

“Growth”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Hebrews 5:11-14; 6:1-3

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The Reverend Deborah Dalton Dail

Denbigh Presbyterian Church

Hebrews Text from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*

“I have a lot more to say about this, but it is hard to get it across to you since you’ve picked up this bad habit of not listening. By this time you ought to be teachers yourselves, yet here I find you need someone to sit down with you and go over the basics on God again, starting from square one—baby’s milk, when you should have been on solid food long ago! Milk is for beginners, inexperienced in God’s ways; solid food is for the mature, who have some practice in telling right from wrong. So come on, let’s leave the preschool finger painting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art. Grow up in Christ. The basic foundational truths are in place: turning your back on “salvation by self-help” and turning in trust toward God; baptismal instructions, laying on of hands; resurrection of the dead; eternal judgment. God helping us, we’ll stay true to all that. But there’s so much more. Let’s get on with it!

“We who have run for our very lives to God have every reason to grab the promised hope with both hands and never let go. It’s an unbreakable spiritual lifeline, reaching past all appearances right to the very presence of God where Jesus, running on ahead of us, has taken up this permanent post as high priest for us, in the order of Melchizedek.”

My brother and his wife, Julie, have five kids. Each year on the kids’ respective birthdays they have a “measuring tradition.” The birthday boy or girl stands tall at the door frame, now rather full of annual measurements, to have his or her new height marked. Then, with the photo-op and the measuring tradition completed, they all marvel and celebrate how much the birthday child has grown in one year.

This time of year, there’s lots of measuring going on. There are school clothes and shoes to be bought. Some of us thought the shoes and clothes we had to purchase at the beginning or even the middle of the summer might see us through the start of school. But, with all that summer growth, larger clothes and shoes are needed.

Children returning to school or home schooling are being measured for their growth, too. They are having assessment tests and evaluations to see where they are to be placed in reading and math groups based on their growth. As academic growth is measured, teachers and students also identify where more growth is needed and set goals for future growth.

This time of year is also a time of assessment for many adults. Similar to what many of us do on January 1 each year, we devote the fall is another one of those resolution times. We will begin new and better habits. We set goals for the more structured days of the “academic year.”

Today marks a new beginning in the church year. So much of what we do as a church is aligned with the academic school calendar. We launch many of our programs

and ministries in the fall. Many of us look to this new beginning as an opportunity for spiritual growth. Perhaps you resolved individually or with your family to attend worship services regularly. Maybe you started a plan to get involved in Sunday School or Bible Study in order to grow spiritually.

Spiritual growth is indeed one of the goals of the church for its members and attendees. God calls us to grow. But what is spiritual growth? How does it happen? Can it be measured? And why bother?

What is spiritual growth? The writer of Hebrews speaks very candidly. He expresses his disappointment in the believers who still need baby's milk—just the basics of the faith—rather than the solid food which more mature Christians should be chewing on, digesting and growing from. They were walking around with milk mustaches, having not explored the solid food of Christianity. Tom Long in his commentary on Hebrews suggests that the writer of Hebrews—really a preacher who is preaching his sermon to a congregation—is perhaps not as harsh as he might sound. Long asserts that the preacher is using reverse psychology. “That’s a lot more out there—a lot more to learn and experience, but you all aren’t up to it yet.”

I don’t know about you, but whenever anyone says I’m not up to something yet, I’m all the more determined to do it. For example, my sons wanted me to take them to play laser tag down in Virginia Beach. One of my friends had taken her son and had played laser tag with him. When I told my sons about this, they said: “Mom, I don’t think you’d be up to that.” I assure you that I played every round of laser tag after hearing that to prove that I was indeed up to the challenge!

The preacher wants his listeners to grow beyond Christianity 101. There’s nothing wrong with Christianity 101. It’s foundational. It’s critical. But the preacher says there’s more. We need to advance from “finger painting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art.” We need to “grow up in Christ.” We need to move from just being learners to becoming teachers. But how?

Our passage from Deuteronomy indicates that God’s people—young and old—need repetition of the scriptural truths, ritual and community in order to grow. The text speaks of having the scripture called the Shema written on doorposts, worn on their bodies, repeated several times a day and much more. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” Clearly, most of us need daily, even momentary reminders of God’s Word, God’s presence and God’s call. We need ritual—routines which help us remember God’s words and ways. We clearly need community—other people around us to remind us of God, to share the rituals with us and hold us accountable.

Recently I was in a Christian bookstore. They had some new products for sale, among them place settings of dishes with scriptures on each piece in the place setting. I was drawn to them immediately because I love dishes. At first I scoffed at the concept a bit. Scriptures around my cereal bowl? Scriptures written on my dinner plate? I also knew that my family might feel I had really “gone over the top” if I purchased these dishes. But as I read our text from Deuteronomy, I am reminded that I need God’s Word very present in my life. At my house, it would be very helpful for my cereal bowl to remind me to “Love one another as Christ loved you.” Mornings usually aren’t too easy

or too loving! We need repetition of God's word and daily reminders of God's presence in order to grow.

We grow by not only reading God's Word, but inviting and allowing God's word to migrate from our heads to our heart and then to our hands. For God's Word to stay lodged in our heads as intellectual information is not enough. God's Word is to bring us knowledge that transforms us from the inside out. Head . . . Heart and then to the hands where we live the Word.

I believe we grow spiritually through questioning and doubting. I believe we grow spiritually when we wrestle with scripture and with God. Frederick Buechner has said that doubts are the ants in the pants of faith, for doubts keep us alive and jumping. I pray this place will always be a place where you feel you can ask questions, express doubts and explore your faith. I believe we grow through questioning and doubting.

In a recent article in *Presbyterians Today*, the new director of Habitat for Humanity International, John Reckford, shared his journey and his decision to leave the corporate world and enter the non-profit sector to work with Habitat. He describes his decision as growing out of "moments of holy discontent." Reckford defines these moments as the times "when you see something and say, 'I can't stand that and I'm going to do something about it.' And then get off the couch and act." Reckford had traveled to India on a mission trip with his Presbyterian church. On the trip they served the people of the lowest caste in India—the Dalit or untouchable caste. He said that seeing the poverty, the injustice and the suffering was for him a life-changing moment of holy discontent." Spiritual growth occurs at moments like these. Moments of holy discontent often stretch us—make us grow in faith. (*Presbyterians Today*, September 2006, pgs. 20-22).

I believe we grow spiritually when we ask God to help us grow spiritually and when we respond to what God tells us. In the same issue of *Presbyterians Today* to which I referred earlier there is a cartoon called "Pontius' Puddle. The man in the cartoon is looking to heaven and saying to God: "I wonder if God can really hear me." Then, he boldly says to God: "Hey God! What should I do with my life?" A voice from heaven proclaims: "Feed the hungry. Right injustice. Work for peace!" The man who had called out to God says: "Just testing!" And God replies: "Same here." If we dare to ask God what God would have us do and be, if we dare ask God to help us grow spiritually, I believe God will answer. It won't always be what we want to hear, however.

While there are many other ways to grow spiritually, there is one other which stands out in my mind. I believe we often grow spiritually in times of struggle, hardship and suffering. We don't ask for these things, but they inevitably come in this life. While I do not believe God orchestrates our suffering in order to grow us spiritually, I do believe these times are used by God to teach us lessons we may never learn otherwise. Hardship, struggles and sufferings sometimes take us to the end of ourselves where we are humble enough to beg for help, to listen and to grow.

Well, can spiritual growth be measured like physical growth can be? What does spiritual growth look like? In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he speaks of the Fruit of the

Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness/generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Seemingly, as these fruits grow in our lives we are growing spiritually.

The writer of Hebrews suggests that one clear sign of spiritual growth and maturity is clinging to the hope which is ours in Christ Jesus—that is, the hope of eternal life; the hope of salvation secured for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is our “spiritual lifeline.” This is patient faith—a mature faith that looks beyond that which is seen to that which is unseen.

But can these signs of spiritual growth be measured? Is there a doorframe in which we can stand and be measured to see how mature we are—how much we’ve grown? No.

Therefore, I believe we must be very careful about trying to measure spiritual growth—especially that of others. I often hear conservative Christians speaking of more liberal Christians as though they had no faith at all. “How can they be Christians if they think that?” “If they are Christians, they’re not very mature in the faith.” And, I also hear more liberal Christians speak condescendingly of the conservative Christians: “They just aren’t developmentally as far a long as we are. They just haven’t come to the same level of knowledge and faith as we have. Some liberals even say, “How can they be Christians if they think that?”

I believe God would have us look inward at our own lives—at our own spiritual growth. As we look within, we will likely find many areas for growth. Among the areas I need to grow in are humility, non-judgmentalism, and love. When we look inward, we will find that assessing the spiritual growth of others is really not our job.

Finally, the toughest question of all: Do we want to grow spiritually? Is it worth it? Do we really want those moments of holy discontent which might turn our lives upside down? Maybe ignorance is bliss. Maybe baby’s milk is all we want. It’s easily digested and takes very little work for an older child or an adult to consume. Only we can decide if we really want to grow. God will continue to provide opportunities, God will continue to plant seeds, God will continue to pursue us, God will continue to meet us where we are to grow us into the believers He intends us to be.

May we today seek spiritual growth from God. And may we cling to the hope which is ours in Christ Jesus, for in the knowledge that our hope is in Him and Him alone, we find our maturity in Him and in Him alone.