

## How's Your Growth Rate?

II Peter 1:3-11, 3:18-25

I know a few weeks ago, Pastor HeyYoung preached a message about children...and since today I want to talk about learning, I thought I would share a few words from an article entitled: Things I've learned from my children. "If you hook a dog leash over a ceiling fan, the motor is not strong enough to rotate a 42 pound boy wearing superman underwear and a superman cape. It is strong enough, however to spread paint on all four walls of a 20 by 20 foot room. When you hear the toilet flush and the words "Uh-oh", it's already too late. If you use a waterbed as home plate while wearing baseball shoes it does not leak-it explodes. A king size waterbed holds enough water to fill a 2000 square foot house 4 inches deep. Superglue is forever. No matter how much Jello you put in a swimming pool, you still can't walk on water. Pool filters do not like Jello." These are some of the lessons you can learn from children.

But you will also recall from Pastor HeyYoung's message about children that we can learn some spiritual lessons as well. And how Jesus made it clear that children teach us about what it is to be a part of the kingdom of God. Her message made the distinction between being childlike and childish. And that part of our maturing as a disciple of Christ is to understand that having a childlike trust and faith is an important characteristic of growing as a Christian.

One thing you discover about little children is that they don't stay that way very long. We've had two of grandchildren born this year and its amazing to see how much they have grown in a few short months. God has designed us as children to grow physically, but we have also been created with the potential to grow spiritually.

A group of tourists visiting a picturesque village walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked him, "Were any great men and women born in this village?" The old man replied, "Nope, only babies." When we first come to faith in Christ, it is like we are baby Christians, but the challenge for each of us is to grow in our faith.

Last weekend we were taking a look at our heart rate...or more specifically our heart condition. Asking ourselves to do a heart examination and determining

## How's Your Growth Rate?

what may be causing a troubled heart in us. We look to the one who is the healer and comforter of troubled hearts. Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life who comes to us and says: "Do not let your hearts be troubled; do not let them be afraid." This morning I ask you to do some further examination and ask the question: How is my growth rate? As a disciple of Jesus Christ, how am I growing in my faith, how have I allowed my relationship with Christ to be deepened? Am I closer to the Lord today, than I was 6 months ago, a year ago, 5 years ago.

For the truth of the matter is, if we are to effective witnesses of our faith, if we are to be mature disciples of our Lord, then we must be willing to do as the apostle Peter exhorts us: "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." And this is not only important for us personally, but our spiritual growth has a direct impact on the life of our church. Because a church alive for Jesus Christ will not only be welcoming and inspiring, but the life of the church is expressed through committed and dedicated followers of the Lord...persons who are passionate about their faith and also seeking to grow deeper in their walk with God. One of the words used to describe the early church was devotion. Acts 2:42 says: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and prayers."

Devoted as followers of the Lord. And the one thing we discover as we seek to live a faithful Christian life is that we cannot do it alone. That we need the support, the encouragement, and the guidance of other people in our faith community. To be a Christian is to be called into community. We need those who will pray for us, teach us, mentor us, disciple us and help us to grow in our walk with the Lord. I was reading an account of the early Methodists and their class meetings that really speaks about this essential role of being strengthened by other believers. The class meeting was a gathering about 10-12 persons who were committed to spiritual disciplines of prayer, and Bible study, and mission. Leslie Church in the book, Early Methodist People describes the class meeting experience like this: "Problems were submitted and solved, spiritual experiences were shared, and the members rejoiced in the conscious assurance of the

## How's Your Growth Rate?

presence of God.” These class meetings were central to the early Methodist movement.

Our times may be different and we certainly live in a different culture, but the need for practicing these spiritual disciplines is just as relevant today. Some of those practices are being faithfully carried out in this church. Men's and women's Bible studies and fellowship groups, Sunday School classes, support groups, prayer groups, and other Christian education opportunities give life to this church and also make a difference in our own personal journey of faith. You will be hearing more about the importance of Christian education next Sunday, but I want to encourage you today if you are not already connected to some opportunity for your own spiritual growth, that you take some time this week and discover which growth experience will deepen your own faith. I know our visioning team and Christian education ministry is looking for ways to expand these opportunities so that everyone can find his or her place for spiritual growth.

I guess what we're saying is that growing as a Christian requires more than our weekly worship. Obviously our worship time is critical for inspiration, for encouragement and fellowship. But how important is this additional step for our faith development.

When you think about it, this was the model of Jesus' ministry. Yes, he preached to the multitudes and he ministered to the crowds of people, but his primary method was all about discipling. Ministering closely with 12 disciples to teach them by understanding the character of God, leading them by example and helping them to serve in the kingdom of God. His life made it clear how important it was to nurture our faith, to be in close communion with others, so that our faith could be strengthened.

So the question for each of us is very important...How's your growth rate as a follower of Christ? Our faith life should not be a static thing. There always a need to know more, to get closer to the Lord. The apostle Paul describes his own faith life like this: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached my goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own...so I am straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for

## How's Your Growth Rate?

the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus..” If that’s our approach, it that’s our attitude, we can grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ...it is a faith that moves us forward in this journey of life, my faith should be growing, changing, maturing.

Listen to the characteristics of a maturing faith listed by Peter in our reading today: “Make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.” In other words if we are growing as a Christian, these characteristics should becoming more and more a part of who we are. Peter even says: “if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” I like how he says “are increasing among you”. That these are characteristics that we can grow in, keep working on, keep developing as we deepen our faith.

Bishop Robert Schnase, who is currently the bishop of the Rio Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church wrote the book Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations...He talked about radical hospitality, passionate worship, risk-taking mission, and extravagant generosity as part of the make-up of a church alive for Jesus Christ. And he also included this practice: He called it Intentional faith development. Persons who are willing to grow in their faith and are devoted to the practices that will deepen their faith.

**Well, we can talk about faith development all we want, but if we are not intentional about practicing it we will just spin our wheels spiritually. I like to look at this way. Suppose I make a decision to get in better shape physically. So I decide to join a gym and get up every morning at 5:00 and go to the gym. And when I get there I see all the exercise equipment and all the people exercising, but I also notice this nice comfortable chair and rather than use the equipment, I just sit there and watch everybody else. Of course on the way home, I happen to spot a Dunkin Donuts or some other bakery and help myself. When someone asks me about my new routine, I can tell them, I’m working on it. As a matter of fact, I go to the gym everyday. Guess what...after of year of this practice, I’m in no better**

## How's Your Growth Rate?

**shape...maybe worse, depending on how many of those donuts I've had. So my physical conditioning isn't about how many times I go to the gym, or how many books I read on getting into shape...improving my physical condition is dependent on me being serious about really exercising. The same is true for our spiritual conditioning and growth. It made me think of Paul's instruction to Timothy, his son in the ministry. I Timothy 4:8 – "For, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." It's all about getting closer to God, growing in our faith.**

It is my prayer this morning that God will challenge us to practice intentional faith development. That we will spend more time in the Word, participate in Christian education offerings. That we will seek out those opportunities to be disciplined and also look for opportunities to help others in their spiritual growth as well. So when our growth rate is measured, we will be able to say in a month from now, or 6 months from now, or a year from now: "I have grown in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."