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Ephesians 4:1-16

MATURING BEYOND TOLERANCE

Good Morning. My name is Katharine Menstell and I am a rising high school senior at Lakeside School. I am 17 years old, I am on our church council, I play volleyball year round for my school and a club team. I love to cook, work with kids, and build things. I have been attending Peace Lutheran Church since I was 4 years old. Back then you may have known me as the girl who crawled around under the pews during the service. 13 years later and here I am giving the sermon. It feels a little weird.

So, 5 days ago the Common Application officially launched for the 2019 college application season. This made me realize just how close I am to this completely new and unknown stage of my life. It also started within me a train of thought about how I might change in anticipation of college. Many people see college as a chance to start over, to change what you don't like about yourself and show a new side of you as you build new relationships. It is a chance to move past high school mistakes and mature. This theme of maturing can't seem to leave my world these past few weeks, popping up in my life and then in the passages for today. It seems like God is saying something to me....

The second reading today gives us a letter from Paul to the people of Ephesus. He tells them to move past their divisions and build a congregation out of love that uses their God-given gifts. Ephesians 4:14 says "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."

This verse seemed to yell at me when I read it. As I approach adulthood and leaving home for college this idea of maturation is at the forefront of my mind. I just turned 17 years old, and as my birthday passed I reflected on my life so far. Thinking back to only 3 years ago as I prepared to enter high school, it's amazing to see my own personal growth and how it affected my friends and family. I still have many years to mature more, but the connection of personal maturity and the maturation of the church is intriguing. Paul writes that the gifts given to us by God will help us unite the church and help it to mature.

An evolving and developing church. That is not something often associated with the church, or religion in general. But this is what we need to remember as our congregation approaches our 75th anniversary. We are still in the development stage and we should use this opportunity to share God's word and bring peace, joy, and love to our local and global community. God has given us all the gifts we need to bring peace and unity to this congregation and the church as a whole. We just have to realize them.

But what would a more evolved and mature congregation look like? Paul describes it as one rooted in Christ's body, building itself up in love. Love is the root of most things in the Bible and a good guideline for maturation. Love for neighbor, Love for an enemy, Love for family, Love for creation, Love for God. These are all signs of maturity.

Let me explain: imagine a girl. She is in middle school and feels like no one understands her. She starts to take out her insecurities on her peers. One day a classmate's grandparent has died. Our girl

has lost a grandparent as well, but instead of showing empathy, she mocks her classmate's sadness. Her classmate begins to cry and stays home from school for a few days.

Our girl has hurt her classmate because she struggles with relating her experiences with those of others and has hindered her classmate from learning. She chooses to not be aware of the effects of her actions and act selfishly.

Fast forward: Our girl is now in her second year of college. She has developed meaningful relationships with her friends, old and new. She has respect for her professors and advisors, for the people who clean the dining hall and her fellow peers. She has matured. When her roommate is struggling with anxiety and feeling like she doesn't fit in with the community, she steps up to integrate her roommate into her circles of friends. She helps her navigate the lackluster mental health services provided by the university. They share their experiences and talk with each other about painful memories. She speaks her truth in love.

Her maturity shows itself through love. She is capable of empathizing, caring for and helping the people around her. When I imagine a mature person, this is what I imagine: a woman secure in herself and open to others.

The connection I see between personal maturity and the maturity of the church is that they both have synergy. Synergy is the idea that the effects of all the parts are more than the sum of the individual elements. Basically, the whole is greater than the parts. Personal maturity is more than experience, wisdom, and knowledge put together. It is supported by these but flourishes with love. A church maturing is also synergistic. All of its members have their own gifts, but when put together and nurtured, they make a congregation better than if all the members worked individually.

So how do we achieve a synergistic and mature church? By moving past our divisions. If we continue to put people into boxes and prevent them from exploring their gifts in our community we stop ourselves from improving. Paul talks of unity in the faith which I interpret as an acceptance of difference. We cannot just tolerate our transgender neighbors, our Muslim neighbors, our Latino neighbors. We must practice acceptance.

Tolerance is living near someone and not harassing them. Tolerance is justifying your status as a bystander by saying that you are not the one harming them. Acceptance is making strides to include others, it is listening to their stories of discrimination, it is intervening when it isn't easy and it isn't comfortable to do so. Our girl from earlier, she intervenes, she makes herself vulnerable to help her roommate feel accepted.

Jesus serves as another example. He interacted with people deemed sinners by the capital C Church: Samaritans, lepers, the ill, sex workers, tax collectors, the mute, the blind, the list goes on. Jesus practiced acceptance. He did not ignore people's plights but rather invited them to share their stories and looked to help them in the ways he could.

If we truly wish to live in God's and Jesus' image, we must practice acceptance. We must help people in need in the best way we know: using our God-given gifts. This acceptance is the first step towards maturity of self, maturity of our congregation, and maturity of the church as a whole.