

Myanmar Institute of Theology
Opening Convocation
Second Semester
October 8, 2018

“Growing in Christ, Preparing for Service”

Scripture: Ephesians 4:7, 11-16; 1 Peter 2:9-10

Hymns: Living for Jesus (#122), Just a Closer Walk with Thee (#139)

It's good to be back on campus again. It's really a great privilege to serve at MIT and be part of the MIT community. As a school, MIT has a unique reputation in Myanmar. It strives for academic excellence. It's diverse. Graduates go on to be leaders all over the country, in church, in business, and in society. MIT is a launching pad for study abroad for those students interested in doing so.

Yet, amid all these unique and special features of a MIT education, what should our top priority be during our time here? As students, what do you most hope to get out of your years here? As teachers, what should we be most concerned to provide for our students? Now, it's not just one thing. But today, I want to emphasize one particularly priority that needs to be at the top of our list. And that is, as this year's theme says, “to grow in Christ and prepare for service.”

Paul (Ephesians 4:7, 11-16)

In our Scripture reading this morning from Ephesians, Paul made it clear that the primary purpose of the church is to build up believers and prepare them for Christian service. What this means is that Christ would be fully formed in each one of us, and all of us would be active in serving Christ by serving others. In other words, we would become more and more like Christ. We would think as Christ thinks. We would see others as Christ sees them. Our hearts would be full of love and determination to make the world a more just, peaceful, loving place.

Furthermore, and this is particularly relevant for us as a seminary, Christ also appointed some of us to be church planters, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers. That is, not only are we supposed to learn how to grow in Christ, but some of us are given the responsibility of helping others to know Christ, to grow in Christ, and to serve Christ.

So, when I think about MIT, since we are a school of the Church, created to prepare future leaders of the Church, what we do here should line up with what Paul says are the top priorities for the Church. MIT should focus on helping its students to grow in Christ and to learn how to serve others well, especially how to help others know and grow in Christ.

Peter

Now, when turn to consider Peter's teaching, we see that he contextualizes Paul's teaching on growing in Christ and Christian service. This is particularly relevant here in the Myanmar context, because Peter's audience had a lot in common with many Christians here.

In their first century world, most Christians were marginalized by the broader, religiously pluralistic society. Some were even persecuted for their faith.¹ In the face of such challenges, Peter urged Christian believers to develop and strengthen their own Christian identity. The best ways to do that include knowing who you are in Christ and actively seeking to develop your relationship with God in Christ.

Peter says we must remember that we are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once [we] were not a people, but now [we] are the people of God; once [we] had not received mercy, but now [we] have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

So he says elsewhere, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may *grow up* in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet. 2:2-3, NIV, emphasis added). Likewise, in his second letter, he comes back to theme of growing in Christ again. He says, “*grow* in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18, NIV, emphasis added).

In the face of marginalization, misunderstanding, ignorance, and even persecution in a religiously pluralistic context, Peter says that the best thing you can do is to deepen your understanding of who you are in Christ and then to grow in that relationship. And that growth is not just for your own benefit. You are also to grow in your ability to reflect the light and love of Christ to those who do not know him.

Growing in Christ

Are you doing that? Most of you came to seminary because of your faith in Christ and your desire to serve. But I also know that it is easy to lose your way while you are here. There’s so much information, so many activities, so many distractions. You are so far away from home. You may feel overwhelmed, confused, or discouraged at times. But God’s will for you hasn’t changed. You are still called to grow in Christ and to prepare for service as your top priorities, especially here and now.

Paul’s principal idea is that Christ would be formed in us more and more. In other words, we become more and more like Christ. That is why taking time for God and practicing our spiritual disciplines is so important. We need to read our Bibles, pray regularly, participate in worship, volunteer, care for and serve one another as a way of life. We need to develop a habit of continually thinking of God and asking him to lead and guide us in all that we do. We must continually listen for God’s voice through the evangelists, prophets, pastors and teachers in our lives. And this is not just intellectual listening. We need to be listening from our hearts as well.

What has particularly helped me lately is to remember to keep looking to God in my times of struggle and suffering. When I am confused, discouraged, hurting, my faith is tested. In my trials, sometimes God seems far away from me. I need to consciously turn toward God. In my time of need, I have to remember to not just look to myself, but to Christ. When I feel confused or start to feel sorry for myself, I have to ask God to transform me through my suffering.

¹ 1 Pet. 1:5; 2:4, 11; 3:14; 4:12-16.

Illustration

This truth is what I have been learning again, at new level, over the past several years. This summer, in particular, has been very difficult for me and for my family.

- My wife, Jill, continues to struggle after her freak accident two years when she fell off a cliff. She suffers every day, and we do not know if and when she will ever be able to go back to work.
- Then, this year, her mother got cancer. We have had to walk with her as she underwent difficult treatment, and to support her while she struggles to try to get better.
- Then, one of the leaders of Faith, Hope, and Love Global Ministries died suddenly this summer. He was riding his bicycle, and he had a heart attack. He was only 50 years old, and left behind a wife and three children. It was such a shock, and is such a loss.

All of this has been draining and stressful. It's been a test of my faith and endurance. My suffering and questions have been driving me to my knees. And God has been using my trials to draw me closer to God and to form Christ within me. God has been using all my pain and suffering to humble me, refine me, show me the faith that is already inside of me, and turn me eyes to my Creator and to Jesus, "the author and perfecter of our faith." I still struggle in so many different ways from day to day. But I can see that God is truly forming Christ within me, and I realize that growth in Christ is the most important thing in my life. Every relationship and everything I do for Christ is affected by my growth in Christ.

Conclusion

The spiritual truth is this: To grow in Christ is our calling, and God is the one who forms Christ within us. But there's a part for you and me to play, too.

1. As students, be serious about cultivating and maintaining a close relationship with God through Christ. This cannot wait for graduation. Be serious about practicing your spiritual disciplines. And when you suffer, or are confused or distracted, get on your knees. Seek God. Look to Jesus as your guide and help. Now is the time to let Christ be formed in you, as you prepare for a lifetime of Christian service.
2. As teachers, we need to teach, preach, and model the importance of growing in Christ for all of us. Each of us has many important things to teach our students, but don't forget that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the essential pre-requisite for everything we attempt to do in the name of Christ. We need to believe and practice this for ourselves, and then show our students how they can grow in Christ as well.

The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." (Col. 2:6-7). This is God's will for each of us.

May this semester be a wonderful time of growing in Christ and preparing for service for us all.

Prayer

Hymn

Benediction

Sadly, I heard it said once, “Go to MIT if you want to grow academically, but go to some other school if you want to grow spiritually and prepare for future ministry.” When I heard that, it broke my heart. My prayer is that someday that saying will be changed to something very different. By God’s grace, someday I’d like the word to spread all over Myanmar, “Go to MIT if you want to grow academically (yes!), but especially go, if you want to grow spiritually and prepare for ministry.” Wouldn’t that be great?

By God’s grace, and our dedication, this vision could become a reality for each of us, and for our school.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. —2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

Announcement: Bible Study I prepared on our school theme, which was kindly translated by Sayama Fanang Lum and published in the MIT Sunday booklet. For English, you can download it from the FHLGM website. Also, hard copies in the back as you leave.