

Sunday July 24, 2022

First Lesson: Colossians 2: 6-15, 16-19

Gospel Lesson: Luke 11: 1-13

Sermon Series: Growth Effect

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**We are continuing with our sermon series called “The Growth Effect.” This is a series designed to examine the progress that we have made as a result of our many weeks spent on both the Pruning Effect and Spiritual fruit Effect sermon series.**

- So the immediate question that comes to my mind, that I think is worth exploring together when looking at our two lessons today, is the question of, **“How do we know that growth is possible?”**
- **How do we know that growth is possible**, in our individual lives?
- **How do we know that growth is possible**, in our Church communities?

- **How do we know that growth is possible**, in our work places?
- **How do we know that growth is possible**, in our familial relationships?
- **How do we know that growth is possible**, in our personal relationships that include both friendships and romantic partnerships?
- **How do we know that growth is possible**, in our finances?
- **How do we know that growth is possible**, in regards to our health and lifestyle choices that go along with maintaining our health?
- **How do we know that growth is possible**, in any aspect of our lives that we wish to see progress or make improvements on?
- So when I am presenting this sermon to you today, this is a long way of my naming, that I invite us all to expand our minds and hearts in this sermon series;

- To really assess personally, where we would like to see growth occur and **made possible** in our lives, including the areas in which our feet are blessed to kiss this Earth?
- For this same question in a sense, was the looming question behind the parable of the barren fig tree, that we talked about extensively a few months ago out of Luke 13: 6-9;
- And since it has been awhile, I will read that passage again if that is alright;

**6** *Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 So he said to the man working the vineyard, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'* **8** *He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears*

*fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.’ ”*

- So the tension and looming question that undergirds this passage of scripture is, “**Did the fig tree produce any fruit?**”
- For the parable tells us that this particular fig tree would be assigned a grounds person to dig around it, put manure on it, and essentially do everything to make the tree live in favorable conditions, **so that it can produce fruit;**
- However, the passage does not give us the final outcome does it?
- Thereby leaving inquiring minds and readers, to wrestle with the outcome all on our own;
- Is it possible for this fig tree to produce any fruit..after three years of appearing to be barren?

- **And I don't know about you, but don't you hate it when you are watching a movie, or if you are binge watching a limited-time television series, and the writers do not reveal how the story ends?**
- Doesn't it get under your skin, when that movie or television series ends, with essentially a question that will never be answered, because the show is never coming back?
- In fact I watched a series not too long ago on Netflix called, **"You Don't Know Me."**
- As a side note, I am about to get into trouble you all, because my confession is that I binge watched this series without ever introducing this to my husband **at all.**
- For those who know us well, knows that we watch **everything together**...lifetime movies, action movies, thrillers..you name it, we watch it... together!

- Well folks, I stopped by to declare, we did not watch this series together.
- Furthermore, the fact that he is learning this information for the very first time right now in this space, is not a good look for me.
- Therefore, I seek your prayers over my marriage in advance!
- So anyway, this series, “You don’t know me,” was based on a novel by Imran Mahmood, where a man is on trial for murder in the name of love.
- What made this limited series fascinating, is that the man on trial, uses his closing argument to tell his side of the story.
- The series was well done for most viewers—until the very end, where the viewer does not learn the outcome of the case.
- Instead, the viewer is presented with two outcomes, one where the man on trial is determined ‘not guilty’. He gets to resume his

relationship with his girlfriend and live happily ever after. The other outcome is that he is found guilty, and kept in prison for a very long time.

- Either way, the series is over, never to return again; leaving many who have been invested in this limited television series, frustrated per the online reviews; so much so, that now critics are posting new articles as it pertains to this series entitled “Stream it or Skip it?”
- For the rationale for many is, “Is it even worth our time watching this series, no matter how captivating it may have been, if we do not know the outcome?”
- Back to the barren fig tree parable, “Read it, or Skip it?”
- **For is it even worth studying** such a parable, if the reader does not know the outcome?”
- Those choices seems pretty simple doesn't it?

- Perhaps this is why I did not even bother inviting my husband to join me in this limited series...**that I already watched**; for if there was no clear outcome, then why even stream it?
- I suppose what I am naming is that in this logic, as sound as it may seem when we apply it to a television show or perhaps even a book, stream it or skip it; read it or skip it; this logic does not work as well, when we apply it to our lives, now does it?
- For we do not know the outcome of our lives when we are actively still living them do we?
- Furthermore, typically what I have observed a lot of us do in our lives, when we reach a place of stagnation, we typically resolve it in our minds to be something we cannot change.
- In fact a lot of us will even coin these difficult growth stages in our lives with the phrase... **“it is what it is.”**

- “I don’t care for my job, but I have been working there for 25 years....therefore....**it is what it is!**”
- Or, “I have been struggling with a certain issue in my life (insert issue), but it has been this way for so long.....**it is what it is!**”
- And don’t get me wrong, perhaps this is true... perhaps there are some things or situations in our lives, that we feel we cannot make progress on, or have a real measure of growth in, **because either the data** may indicate it, **or the facts** may allude to it, **or perhaps there are some personality challenges** that we have come up against, that may highly suggest that whatever it is....**it is what it is!**
- However, the faith **that we live by**, the teachings **that we live by**, that intuition that I am comfortable with identifying to be the Holy Spirit **that we abide in**, may tell us otherwise;

- I am talking about that still small voice within us, that sometimes whispers to us deep within, **underneath the surface** of where our fears may reside;
- underneath where our uncertainties may reside;
- Contained under the belly of where our doubts and insecurities may reside and thrive;
- Asking us this question...but what if it's not?
- **What if** there is more?
- **What if** there is another way?
- **What if** there is another approach?
- **What if** there could be another outcome; **despite what the facts** may reveal, **despite what the evidence** may uncover;
- **What if this isn't all there is?**
- This Church is where the scriptures invite us to consider this morning;
- That there is more than meets the eye to our life circumstances and situations.

- Revealing to us that *faith truly is faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* (Hebrews 11:1)
- **And so where I am gaining preaching energy and inspiration from to affirm this idea**, by the help of the Holy Spirit, which was also highlighted from our Wednesday Night Class, Applying the Sermon to Life that meets downstairs in Fellowship Hall at 5:30; is in verse 6-7 in our First Lesson of Colossians this morning, where it says, *As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to walk in him, **7** rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*
- And so to give a little background to what is occurring in this passage, before I reveal why this verse is so essential to our faith and spiritual growth;

- Paul, the assumed writer of this passage was always eager to have ethics and faith balance.
- So in this passage of scripture, Paul was urging this community, to understand that since they received faith by Christ, they are now to walk in this faith.
- It is similar to Galatians 5:25 where the Apostle urges them to “walk in the Spirit.”
- Paul was equating the community then, which could speak to our community now, to consider ourselves to be like tender plants; rooted, established in the soil of our faith, so that we can become vigorous.
- Furthermore for us to do so, Paul urged this community to constantly take Christ as their example, as they have already taken him as the object of their faith.

- For an even simpler way to look at what Paul was saying, any tree or plant **must have good roots to anchor it and keep it in place.**
- More importantly, roots are the lifeline of a plant, taking up air, water, and nutrients from the soil and moving them up into the leaves, where they can interact with sunlight to produce sugars, flavors, and energy for the plant.
- Furthermore, I stopped by to declare that **when you and I are** anchored in Christ's teachings;
- **When you and I are rooted** in Christ's example of agape love;
- We are guaranteed to grow and produce much fruit.
- Verse 9 of our Colossians passage teaches us that when we are rooted and built up in Christ Jesus, in ***Him, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.***

- **In him**, we become transformed from our old ways, and we become transformed into that true imago dei image that was already within us....but for some of us this image has been blocked somewhat.
- Some of our imago Dei's have been somewhat blocked by our own fears and perceived limitations.
- Some of our imago Dei's have been blocked by society's projected fears and imposed limitations.
- However, I will repeat myself unapologetically and name that we all have many gifts that can be useful for not just this community, but everywhere your feet kisses the Earth.
- The Church's role is to plant seeds by way of the Holy Spirit, to help clear out whatever is keeping the Imago Dei from fully coming forth.
- **Now the first lesson talks a lot about what I am naming by way of circumcision, because as an**

**Abrahamic faith, Islamic people practiced circumcision as a confirmation of their relationship with God.**

- Furthermore the practice is also known as 'tahera', meaning purification.
- With the global spread of Islam from the 7th century AD, male circumcision was widely adopted among previously non-circumcising peoples.
- However, if you and I were to sift through the cultural concerns of that day, and get to the heart of what this text is really saying to us all;
- The text is assuring us all that through Christ, we are all made new.
- Together we rise in our baptism with Christ, to share our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness, to a broken world that desperately needs to experience it and be transformed by it.

- This is why our ministry here at First UMC, focuses so much on spiritual growth and development.
- It is because in a sense, we are striving to tend to our spiritual roots both individually and collectively together.
- Looking back again to the story of Martha and Mary from last week, where Martha was trying to hurriedly get things in order for their guest Jesus; meanwhile Mary chose to sit at Jesus feet to listen;
- Here at First UMC, we are essentially striving to create these Mary moments, where we all can metaphorically sit at Jesus feet, and have our spiritual roots nourished, **so that we can** grow stronger in the areas that we need to; **so that we can** become the best leaders, collaborators, family members, partners, organizers, friends and so forth, **that we can be.**

- **Looking at our Gospel of Luke today;**
- Luke paints a picture of what will aid us in our growth effect, and I would sum it up with one word...prayer.
- In our gospel, Jesus was praying one day, which made a strong impression on those who heard.
- One of His disciples requested that Jesus teach them to pray, even as John the Baptist had taught his followers.
- As a side note, this echoes a story that Alex shared with our Wednesday night class last week, where after he taught CLASS 201 last Sunday, that focuses on developing a prayer life and spiritual discipline and practices, from there, the attendees who attended his class asked Alex something similar;
- They wanted to know how to pray.
- As a result, what is in the works is another small group on Sunday mornings, that will be held

around the 10:30 hour on just that...people checking in together just for a few minutes before the worship service, learning how to pray together.

- We will have details on that Growth effect opportunity very soon, so that whoever feels led to join in with this group can do so.
- **So getting back to the gospel, if one were to translate verse one, you might be surprised to learn that the translation from Greek is literally: “Lord, teach us to be praying.”**
- According to biblical scholars, the disciple did not say, “Teach us *how* to pray,” though that may be implied.
- Instead the true emphasis is on this idea that yes one can only learn to pray by praying.
- Just as reading good books on prayer will help as well.
- However, just as one could read a book on how to drive a car and yet be unable to drive, so one

might study a dozen books on prayer and not know how to pray.

- In this area, as in all others, only practice makes perfect.
- So with Jesus taking all of this into consideration, His response to the disciple's plea, **suggested a pattern for praying.**
- It is extremely brief, consisting only of five petitions.
- At the same time it is amazingly comprehensive, covering all the essential needs of an individual.
- Where Jesus goes into a version of the Lords prayer in verses 2-4 of our gospel;

When you pray, say:

Father, may your name be revered as holy.

May your kingdom come.[b]

**3**

Give us each day our daily bread.[c]

## 4

And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to  
us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

- Thereby, making the lesson of this parable hopefully more clearer to us all; the need for persistence in prayer.
- One of the commentators I researched reminds us that in this “Although idle repetitions in prayer are forbidden, persistency and importunity in prayer—wrestling with God, and not letting God go until God has blessed us—are here distinctly taught.”
- Making it clear that we mustn’t let go.
- We cannot give up.
- For our roots do not lie.
- Our roots are strong; 134 years strong and then some to be exact;

- For the people who have tirelessly built this community, which includes the great cloud of witnesses that always remains before us; in our history and most importantly in our hearts by God's grace, **have contributed** to our roots being **this strong;**
- **A Community** whose roots were established in 1888, by persons who were devoted to Christ's teachings and dedicated to the education that Nebraska Wesleyan University ([NWU](#)) would provide the families of University Place;
- **A Community** who has weathered many storms, including a roof collapsing with thankfully no one getting hurt, **but the roots of worship did not cease.** Jo Anne Bair shared how First once was called the "hole in the ground" Church because of us starting out worshipping in the basement. Perhaps it was then that our roots were being fully nourished and established!

- **A community** that has thrived and persisted through every social movement and more; there are truly too many to name;
- However, I suspect it was because of some of these social movements that called forth for action, justice, mercy and more, that encouraged the response of the people of First UMC of Lincoln, to have a sense of urgency, that would establish firmer roots steeped in none other than God's reconciling love;
- **And although these transitions** in our history and throughout our community have not been easy;
- **Although living** in this Lord's Prayer has not always felt attainable;
- **Although we have fallen** short at times in living out fully what it means to love God and love our neighbor;

- **Our roots have always been** dedicated in growing together, although as one of our classmates named that each of our growth sequences are different...that is ok.
- **Our roots have always been** dedicated in persisting together;
- **Our roots have always been** steeped in pursuing the One thing, that keeps us committed to growing in these Mary moments and opportunities together.
- How do we know that we can grow together?
- Our roots tells us so!
- Thereby letting us know that the growth effect is possible—thereby speaking life into our spirits that the growth effect is happening!
- Let the Church Say Amen!