

After church today, we have a new member class – an opportunity for people who have been attending regularly to sit with me for a bit and get to know one another better. I'll explain a bit about the church and its leadership and history, and they can ask questions, too.

If, after that, they want to become full members of the church, the session will meet with them, and I will ask four questions that our church's constitution requires me to ask before session can officially vote to bring them onboard.

Those four questions are: Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

Do you turn to Jesus Christ, accepting him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

And finally, will you devote yourself to the church's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers?

These questions are universally asked of every single Presbyterian. They're required. The constitution uses the word, "shall" as in, you shall do this. There's no option.

And for the most part, we lay a lot of the emphasis on questions one through three. Do you believe you are a person who needs God in your life? Do you love Jesus? Will you follow Jesus?

Becoming a member of this church is as easy as saying, "I do. I do. I will. I will." Pretty simple and straightforward. There's no membership fee. No rite of initiation. No hazing. Just two-word answers to four questions that come with almost no accountability or expiration date.

But friends, it's so much more than that. Those four questions, and particularly question four, are asking everything of us. They ask us to commit to a four-fold faith that touches every part of our lives, every day.

Now, when I was an elementary and middle school student, I was drawn to the only story about Jesus from when he was that age. Luke 2 recounts a time when Jesus was twelve

and his family traveled by foot to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It says, “when the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers (meaning aunts, uncles, cousins, friends), they went a day’s journey.” They walked an entire day without their son! Then they took a head count after dinner (I guess), panicked, counted again, started yelling frantically, questioned every single one of their traveling party about Jesus’ last known whereabouts, and lost about 5 years of their lives when they realized that the child God had entrusted to their care was not in their care.

It took several days to find Jesus, but there he was, in the Temple, amazing the grown-ups.

It says, “his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” I think that’s generous. I think I would have been apoplectic and guilt-ridden and hoarse from yelling for Jesus and at Jesus and contrite in my prayers to God and exhausted from not sleeping for several days. But sure, she “treasured all these things” and then probably didn’t let Jesus out of her sight for 3 to 6 years.

But the part that I liked best was the next verse as I remember it from the King James Version that I grew up with - “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men.”

He grew in wisdom – meaning he grew smarter, and he grew in stature – he had a growth spurt and grew facial hair and his voice dropped. He grew in favor with God – he grew spiritually through prayer and worship, and he grew in favor with other people – he grew socially and had meaningful relationships. He grew in four ways. Not because he was fully divine but because he was fully human. He grew up the way we all grew up. Changing mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially. I could relate to that.

And I think that verse is deeply connected to another verse in the Gospels. A verse that we know as the Great Commandment. In that scripture, a religious authority tried to ambush

Jesus in a theological trap and asked, “Teacher, what commandment in the law is the greatest?” and Jesus answered, ““You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment.”

According to Jesus, the most important commandment we are to follow is to love God in four different ways – mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially. Four different means of devotion.

Being a Christian is not about showing up on Sunday morning for an hour. Being a Christian is a four-fold commitment, a whole-self devotion.

I read a quote earlier this week that said, “Sitting in a pew on Sunday doesn't make you a good Christian any more than sleeping in a garage makes you a car.”

Yes, we worship God in this place. We hear scripture and sing praise and confess in prayer, but one hour is not what makes us Christ followers. It's a full-time job chasing after Jesus. A job that engages every part of us.

Being a Christian and not attempting to expand your knowledge in some way is going to leave you wanting. Being a Christian and not caring for your neighbors is a hypocritical conundrum. Being a Christian and not breaking bread with other believers is a lonely existence. And as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”

I get that it's often easy to get frustrated at the institution of the church. The historical record of Christians is not one to take great pride in. The abuse and exploitation and misogyny and violence and greed that Christian churches have engaged in is appalling, but somehow, it has survived. And when I read about the early church in Acts, when I see what the church at its best was and is called to be, I'm inspired.

It says, that after Jesus was resurrected and spend some time teaching his closest followers more about scripture and his teaching, after he empowered them with the Holy Spirit, they began to tell others in Jerusalem. These new believers, not yet even called

Christians, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The young church was thriving because they were devoted to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in all the ways it mattered. They worshipped God in the temple still – they hadn’t given up on their faith and rituals even though they had just seen the religious authorities seek their spiritual leader’s death. They were frequently eating together. They were praying together. They were hanging out socially together, and when there was a financial need they were communally taking care of it.

Now that’s a church! That’s the way to be! No wonder their numbers were growing daily!

The early church was doing four things – devoting themselves to the church’s teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and of prayer. Now where have I heard that before? Oh yeah! That’s what we ask every single Presbyterian on Earth to commit to! Act like the Christians in Acts chapter 2!

Promise to learn! Promise to be curious! Promise to express doubts! Love God with all your mind!

Promise to share your life with your church family – the full fellowship – the highs and the lows. The laughter and the tears! Make the church your chosen family and be your authentic self with us! Love us and let us love you! Love God with all your heart!

Promise to eat with us and physically work with us! We are warm-blooded, physical creatures! Our bodies need fuel! We should listen to our bodies! And we need to physically show up to build with Habitat for Humanity or simply give a big hug or weed the flower beds and clean up Weekapaug beach. And then we should break bread together to refuel for the next project! We need to love God with our strength!

And we need to meet for worship and prayer. We need to hear the voices of others when we sing and confess and laugh and cry. We need to be together and lift one another's burdens up as one. Love God with all our soul!

The early church heard the call to follow Jesus fully. A four-fold faith. Not just one aspect. Not just two. Four different means of intentionally devoting yourself to God and to God's people on earth. Growing in every way, just as Jesus grew.

That's how we do this thing called discipleship to Jesus Christ. That's how we church. Over and over again, scripture keeps telling the same story: it takes effort in all four areas to grow as a Christian.

Sunday mornings are the best part of my week. I love being here. I love hearing your voices and sharing this time with you, but following Jesus and being the body of Christ on Earth is not just about what happens here in this hour on Sunday. It's about what we choose to do with the other one hundred and sixty-seven hours of our week.

The monastic Christians have proven to us that you *can* have a meaningful relationship with God in isolation. Covid has taught us that we can have Bible Study and worship remotely, and we still stream our services online for those who cannot be with us physically, but I am so grateful that my calendar is also full of things like Bible Study and a taco dinner on May 5th, and a Habitat build day, and a celebration of Peter's life in June, and a youth conference with 6 awesome youth after that.

We made promises to each other when we signed on to be here. Mind, body, heart, and soul – this is the way we follow Jesus. Amen.