

August 2, 2015

TEXT: Ephesians 4:11–16

TITLE: The Global Body of Christ

Today's sermon will try to answer two questions: "How do you recognize a healthy church?" and "What did I experience while in Malawi?" There are lots of churches here in America, some healthy, some struggling and unhealthy. There are lots of churches in Malawi, some healthy, some struggling and unhealthy. When I first arrived overseas, I looked at the churches there through the lens of ELPC. To my surprise, they were more formal in their Sunday rituals than we are. Our order of worship is pretty standardized yet flexible; theirs almost never changed. Before the service, the elders sat in the vestry with the minister, or in Chichewa, the "abusa." One ruling elder assigned the different tasks, such as the Call to Worship, the Prayer of Intercession, or the three scripture readings. After a prayer, the group got up and processed into the church, with the Abusa (wearing a clerical collar) sitting off to one side and the elders seated in a row in the chancel facing the congregation. When the service was done, the same group recessed down the aisle and into another side room, where they sang one verse of "Amazing Grace," offered a prayer, and thanked one another for their participation that morning. There were typically three services every Sunday morning: a Chichewa service at 6:00, an English service at 8:00, and a contemporary service at 10:00. Let's just say that because of the roosters crowing outside my window, I awoke at 5:00 every morning for 2 weeks straight.

The formality of the CCAP congregations (Church of Central Africa Presbyterian) comes from their historic roots in the Church of Scotland. David Livingstone made his way to Malawi in the 1850s, and despite encountering violent tribes and contracting malaria, Presbyterian missionaries made great progress in spreading the gospel in that land. Dave Carver, our group leader from Pittsburgh, was quick to remind us that the early missionaries came to Africa with their belongings packed in a coffin, since they knew they'd not return home alive. In Blantyre, I saw some of their graves as well as the heartbreaking sight of strings of smaller graves beside them of the infant children who died while the missionaries did their work there. So if the church you establish is modeled after the Church of Scotland from the late 1800s/early 1900s, it's no surprise that the service is a bit formal: Chichewa versions of old hymns like "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" and "Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty." Ministers in clerical collars and black preaching gowns. Elders doing most of the church work and regularly preaching. Men and women typically sitting on separate sides of the sanctuary.

Are these churches healthy? If you go by numbers, they certainly seem healthy. The Balaka church is not small. It was totally full with at least 600 people present for the Chichewa service, with the English service right after it at least three-quarters full. When I was asked to give an impromptu children's message, easily 150 children came pouring forward, anxious to quote memory verses for me. The Women's Guild is very strong and quite active. Interestingly, when people

entered the church, they filled up the sanctuary from the front back—no back pew sitters. And when they did the offering, everyone came forward and put their money (the Malawi kwacha) in the plates up front. By all reasonable standards, the church seemed healthy in body and spirit.

Some of my favorite moments came when the formality was broken with smiles and laughter: How pleased they were when our Pittsburgh group greeted them in Chichewa. How they roared with laughter when one woman's group did a skit, in which a woman dressed up as a man, waving around a beer bottle and cigarette, to remind us of the hurting souls Christ calls us to save. One funny moment came when speeches were being made in Chichewa, followed by translations in English, and a prayer offered on my behalf was translated as follows: "May the God who brought you safely to Malawi in pieces also send you home in pieces." They laughed at the mistranslation and made someone else translate for a while.

Malawi is an incredible study in contrasts. It is a country routinely in the list of 10 poorest countries in the world. You are wealthy if you have running water in your house. You are very wealthy if you have hot running water. Anyone one of our homes, with flush toilets, clean water, furniture, books, cable TV, refrigeration equaled their most fancy resorts or presidential palaces. They have only sporadic Internet service, but their world has been transformed by cellphone technology. It is expensive to buy minutes for their flip phones, so they are masters of the one sentence phone call. Some people have cars; most walk or ride in mini-buses or bike-taxis called "kabanzas" (which are bicycles with a padded seat behind the bicycle seat where the passenger can balance while being pedaled by someone else). Life expectancy is short there. Medical care is limited. Most people in villages live a subsistence life, with global warming making their existence even more tenuous. Yet through it all they pray—they give thanks—they share what they can—they value hospitality and friendship – they help those in need.

For all our differences, their churches had lots of similarities to ours. They would visit the sick, pray for those in need, gather for bible study and worship. I had to laugh when, halfway through a large potluck meal held one evening in my honor, someone had to make an announcement that some folks had picked up the wrong plastic dishes and serving spoons and that needed to be sorted out before everyone went home. I guess some things are universal!

What makes a healthy church—or for that matter, a healthy community, a healthy family, a healthy society? Is it numbers of people who participate? Because Malawi's Christian communities are quite strong by that standard, but numbers never tell the whole story. Is it the amount of wealth and resources at someone's disposal? Probably not. There are lots of precious things in life that money can't buy. Are churches in America fundamentally better than churches in Africa, since our economy is stronger? Hardly. Our Pittsburgh partnership group to Malawi also included three church leaders from South Sudan, whose daily faith lives are

shaped by sacrifice, war, life in refugee camps or exile, and the constant threat of political violence. Their faith commitment was humbling and inspirational to me.

In this Pauline letter to the early church, we are reminded that there are a range of gifts that will be expressed in the church—whether you live in 1st century AD lands or 21st century countries like Malawi and America. We are not meant to all be the same in our roles and how we live out our faith. Paul wrote some are apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, some teachers. Some will be Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Catholic, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist. But in the end, the one detail we should all hold in common is that we “grow up.” Paul describes “growing up” in this way. He said, *We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ Jesus. For in him, the whole body is joined and knit together with ligaments given by Christ, so that each part may work properly and the whole body may grow – building itself up in love.*

A healthy church is made up of people with individual gifts—whether here in Pittsburgh or overseas in Africa—who grow together in Christ. Who think of Christ as the ligament that holds their common life together. That means that whatever we do, we picture Christ as being present between us—witnessing our interactions—prodding us to do what is good and just—encouraging us to be patient, caring, prayerful. Christ is here as we baptize one another. Christ is here as we share a communion meal together. Christ is amidst us as we drive home, as we go to work, as we drink tap water here (while others in Africa rely on boreholes and wells), as we walk the aisles of Market District stores (while others scrape out an existence from corn flour and pumpkin leaves).

Health comes when we grow up into Christ. Think of the people to whom you’re connected in your private life and your church life. Think of those connections as ligaments provided by Christ—all of them: the strong ties and the superficial ties. And if what connects you to others is literally Christ Jesus, what is he making from your life? What is he building up within you and through you for love?

We are all connected—there is no getting away from that God-blessed reality. So grow up and be strong, and may the grace of the Lord be with you always.

AMEN