

Growing in the Grace and Knowledge of Jesus Christ

II Peter 1:2-8, 3:18

It was great to be part of last weekend's emphasis on Christian Education. My thanks again to all of our leaders in Christian education, our SS teachers, and Bible study leaders, and each person who helps us to learn more about being a follower of Jesus Christ. It was also great to share with our children. Those of you who were at the 9:30 service will remember that I talked to the children about growing in their faith and I showed them a growth chart from our children's childhood days when we measured the progress of their growth. There was a time when in my yearly checkups I attained the grand height of 5 ft. 8 inches, however this last time my report indicated my height was 5 ft. 7 inches. I guess I'm shrinking! That happens when you get older. But you know I don't want that to be happening in my faith life. What if God were to put a growth chart on the wall of your life. Would you still be growing, would you have plateaued and remained at the same place, or is it possible you could have been going in the wrong direction.

Today we begin a new series and I'm calling it Growing as a Disciple of Jesus Christ. Both Pastor Hey Young and I will be preaching for 7 weeks on this important area of personal spiritual growth. The series will be based on a book called Devotional Classics, edited by Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith. It is a book full of devotional writings written by classical thinkers and writers of the Christian faith throughout the history of the Christian church. What we will learn from this series is that there have been many different expressions of Christian faith and teaching and I pray we will gain insights from these expressions that will deepen our own faith. Foster and Smith have identified 6 different streams of Christian thought that have been part of the church in the last 2000 years and in this series we are going to jump into these streams and allow them to enhance our walk with Jesus. Some are more inward focused like contemplation and holiness. Some are more outward focused like social justice and incarnation. The titles and themes of each these streams of Christian thought are found in today's bulletin.

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All of them merge into one big pool which we call living the Christian life, being a disciple of Jesus Christ. I hope that you will discover this series as a way of deepening your faith and growing as Christ's disciple. I believe that is the desire for most of us, but somehow the daily rituals and patterns of life we follow can stifle our progress. And its even possible for the voices of our culture and the values, the messages and temptations of our world to put us into a mindset of skepticism and doubt and we realize we are no longer living by faith and its almost living as though God doesn't even exist.

It reminds me of the story that is told of a colony of mice who made their home at the bottom of a large upright piano. To them, the music was frequent, even routine. They would listen to lovely melodies and harmonies. Well, at first the mice were impressed by the music. They drew comfort and wonder from the thought that Someone made the music. Someone invisible, yet close to them. These mice loved to tell stories about the Great Unseen Player whom they could not see. Then one day an adventuresome mouse climbed up part of the way in the piano and returned with an elaborate explanation about how the music was made. Wires were the secret, these tightly stretched wires of various lengths that vibrated and trembled from time to time. And then a second mouse ventured forth and came back telling of hammers, many hammers dancing and leaping on the wires. Well, the mice decided they must revise their old opinions. The theory they developed was complicated, but complete with evidence. In the end, the mice concluded that they lived in a purely mechanical world. The story of the Unseen player was relegated to a mere myth. But the unseen player continued to play nonetheless.

It's possible to wander through this life devoid of faith. Often influenced and shaped by a world that takes God out of the equation. And it's possible for even the believer, the follower of the Lord, to get so caught up in the world and its pressures that we neglect to keep our spiritual life in tune. So this becomes our challenge and also our invitation. To reconnect spiritually and to discover where each of us needs to grow in our walk with the Lord.

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Today's Scripture lesson from II Peter utters the admonition to be on guard in this journey of faith. It is a call to give serious attention to this matter of spiritual growth. Listen again to verse 5 of II Peter 1: "For this very reason, you must make every effort" (one translation says "with all diligence") to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with perseverance, and perseverance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love." These characteristics which are sometimes referred to as the ladder of faith. If these are the things that are a part of our life, the writer of II Peter says, they will "keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

That's what we're striving for as a follower of Jesus. I don't want to remain stagnant as a Christian, as Cecily said last week, I want to be spiritually awake, that we would be alive for Jesus Christ. That my faith will make a difference in my life and that my life will have an impact on others as a disciple of our Lord.

So how is that going to happen? It doesn't happen automatically, or haphazardly. Growing as a disciple requires intentionality. Let me introduce you to two of the writers that contribute to the Devotional Classics. The first one is familiar to many of you. His name is C.S. Lewis. He is one of the most important Christian thinkers of the twentieth century. Some of you know him as author of Mere Christianity and also the Screwtape Letters. Here is how C.S. Lewis talked about living the Christian faith: "Christ says, Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the one you think wicked – the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours."

Lewis is talking about surrender. Giving my whole self to the Lord, not a segment, not one aspect of my life, not a part but the whole. If I am serious

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about living as Jesus' disciple, the invitation is to give him my all. It is the same sentiment stated by an earlier Christian writer by the name of Fenelon of the 16 and 17 hundreds. The major theme of his writing is one the complete love of God. Quote on slide: "We may be sure that it is the love of God only that can make us come out of self. If His powerful hand did not sustain us, we should not know how to take the first step in that direction." He writes in his work on Christian Perfection: " Those who are God's are always glad, when they are not divided, because they only want what God wants and want to do for him all that he wishes. Peace of conscience, liberty of heart, the sweetness of abandoning ourselves in the hands of God, the joy of always seeing the light grow in our hearts, finally, freedom from the fears and insatiable desires of our times, multiply a hundred fold the happiness which the true children of God possess in the midst of their crosses, if they are faithful."

I think you sense a common theme. Growing closer to Christ requires sincere devotion. And it's not a half-hearted devotion. We are called to this place of full surrender. Full surrender of ourselves to God. What we're talking about is what we hear Jesus say as he echoes the words from Deuteronomy: Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. Not a part of my life, but all. It is turning to the Lord in faith and saying: "Whatever is keeping me from be wholly yours, I surrender it to you, God.

Perhaps you have heard this story that Bruce Larson tells about surrendering our lives to Christ. He said:

"For many years I worked in New York City and counseled at my office any number of people who were wrestling with this yes-or-no decision. Often I would suggest they walk with me from my office down to the RCA Building on Fifth Avenue. In the entrance of that building is a gigantic statue of Atlas, a beautifully proportioned man who, with all his muscles straining, is holding the world upon his shoulders. There he is, the most powerfully built man in the world, and he can barely stand up under this burden. 'Now that's one way to live,' I would point out to my companion, 'trying to carry the world on your shoulders. But now come across the street with me.'

"On the other side of Fifth Avenue is Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and there behind the high altar is a little shrine of the boy Jesus, perhaps eight or nine years old,

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and with no effort he is holding the world in one hand. My point was illustrated graphically.

"We have a choice. We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, 'I give up, Lord; here's my life. I give you my world, the whole world.'"

As we begin this journey of growing in faith, deepening our spiritual life, I invite to a place of saying, I surrender, Lord, here's my life. I'm not going to hold back. I am going to ask myself: "What do I need to let go of, and where do I need to grow in my relationship with the Lord. When we can take that posture, when we can come to that place of surrender...then we put ourselves in a position to grow in our walk with Jesus. This is our journey in these coming weeks. To open our hearts to God and be ready to do what he calls me to do. I want to be wholly his. If this is our heart's desire, then we make it possible to follow the words of II Peter 3:18: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.