ones are my growing edges?

First and foremost is to have an attitude of gratitude. Gratitude is the ultimate virtue, the basis of faith and life in the Spirit. It is the primary mark of holiness. Gratitude not only is the root of holiness; it defines maturity. We are mature to the degree that we are grateful for the gift of life God has given us.

The companion to gratitude is forgiveness. In the Bible, forgiveness means the removal of sin, so that it no longer burdens our lives or is a barrier in our relationships. Without the willingness to forgive and receive forgiveness, no human community of any kind can survive. Maturity in Christ is learning to forgive: to forgive those who have hurt us, to forgive ourselves for our own

shortcomings, even forgive God for seeming to treat us unfairly.

A simple question: What is one good thing that holding resentment and bitterness in your heart has done for you? The devil's greatest achievement is having a person die with a bitter, unforgiving heart.

Third: are we people of integrity? Do we discern and live in the truth? Are we willing to confess and suffer for what we know is true? We are as sick as our sickest secret, and we are as healthy as we are honest. Maturity in Christ does not mean that we are without fault, that we are honest. (I John 1.7!)

Maturity in Christ means being spirituality grounded. You recognize and accept you are not the Creator, but His creature. That is the first step in keeping your ego in check. Being spiritually grounded is a result of spiritual disciplines: prayer, meditation, confession of sins, receiving the Eucharist, the study of scripture and reading books on the Christian faith. It produces a faith active in works of love.

Five: Mature Christians have the capacity to take stands, yet stay connected with others, even those who disagree with them. They are clear about what they believe and do. They can state their beliefs and stand by them. And when faced with angry or hostile reactions from others, mature Christians remain connected with others, insofar as they by their efforts are able.

A special aspect of this is Christians who encounter jealousy, anger, bitterness, and hatred from others, yet do not give them back in kind, but absorb them, transform them, and give them back in deeds of love. That is what God did in Christ on the cross: He suffered the anger, the evil, the hostility, the sins of the world, but with arms stretched wide gave all that back in love. In the metaphor one author has used, in the face of jealousy, anger, bitterness, and hatred mature Christians are like water purifiers. They take in the bad water, holding

the poisons and toxins inside of them, and giving back just the pure water, rather than being like electrical cords that simply pass on the energy that flows through them. (Fr. Ron Rolheiser)

This is so important, because any unresolved hostility or resentment, guilt or bitterness we do not resolve in ourselves we will retransmit on to others and play out in other relationships.

Next: When faced with a challenge or difficult situation, Mature Christians focus on their goals, not their fears. Where others see problems, they see opportunities; where others focus on weakness and deficiency, mature Christians look to the resources they have to respond to a situation, especially those of our Christian faith.

Another aspect of mature Christians is how they deal with suffering. Sooner or later, suffering comes to us all. The question is: how do we deal with it? How do we use it? One way is to let the experience of suffering make us bitter and resentful, angry against God and envious of others.

The way of mature faith is to use our experience of suffering to identify with the sufferings of others and help them. When we do that, we find that both others and we are blessed.

Some of the greatest saints I have met in my years of ministry have been people who took their sufferings in life and let them soften, rather than harden, their hearts.

Mature Christians have the capacity to live through anxiety without succumbing to it. They manage their own anxiety, not others. They know what triggers their anxiety and regulate their own anxious reactions. They try to understand and live with the complexity in so many situations. They know there are few things or situations that are cut-and-dried, either-or, black and white. We are all, as the Lutheran slogan says, saints and sinners at the same time.

Thus, they are in tense situations a non-anxious presence. They can do this because their faith assures them their future is with the Lord. They know nothing can separate them from the love of God. That awareness gives them freedom from themselves for the good of others.

As another writer puts it, "Bless more and curse less." Mature Christians define themselves by what they are for rather than by what they are against. Scapegoating and fault-finding are anxious responses, not the response of faith active in love. There are many people and forces out there who delight in lifting up themselves or their cause and criticizing others. Don't listen to them; don't get sucked into their lies and falsehoods.

Last, mature Christians grow and live out a welcoming, generous outlook on life and other people, especially the stranger. Like Christ, their arms stretch out in a widening embrace, not draw in to protect themselves and keep others out. Like the hymn, their lives witness to the wideness of God's mercy.

All of this is rooted in our identity in Christ, received in Baptism. There you and I were sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. That is the way of Christ. Jesus always took His real identity from God, not from Himself or the opinions of other people, whether they were His friends or enemies. "I do the will of my Father," Jesus confessed.

The calling to mature discipleship in Christ is a life-long task. There will be setbacks and fallbacks. There will be dry spells when we feel our faith is stagnating. But the Lord our God will sustain us. He provides the resources we need for renewal in faith: His Word, His Sacraments, the fellowship of community in Christ. Thus, as St. Paul writes today, "... we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, ... we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body ... makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love." Amen.