**Growing In Our Faith**

**Ephesians 4:1-11**

9/27/15

Thought for Meditation:

 Our interiors must develop along with our exteriors. The story of salvation has predictable outlines, but the individual character of the saved person is never predictable. That is always unique. The uniqueness is carved by prayer.

*Eugene Peterson, “Answering God” p55-56*

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Dr. Paul Brand was a surgeon who worked in India for many years. He often cared for missionaries who had been injured and wanted to get back out into the field. One time a lady came to him who had obviously broken her leg. About 6 months earlier she had fallen, and the femur, the thigh bone, had broken. A doctor had set it, but it hadn’t healed properly, so she came to Dr. Brand.

He described the typical process of a bone as it heals. We often think of bones in terms of Halloween and death, but bones are actually living and growing. When a bone breaks repair cells invade the area and lay down a cartilage-like sheath called a callus. Cartilage is flexible, but at least it holds the bone together. After the callus is established other cells called osteoblasts come in. They break down the callus and replace it with bone. Instead of being flexible it becomes rigid. Eventually the bone grows back together and is as good as new.

The femur on this lady had not healed. It had not grown back together. He asked her a few questions and found out that 20 years earlier she’d had a small tumor in her thigh. Another doctor had used radiation to kill the tumor, and in the process had killed the bone. When it broke, because it was dead it couldn’t grow back. Dr. Brand did a series of bone grafts and eventually was able to heal this woman’s femur.

In the book where I read about this Dr. Brand shared the point of the story. Just as bones can either be alive and growing, or dead and not growing, Christians also have two options. We can either be growing or dying. That is true physically, and it is true spiritually. Followers of Jesus Christ are called to grow in our faith.

This is our second week looking at the new mission statement for Sharon Church. Last week we looked at the first part of the mission statement – our mission, our job as a church, is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. We are called to tell other people about Jesus and invite them to become his disciples.

The second part of our mission statement is that we are called to “welcome and encourage all who want to grow in faith.” As our passage in Ephesians says, our job is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to … **to maturity.… We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ”** (Eph. 4:12-13, 15). Let me share with you two ways we are called to grow.

First, we are called to grow in our knowledge of Jesus. One of my professors at seminary studied under Paul Tillich. Tillich was one of the great theologians of the 20th Century. He was born and raised in Germany and had a very thick accent. One day he was lecturing about Gnosticism, which was one of the early Christian heresies. He was trying to make the point that true faith always includes knowledge, knowing what you believe. The Greek word for knowledge is gnosis – g-n-o-s-i-s. Tillich was trying to say “There is no perfect faith without gnosis.” Yet with his accent it came out, “Zer is no perfect face without noses.”

One of the great strengths of the Presbyterian Church, and, to be honest, one of the reasons I am a Presbyterian, is that historically, Presbyterians have always emphasized faith that is well-thought out. Our strength has always been an intelligent faith. We’ve always expected our pastors to be educated and for the most part Presbyterians are better educated than many denominations. We encourage people to think about what they believe. You don’t have to give up your mind to be a Christian.

This church does an adequate job of providing opportunities to grow in our faith through learning. Last week I started an adult Sunday school class on the Ten Commandments. Each week we will look at one of the commandments. We had 20-25 people last week but I’d love to see more of you join us. We have several small groups that are studying various books. I commend those of you who are part of those groups or doing some other type of study where you can learn more about Jesus. My dream would be that every member would participate in some type of class or small group. A church like this ought to have two or three Sunday school classes and at least ten small groups. I’d love to see a group or a class for young adults. With Robert Morris right down the street I’d love to see us develop a ministry to the college students. College is a time of great intellectual growth and we are in a position that we could be part of that.

I want to share with you an image that comes out of a college setting. It isn’t a pretty image, but it makes the point. Imagine you are at a college and you go into the cafeteria for lunch. You pick up your tray and your silverware. You get up to the counter and look at the food. You recognize most of it, but there is one pan with some sort of glop in it. You ask the server what it is and she tells you that you don’t want to know. “Yes I do. What is it?” She responds. “It’s pre-chewed food. Someone took all the food we are serving, chewed it up, and instead of swallowing, they put it in this tray. Would you like some?”

That is a disgusting image. I can’t imagine that. Yet too many Christians are willing to accept that for our faith? They are willing to live on the faith they learned in Sunday School back in the 5th grade? They are willing to accept whatever the pastor says as true. They are willing to live on someone else’s pre-chewed knowledge about Jesus. Brothers and sisters, all of us are called to grow in our knowledge of Jesus Christ.

We are also called to grow in our love for Jesus. Soren Kierkegaard told a parable about a king who loved a humble maiden.

 How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his very kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist – no one dared resist him. But would she love him?

 She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind. Would she be happy at his side? How could he know?

 … He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, and equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross over the gulf between them.

For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal… The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to *descend*. He clothed himself as a beggar and approached her cottage incognito, with a work cloak fluttering loosely about him. It was no mere disguise, but a new identity he took on. He renounced the throne to win her hand.

*as told in “Disappointment with God,” by Philip Yancey, p103-104*

This is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The King of the universe loves you and wants a relationship with you. God wants your heart. God wants your passion. Are you growing more and more in love with God every day, every week, every year? Lovers long to be together. Is that longing part of your life? God’s desire is for you to grow in your love for Jesus Christ.

Our mission is to “welcome and encourage all who want to grow in faith.” That includes growing in our knowledge and in our love for Jesus. Of the different parts of our mission statement this is the one I love the most, and the one I struggle with most. I got my Doctor of Ministry from Pittsburgh Seminary. I focused on spiritual growth. I still don’t have a clear sense of how people grow in faith and what the church needs to do to help in that process.

Part of the problem, I think, is that we are all different, so growing in faith will look different for all of us. There isn’t a one size fits all program that will help everyone grow. However, let me suggest that there are at least two settings that help people grow. Some people grow best when they study by themselves. Others grow best when they are in a group. Let me make a few comments about both ideas.

For those who like to study alone there are more books to help you grow in your faith than you will ever be able to read. I did a quick search on Amazon for “Christian Books and Bibles.” There were more than 500,000 entries. There are books on theology, on the Bible, Christian living, spirituality, family and relationships, church leadership, and who knows how many other categories.

Of course, the most important book to read is the Bible. The primary way God speaks to us is through the Bible. Charles Spurgeon, one of the great preachers of the 1800's, visited woman who was very sick. She asked him to read from her Bible. He picked it up and started flipping through the pages. He noticed in the margins at many places, were the letters "TP". When I see the letters “TP” I think of either toilet paper or toothpaste, neither of which makes much sense in the Bible. Spurgeon wasn’t sure what it was about so he asked her. She replied, "Those are the promises which are tried and proven." She lived by the power of God's Word.

For those of you who prefer to study by yourself, I encourage you to read, especially read the Bible. For those of you who prefer to be in groups, I still encourage you to read your Bible. I am convinced that if every member of this church spent five to ten minutes a day, five days a week, reading the Bible it would transform this church. Read one chapter or even one passage a day. Know God’s word, and grow in your faith.

For those who would rather learn in a group setting, I encourage you to find a group that is focused on helping people grow. Sunday school could be part of that, or a small group. I know that some of you are going to Community Bible Study and that is a wonderful opportunity to grow.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale was on vacation with his wife, Ruth, down in Florida. They stayed at a resort that had a golf course. Every evening they went to the club house for dinner. As they walked in to the restaurant Peale heard a humming noise of some sort. He didn’t know what it was. The next night he heard it again so he went to explore. He found all of the golf carts plugged in and recharging. He thought to himself,

“There is a sermon illustration here. All those carts have been running around all day. No matter where they have been on the golf course, they come together in one place to plug in and get their power from one source.”

That is the power of small groups or Sunday school classes. We learn more when we are together than when we are by ourselves. Where might you participate in a small group or Sunday school class?

Spiritual growth, helping people grow in our faith. That is what we are about. Let me invite you to take an inventory of your life. In what ways are you growing in your faith? What will help you grow in your faith? How can you help others grow in faith? For right now I invite you to stand and join me in reciting our mission statement, committing ourselves to spiritual growth.

The mission of the Sharon Community Presbyterian Church is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, welcome and encourage all who want to grow in faith, care for those in need and celebrate the glory of God in worship and in our daily lives.