

Let's Get Growing

Acts 5:12-16

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“My mom taught me at a very young age that Christianity and faith was about being part of a community. About recognizing our privilege and blessings and doing what we can to be of service to others. Especially people who are marginalized, targeted, and who had less, often unfairly. I learned that service was far more important than performative nonsense. Like being seen in the same pew every Sunday or writing Christian in your Twitter bio and using that as a shield to target and marginalize, already marginalized people.” This was part of a speech by Senator Mallory McMorrow on the floor of the Michigan senate this week.

I want to lift up this portion of her speech because, she points to a very important aspect of our Christian faith – acts of charity, justice and love. Her words remind us that the term Christian is both a noun and a verb. It is an identity and an action. Like how the song goes, “They will know we are Christians by our love.”

In community we care for one another, especially those whom others overlook, ignore, target or vilify, or for whatever reason are tossed to the edges of society. She reminds us that we need to check our privilege and remember that with privilege comes responsibility to share and care for others who are less fortunate than us.

Here we are one week after celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ and we are reminded of the work that the disciples took up in Jesus' place. They were charged with carrying on the ministry of Christ and proclaiming the power his resurrection. In today's reading we see the people gathering regularly for prayer and teaching, and although many were afraid to be publicly associated with the followers of Jesus, God

continued to add to their numbers. So I ask you? By what measure do you count someone as a believer or follower of Christ? Is it their regular attendance on Sunday morning? Is it a particular creed or list of beliefs? Is it whether or not they pray? Is it like how Senator McMorrow describes it – being of service to others in community by caring for the less fortunate, the downtrodden and the abused? I want you to sit with that for a moment.

Earlier this week I revisited the mission statement of East Church. It reads:

“Empowering God’s community to grow in faith through worship, service, and learning at every age.” Worship, service and learning are the hallmarks of our church. I think we can all agree that we believe that the essence of Christian faith today includes these three aspects – Worship of God, Service of love in community and ongoing learning how to be better followers of Christ. In a nutshell this is what it means to be a faithful Christian.

When I looked back at the Profile from last year I can see how these three aspects of faith have been real hallmarks of this faith community. Worship of God through music and the arts. Each week we celebrate God’s love through music. I heard after the Christmas Eve service and again during our Good Friday and Easter Sunday Service especially how moved people were by the worship service by the congregational singing, the bell choir and the preaching.

Service to the community was one area that especially drew me to East Church. We have a long history of being engaged in various important social action work including Housing unhoused families, helping refugees get resettled in Grand Rapids and creating an open and affirming faith community for the LGBTQIA people. This year we will be celebrating the 25th anniversary of IHN and Family Promise here in Grand Rapids and twenty years of being an Open and Affirming Congregation.

In the area of education for all ages we continue to reach out into our community and offer both Christian education as well as various special interest topics on various

causes like caring for the earth. In a few weeks we will be hosting an informational fair to celebrate the Rain Garden and invite our neighbors to learn how they can support the environment right in their neighborhood.

Over the next several weeks I will be preaching on various ways that the church and we as individuals can deepen our walk with God. We will also be asking you as a congregation to be actively involved in helping us consider ways of growing and strengthening our community.

We all felt the affects of COVID on our communal life these past two years. It is hard for any church to grow effectively during an interim period and then add COVID on top of it and I think we can all safely say, we are now in a time of regrouping and growing.

In those early days of the church the disciples and committed believers risked a lot to be out in public boldly proclaiming the Good News. Even though many were afraid of the dangers of associating with them publicly at first, God continued to add to their numbers. The early church kept doing the good work and God added to them. I believe for us also this is an effective approach for us today. Let us re-invigorate the mission that God has called us to and let us seek new ways of connecting with our community, in keeping with that call. I believe when others see what we are about they too will feel called to join us.

I think the Church Profile sums it up best:

Our goal at East is certainly to grow in numbers. We want and need a more vibrant membership. Yet, we do not want to focus on “numbers for numbers sake.” This is not who East is. We trust that we will grow in numbers as we expand our love and compassion toward each other and to those outside our walls, in our neighboring community. The phrase that came through in our member survey “organically grow our church” has value and appeal because it is not focusing only on numbers.

So I invite you to pray for East Church. Consider ways we could reach a broader base of this diverse community around us. Join us often for worship and be built up by connecting to one another. Most of all keep teaching and learning in faith so we may discern the will of God for ourselves and our church.

Our church Mission statement is: **“Empowering God’s community to grow in faith through worship, service, and learning at every age.”**

So let us take a moment here to reflect on these three aspects of our mission:

Worship, Service and learning and I invite you to think about one element of one of those three things, worship, service or learning and write down one thing you would like to commit to increasing in over the next six months. Helping with some aspect of worship, maybe joining a board like visitation, mission, membership care or the council. Help in the pantry or with IHN in June. Or maybe there is some knowledge or passion you have that you would like to teach others? Maybe you read a good book and would offer to lead a book study club or learn more about an issue like dismantling racism?

I invite you to write down something you are willing to commit to in growing your faith – pushing yourself a little more in your spiritual journey.

If you are willing please drop this in my mail box or hand it to me at the end of the service. I would love to know what inspires you to grow.