

To Maturity
 Reading from the New Testament: Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16

In 1974, Chaka Khan sang the funk-fueled appeal that lies at the heart of what we're seeking to accomplish here at SMPC. For a number of us, we cannot hear the lyric without singing the two notes that follow it. Let's see who was coming of age in the mid-seventies – ***Tell me somethin' good... ??***

There is a Southern colloquialism that asks the same thing. *What you know good?* Yet, phrase it however you will, it is disappointing how seldom we meet the request or answer the question. The acclaimed author/poet Maya Angelou tells the story of growing up with her grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas: Her grandmother ran a small store, the origin of which is a powerful story in itself that we'll save for another time. Anyway, Mrs. Annie Henderson, Maya's grandmother, had a particular routine when people who were known to be whiners entered her store. Angelou recalls, "My grandmother would ask the customer, 'How are you doing today, Brother Thomas?'"

And the person would reply, 'Not so good today, Sister Henderson. You see, it's this summer heat. I just hate it. It just frazzles me up and

frazzles me down. It's almost killing me." Then my grandmother would stand stoically, her arms folded, and mumble, "Uh-huh, uh-huh." And she would cut her eyes at me to make certain that I had heard the lamentation.

“As soon as the complainer was out of the store, my grandmother would call me to stand in front of her. And then she would say the same thing she had said at least a thousand times, it seemed to me. ‘Sister, did you hear what Brother So-and-So or Sister Much-to-Do complained about?’ And I would nod. Mamma would continue, ‘Sister, there are people who went to sleep all over the world last night, poor and rich and white and black, but they will never wake again. And those dead folks would give anything, anything at all for just five minutes of this weather that person was grumbling about. So you watch yourself about complaining, Sister. What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it. If you can't change it, change the way you think about it. Don't complain.’

Remembering the experience, Angelou observes, “It is said that persons have few teachable moments in their lives. Mamma seemed to

have caught me at each one I had.” (Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now*)

People have few teachable moments in their lives. And mamma seemed to have caught Maya at each one she had. Pride, of course, is a significant factor in the rarity of teachable moments. Barbara Kingsolver says, “I’ve seen how you can’t learn anything when you’re trying to look like the smartest person in the room.”

Another factor in the paucity of life’s teachable moments is that in obedience to the idol of busyness, we fail to take the time or reserve the energy to encounter anything deeper than the cliff notes of life.

Maya Angelou was without a doubt, a woman of immense character whose wisdom and writings offer a profound and important perspective on this world in which we live. Awarded the *National Medal of Arts* and the *Presidential Medal of Freedom* along with over 50 honorary degrees, what makes Angelou’s legacy so beautiful is the way she readily acknowledged the power of the simple encounters with her grandmother and uncle in the development of her character.

None other than Mr. Rogers observed, “If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.”

Teachable moments don’t have to be rare. In fact, they are constant if we are just present and attentive to those we meet, to those with whom we live and work and worship. We have so much to learn from each other, you from them, they from you. And our teachers are not just our peers, they are also our elders, our children, not just your children, but all of our children. A member this week passed along the wisdom of an 8-year-old, who when asked how a stranger can tell if two people are married, answered, “You might have to guess based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids.”

Every encounter is charged with the possibility of meaning. I remember visiting a member in a hospital up in the foothills. He looked so frail and weak, just coming back from the razor’s edge between life and death, his potassium level having bottomed out, sending his vital signs all out of whack (medical term). Well, I tuned up my best pastoral

countenance, trying to acknowledge the gravity of a dangerous health crisis, but he was having none of that, brushing off any notions of being traumatized and saying, “Well, once you’ve been shot out of a plane, it kind of changes the way you face life’s little health scares.” I guess it does. You see, Inky was a fighter pilot in WWII and was literally shot out of his plane, surviving only to be immediately captured by German soldiers and held as a Prisoner of War. It was a powerful lesson for me about keeping perspective. The kids at our church adored Inky and would hang on his every word whenever he would share a story from his rich trove of experiences. To the end he maintained such a healthy perspective in contrast to a world bent on inflaming the ordinary irritants of life while ignoring that which is wondrous and meaningful. A comment you would regularly hear from Inky was: “I thoroughly enjoyed it.” It could be a meal, a view, a choral work, almost anything. He could see the wonder of things.

Do you realize that each time we gather here, you are surrounded by a vast treasure trove of life experiences from which you can learn, by which you can be encouraged, through which you can reach out and touch the face of God?

Understanding the unsurpassable gift of redemption, acceptance, inclusion, and worth we have been given in Jesus Christ, the author of Ephesians entreats the fledgling church community “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” When I asked the folks in our bible study this week to describe what constitutes a worthy life they used words like humble service, kindness, mercy, compassion, fairness, friendship. It was obvious they had actually read their Bibles! They knew the answers.

When I asked them what is the generally advertised and accepted model of a worthy life in our culture today, they used words like money, possessions, wealth, celebrity, power, influence, self-involvement.

When I asked them who they would perceive to be leading a worthy life, they did not name celebrities, athletes, reality stars, social media influencers, ignoble office holders, or ostentatious one-percenters. They were more likely to name the noble neighbor, the behind the scenes contributor, the caregiver, the merciful, the generous, the humble and wise role model.

The irascible bootleg preacher, Will Campbell, reported that on the night the tv networks were wrestling with whether to broadcast the President's State of the Union address or the verdict in the O.J. Simpson case, he was more consumed by the news of the death of Fanny Booker. She was no celebrity or athlete or president. Fanny Booker was a 90-yr. old black woman in Mississippi who ran a little school for rural African-American children during the Depression when the state wouldn't educate them. She was never featured on the news, but while running a quilting bee she taught people how to register to vote. Campbell said, "Few came to her funeral. The papers didn't mention her passing. So let's speak her name now with awe for she was the stuff of authentic history, the essence of true greatness." (Will Campbell, *Soul Among Lions*)

Very often, the way God speaks to us is through the people we encounter, the face-to-face sharing of stories that provide hints, intimations, and glimpses of God's kingdom if we will just pay attention. That's the power of church, at least when we treat church as church.

But I have to tell you, this power diminishes sharply if we don't take what we do here seriously. If what we are about here is just another thing in another busy week, our activities here become not much more than a nuisance in an idol-centric life. But the idols that so consume our energies and attention out there cannot approach the worth that we can discover here when gathered in Christ and with one another. Enriched by his Word, nourished through the sacraments, we gather to share and place our stories in the frame of **THE** story. We have so much to learn from one another, for framed in Christ's story, our stories take on a substance that provides for growth in relationship and toward maturity.

The author of Ephesians says that our purpose here is to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 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. 14 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. 15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."

Listen to that last part again, “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.” It would be hard to find a word more relevant for this age.

Therefore, with love and through the grace of Christ, we invite you, implore you, and pray for you to step away from the *tossed salad* life, take what Christ is doing here seriously, and join us in the journey of growing up. It is time for us to truly **practice** our faith, and it's really not that complicated.

Of course, worship remains the engine and axis of our effort, but we also invite you on Sunday mornings to come and gather for *Faith Practice*, 9:10 each Sunday. Participants will gather intergenerationally around tables and around a Bible story; and together, enriched by perspectives from different generations, you will share, read, talk, pray, and bless one another.

And then on every night and in every home, we will continue the practice of what we're calling the Faith 5. As a family, or if you're living

alone you can phone a friend, we're asking you simply to share the highs and lows of your day; read a Bible verse or story (we'll even give you the readings); talk about how the scripture might relate to your highs and lows; say a prayer, remembering to include each other's highs and lows; and finally, never leave one another without blessing each other, for everyone is blessed to be a blessing for others.

It is not complicated. It is doable. And it is time.

We are serious about this, for if what we are about here is just another thing in another busy week, we become not much more than a nuisance in an idol-centric life. But the idols that so consume our energies and attention out there cannot approach the worth that we can discover here when gathered in Christ and with one another. Enriched by his Word, nourished through the sacraments, we gather to share and place our stories in the frame of **THE** story.

Living in San Francisco in her twenties, Maya Angelou says she became sophisticated, too sophisticated to take seriously the significance of all this (*the trappings of faith*). She saw herself as erudite, worldly, an acting agnostic. Well, at this time she had a voice

teacher who introduced her to a book, and he asked her to read aloud to him from a section that ended with the words: *God loves me*. She read the piece and closed the book, but the teacher told her to read it again. She says, “I pointedly opened the book, and I sarcastically read, *God loves me*.” He told her to read it again, and after about the seventh time, she began to sense that there might be some truth in the statement, that there was a possibility that God actually did love her, Maya Angelou.

She suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all, knowing that if God loved her, she could do wonderful things, try great things, learn anything. For what could stand against her with God, since one person, any person with God constitutes the majority.

The image of her grandmother, Annie Henderson, returned to her. The Depression was particularly challenging for a single-black woman in the South raising a crippled son and two grandchildren. But as if rebelling against the difficulties, Angelou remembers her grandmother often standing up tall and declaring, “I will step out on the word of God.”

Angelou says, “Naturally, since Mamma stood out on the word of God, and Mamma stood over 6-feet tall, it wasn’t difficult to believe in God.” (Maya Angelou, *Wouldn’t Take Nothing For My Journey Now*) Tossed to and fro by the winds of trends and the arrogance of sophistication, belief drifted to the periphery. It took a friend, a trusted teacher and the repetition of life’s most basic truth, *God loves you*, to awaken in Angelou the slumbering faith of her grandmother, and to propel her to live into the worth God saw in her. We need one another to grow up in Christ. So, let’s get serious. It is time to practice our faith. Amen.