

SERMON TITLE: "Christ's Gift of Growth"
SERMON TEXT: Ephesians 4:7-16 (Children's sermon based on Luke 2:41-52)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 30, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

One of the common experiences extended families have as they gather for the Christmas holidays is the attention to and comments about growing children. "Wow, Johnny, I think you've grown a foot since I saw you last!" or "My goodness, Alyssa, you're almost as tall as your mother!" And then there are the adult-to-adult, wink-and-nod remarks: "Well, Bob, you'd better watch out, or he's going to overtake you," or "Yeah, it's hard to keep clothes on these kids; they just grow like weeds."

That's the joy of childhood, when growth mostly means getting taller. Then there's the kind of growth we adults are prone to experience. The comments about that are more likely to happen during the car ride home after the holiday gathering is over. "Gosh, Frank has really put on the pounds this year, hasn't he?" or "It's too bad how much weight Sonya has gained, isn't it?"

Fortunately, though, not all childhood or adulthood growth is limited to the vertical or horizontal dimensions. For example, Luke chapter two tells us that—after 12-year old Jesus stayed behind at the temple and scared the wits out of his parents—he obediently went home with them and continued to grow, not only in stature, but also in wisdom and in divine and human favor.

This morning, I propose to you that all our life is an opportunity for positive growth. As we're still in the season of giving and receiving Christmas gifts, let's look today at Ephesians 4, and see how we might receive Christ's gift of growth.

1—GROWTH IN GRACE

We begin to see Christ's gift of growth in Ephesians 4, verse 7, where we read that "each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." The word *measure* makes me think of one of those growth charts people hang on their kids' bedroom walls, maybe with a long-necked giraffe inviting

the child to grow taller. When my kids were growing, we made marks with a pencil next to a closet door. Growth is definitely implied in this this verse. But what is being measured isn't height. It's grace. The gift of Christ to us is that we can grow in grace.

In the United Methodist Church, we talk a lot about grace. We focus on grace because John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught that God offers us grace for every phase of our life. Christians in the Wesleyan tradition believe that, before we are ever born, God surrounds us with *prevenient grace*. This grace-that-comes-before offers us a measure of spiritual protection and awakens our hearts to God. When we grow to the age of accountability and start to take responsibility for our choices and actions, then God offers to us the gift of *justifying grace*. Justifying grace is the forgiving mercy of God that erases our sins and guilt, pronounces us clean, and gives us a born-again fresh start. As we continue to struggle with temptation and sin, however, we who desire to be faithful grow to the place where we want—more than anything else—for God to shape us and perfect us in Christ's image. And, thus, we grow in Christ's gift of *sanctifying grace*—the grace that purifies and transforms our hearts as we move on toward perfection in love. Then, finally, at our death, when we are joined with God in eternity, Christ offers to us the gift of *glorifying grace*. As we develop through every age and stage of life, Christ is there for us, offering the gift of growth in grace.

In *The Faith We Sing* hymnal, there's a song that tells of God's gift of grace to us as we grow through the years of our lives. There's a verse for childhood, one for adolescence, one for the young adult years, one for middle age, and one for the time when death is drawing near. At the beginning and ending of the hymn, God's voice sings to us,

I was there to hear your borning cry;
 I'll be there when you are old.
 I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
 to see your life unfold.

(#2051, lyrics and music by John Ylvisaker, 1985)

No matter what stage of life we're in, Christ's gift comes to us as an opportunity for growth in grace.

2—GROWTH IN KNOWLEDGE

A second way Christ's gift of growth comes to us is growth in knowledge. We see this in Ephesians 4:13, where the Apostle Paul or one of his followers wrote about "the knowledge of the Son of God," and in verse 14, where he hoped that the Ephesians would "no longer be infants . . . blown here and there by every wind of teaching." In other words, one of the goals and realities for Christians is that our gift of growth will mean increases in knowledge and understanding about the Christian faith.

One of the common mistakes Christians make is that we don't open our minds to the gift of growth in knowledge. We think we learned everything we need to know about God in kindergarten Sunday School. But that's not true. Just like you first learn $2 + 2 = 4$, and then later learn subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, algebra, and trigonometry, so as we grow through the stages of life, God wants us to grasp more fully the doctrines of the faith. Yes, Jesus loves me; the Bible tells me so. But what does that mean when my teenage boyfriend dumps me? What does that mean when I get laid off from my job? What does that mean when my child is born with a disability? What does that mean when my teenage son questions his sexual orientation? What does that mean when my adult daughter is injured in an abusive relationship? What does that mean when I get bypassed for a long-sought promotion? What does that mean when my elderly father is paralyzed by a stroke? What does that mean when my wife has died, and I'm agonizingly lonely? Or, quite differently, what does "Jesus loves me, this I know" mean when I feel extremely blessed, but see the pervasive trauma of poverty, sickness, war, famine, and natural disasters all around the world?

Because our lives constantly present us with new situations and challenges, God wants to give us the gift of growth in knowledge of what the Bible says and how it should be interpreted for life today in the 21st century so it can provide us relevant comfort, correction, and guidance for every age and stage of our individual experience. God doesn't want us to be manipulated by people who distort the Christian faith. God wants us to read the Bible on a daily and regular basis, on our own and in Christian

study groups. God also wants us take advantage of high-quality books and classes that help us think and discuss with other people who are growing in their own faith discernment and knowledge.

Fortunately, we have some opportunities around here to help us with that. In the back of the sanctuary, on the table on the west side, we've laid out some schedules for reading through the Bible in a year.* You could begin using this schedule any time. But maybe now, at the beginning of a new year, is an especially great time to begin a new, daily habit of personal Bible reading. This particular schedule is simplified, so you won't have you read every chapter and verse. But it will guide you through the most important readings, so that, by the end of the year, you will have covered the essentials of the Bible. We also have a new Adult Sunday School course beginning on January 6 that will use scripture and other resources to help us learn about Implicit Bias. On January 25, a new Friday Study will begin that will help us apply our Christian faith to ministry with persons experiencing Alzheimer's and Dementia. And, of course, our youth and children's Sunday School classes will also provide opportunities for Christian learning that are appropriate to those ages. All these are Christ's gift to us for growth in knowledge.

3—GROWTH IN SERVICE

A third way we receive Christ's gift is growth in service. Ephesians 4:11-12 tells us that the gifts Christ "gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry." This ministry of service can be within the church—like singing in the choir, teaching Sunday School, cleaning the restrooms, serving on a committee, counting the offering, or shoveling the snow—or it can be beyond the church—like serving at the Lantern House homeless shelter, volunteering in a school, preparing disaster relief supplies at the UMCOR Depot, or advocating for the poor at the state legislature. The ministry of Christian people is far-reaching, and the more we do, the more we see all that needs to be done. Through Christ and the

Holy Spirit, God has given us the gift of growth in service so we can increase our interests, our skills, and our effectiveness.

Not everyone is equipped to do everything. No matter how much we would practice, most of us would never be able to play the organ the way Karen does. But maybe we do have the ability to grow in the service of hospitality, compassionate outreach, garden irrigation, fundraising for missions, computer data entry, shut-in visitation, bell-choir ringing, or church building maintenance. A bit of basic knowledge, interest, and natural talent is helpful to be sure. But the beauty of a gift of growth is that we don't have to be highly skilled at the start. Christ has given us the gift of growth in service so that we can improve over time with on-the-job training. As we put our talents to work and become more and more effective, we will see how Christ gives us the gift of growth in service.

CONCLUSION

At Christmas time, we are reminded quite clearly that God sent his Son into the world as a baby—a baby who had a lot of growing to do. Without a doubt—as he moved through infancy, boyhood, adolescence, and young adulthood—Jesus grew in grace, knowledge, and service. Without a doubt—as he called and prepared his disciples—he offered them many opportunities for their own growth, so that they could, eventually, lead growth in the body of Christ, the church. And, without a doubt, all those opportunities for Jesus and the early Christians are also opportunities for us. You may be tired of Christmas and ready to put this season behind, but let's not neglect to unwrap this important gift that God offers us today. Let's open up and celebrate Christ's gift of growth.

*http://www.fumcogdenut.org/uploads/4/9/7/4/49741753/a_year_with_the_bible.pdf