

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Spirit of God: Growing Pains”
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Proverbs 8:1-11, Ephesians 4:1-16

I woke up in pain. I was probably in my early double digit years, when in the middle of the night I awakened in pains all through my legs. It was intense and unlike anything I had ever felt before, as if everything else was cramping up. I must have cried out because my mother came into the room. When I described it to her, her only response was to smile and say, “You are about to hit a growth spurt.” Though I wanted to be taller than I was then, I wasn’t sure that the pain was worth it. But at least I learned that growing pains were natural.

What’s interesting about growing pains is that they are not limited to us human beings. We share them with most of the systems around us. Businesses have growing pains. When they begin to expand from a small mom and pop shop to something larger, there are the growing pains of having to learn new management skills, finding capital, keeping financial records on a computer and not in a shoe-box. Cities have growing pains. The great mage-cities of the world, such as Manila, Lagos and Mexico City among them, experience growing pains, when they suddenly find themselves unable to deal with the influx of millions of people which strains their water system, their electrical grids and their roadways. Families experience growing pains when a child is born, then a second and perhaps a third and fourth. Each one brings new and different challenges. Christians and churches experience growing pains as well.

I know that this may sound a bit odd that we as Jesus’ followers and as a community of Christ experience growing pains. After all, we may wonder, isn’t being a Jesus follower believing certain things and a church about getting together to learn about those things what we are supposed to believe? In a sense, that is true so let me explain: first the growing part. The Apostle Paul points out, being a Jesus follower is about “...*growing up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part if working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.*” In other words, the image that Paul uses is that you and I have a goal that we are trying to reach, and that is to live fully into the image of God in which we were created; to become, in other words, like Christ.

The second part is the painful part. The reason that this growth is painful is that once upon a time, each of us, perhaps in our early teen years, or even before, locked onto a particular view of faith, the universe and everything. Those views become an integral part of who we are. In essence, they become as much a part of us, as our heart or lungs, as a leg or an arm. And when we are forced to acknowledge that growing in Christ requires us to change them, it is as painful as losing a physical part of ourselves; sort of like amputating a part of our identity. The struggle then is to be open enough to change and growth that we are willing to endure the pain that comes with the process. Fortunately for us, the Apostle Paul offers us, in verses two and three, a five-step program for growth...that hopefully will carry us through the pain.

Step one is humility, meaning that willingness to live with the notion that we could be wrong. This virtue is extraordinarily difficult because it demands a constant willingness to expose our own fallibility. While that may not sound like such a big deal considering that we offer a prayer of confession every week, it can be seen as dangerous in a world that demands certainty; in a world in which we are supposed to have all of the answers. I once had a minister friend tell me that I could never admit to my congregation that I did not have all of the answers because then they would doubt me and then doubt what I was teaching...and you get the point. But if we are to grow, we need to admit that we don't know everything about who God is and what God wants of us. We should, therefore, live with a deep humility that allows us to change.

Step two is gentleness, meaning that in our humility, when we are confronted by those who disagree with us, that we do not react by attacking them, but open ourselves to new insights. This virtue is hard because it opens us to being "attacked." When I say attacked, notice I use air-quotes because we often view someone challenging our deeply held views of God, the universe and everything as an attack on our very selves; on our tightly held sense of identity. Our response then is to be defensive, or to attack back. But when we do we shut ourselves off to the possibility that they may know something about faith that we do not; that they may have an insight from God that we need to hear. We should live with gentleness if we are to grow.

Step three is patience, meaning we are willing to listen to those same voices, the voices of those who disagree with us, for an extended period of time. This takes the concept of gentleness and multiplies it. It is one thing to have a onetime conversation with someone who holds a different view than our own, but it is an entirely different thing to be engaged in a long-term relationship with someone who holds views that are entirely different than our own. As human beings we naturally gravitate toward those who see the world as we do. We seek out the companionship of those who reinforce our views of God, the universe and everything. And we have little patience for those who see the world differently. Patience calls us to long term engagement...even if we hold to our views, because it might be that it is the other who needs to learn from us. We should live with patience if we are to grow.

Step four is bearing with one another in love. This extends humility, gentleness and patience, by calling us to live sacrificially for those whose views are different from our own. If we are to grow into the very stature of Christ, then what we are called to do is to love those whose views and attitudes are very different from our own. We are to see them through the eyes of Jesus Christ and even when we do not agree with them we are to offer ourselves in sacrificial ways in order to nurture them as followers of Christ. Loving in this way can be extremely painful because it may never be appreciated or reciprocated, because the other views us as being in the wrong. Yet by stepping out in love, we begin to grow. So, we should live with love if we are to grow.

Step five is making every effort to maintain the unity in the bond of the Spirit. Not only are we to be humble, gentle, patient and loving, we are to hang in there as a single community. This is something that Christians have often found difficult to do. Just as we want to hang with likeminded people in our everyday lives, we want to do so in our Sunday lives as well. We want to be sure that everyone around us

believes, acts and lives like we do. There is great pressure then for people to either conform, or to leave. Unfortunately, when this happens, growth ends, because there is no one to challenge us to see faith, the universe and everything differently. So, we should live in unity if we are to grow.

If we want to see what growth looks like, all we have to do is to look back to this July 4th. On the 4th, NPR tweeted out the Declaration of Independence. Many people did not recognize the Declaration and assumed that NPR was calling for revolution against our current administration. When they were informed about the actual content of the tweet, there were two responses. The first, and most common, was to blame NPR and still accuse of it of liberal bias. The second came in this tweet from D.G. Davies. *“I took NPR out of context and had a stupid moment. Never underestimate one’s capacity to learn. Sometimes it’s painful. But it’s valuable above pride.”*

This is our task as Jesus’ followers, to be open to change even when it is painful, in order that we might grow into the full stature of Christ. My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourself, how am I insuring that I am open to the change the Spirit might bring, that I might be more and more mature in Christ?