

- Today, we are continuing with our sermon series, “The Growth Effect”
- The Growth Effect is designed to look at our progress as a result of the Pruning Effect and the fruits of the Spirit that we examined earlier.
- We have talked much about what The Growth Effect looks like: how to identify it, and how to pursue it, and even how to trust it.
- But, one question that was inspired by our Wednesday evening Applying the Sermon to Life class, that we have not fully explored, is from where do we learn to grow?
- From where do we learn growth?
- How are we supposed to know how to grow?
- Sure, we have the ancestor’s stories, we have the fruits of the Spirit in our lives, and we can see the Pruning Effect in our lives, but where are we supposed to learn this growth from?
- Think of it like watching YouTube. You can watch all the videos you want on how to drive, watch videos of your ancestors driving, learn how an internal combustion engine works, and even learn how to build your own car as efficiently as possible.
- But, once you sit behind the wheel, how are you supposed to know what to do?
- For years, I KNEW, in my head, how to drive a car with a manual transmission. I 100% knew, theoretically, how to drive a stick shift, but when I finally sat behind the wheel of one, I couldn’t get the darn thing to move! I just jerked back and forth in the driveway, screeching tires, grinding gears, and stalling every single time I tried.
- It takes a particular person, with experience, the skill to teach, and the drive to teach and show, to effectively train someone to drive a stick-shift car.
- It takes a particular skill set, particular experience, and the drive to teach us how to grow as well.
- And when we find this person with the skill, drive, and experience to encourage growth, it is our call to support that person, to be their foundation, to be their armor-bearer so they can effectively use their gifts and skill to feed, encourage, and help us learn to grow together into a brand new world and wilderness where we can thrive.
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- Now, what do I mean by armor-bearer?

- This last week, during our Wednesday Journey Through the Bible class, we were discussing some of the early Old Testament stories, and one that came up was that of Jonathan and his armor-bearer.
- Now, Jonathan was the son of Saul, the first King of Israel.
- There was another group in the area then, called the Philistines.
- These Philistines were dedicated to keeping Israel subjugated and weak, unable to grow in this new land of theirs.
- Israel had suffered a number of defeats at the hands of the Philistines and were pretty well outgunned and outmanned.
- Jonathan, a little impulsive, perhaps, had a reputation for just charging out and raiding the Philistines, and on this particular day, he decided to do it again.
- He went to his armor-bearer and asked him to go with him to raid a nearby Philistine camp....just the two of them.
- Now, who is this armor-bearer? What was their role?
- From the name, we can assume that they carried the armor for the other guy, but this was usually a pretty close relationship between the two.
- The officer would train and lead this person, creating a close relationship. The armor-bearer supported the officer, anticipated their needs, and gave them a solid foundation to work from when moving into new territory.
- And we see this happen in this story: Jonathan calls for his armor-bearer to go with him into uncharted territory to take on the Philistine camp all by themselves.
- This armor-bearer knew his officer well enough, knew his reputation, his skills, his gifts, and his experience, and his first response was:
- “Do what you think is best. I’m with you completely, whatever you decide.”
- He knew something was going to happen. He knew that it would be new, it would be drastic change, and it would be risky.
- He knew that it would shake up the camp, shake up the Philistines, and hopefully shake enough people up to drive a push to defeat the Philistines.
- Despite the risk, the uncertainty, and the unknown, the armor-bearer still trusted his officer’s skills, gifts, and experience, and supported Jonathan as he led them into the unknown.

- And it seemed to work out for them! Jonathan and this armor-bearer ended up tag-teaming and taking out 20 of the Philistine troops and sent their entire camp into chaos before they left, which eventually led to Saul coming in and finishing the job.
- Without the armor-bearer, Jonathan would have been unable to move.
- Without the armor-bearer, Jonathan could not have succeeded in his raid, the Philistines wouldn't have been disrupted, and Israel would have had no room to grow into the land promised to them.
- This armor-bearer ended up being just as critical to the growth of Israel as the leaders of the nation itself.
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- Jumping ahead about a thousand years, we have an unknown person writing a letter to the first generations of Hebrews to follow Christ starts talking about the same concept. This is what we're seeing in our first lesson today.
- But, it's not as clear cut as the armor-bearer story in I Samuel.
- In this lesson, we hear that we have NOT come to something that can be touched, like a fire, a building, a particular stretch of land that was promised.
- Instead, we have come to the "City of the Living God" the Kingdom of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, where there are innumerable messengers talking about and teaching of the kingdom.
- Kind of sounds like First Church here, doesn't it? So many of us involved in preparing and executing Sunday morning services, so many people involved in our Sunday education hour, our Wednesday classes, and any number of small groups and activities.
- First United Methodist Church is a bustling bastion of the kingdom of God, constantly working toward spreading the love and justice of Christ!
- Now, all the old stories of the bible talk about God's presence on Mount Sinai, how his voice rumbled and shook the earth, the physical earth.
- But, this passage in Hebrews is telling us that something new is happening, not only the earth will be shaken, but the heaven as well. The Kingdom of God. The place where we are.
- But what is being shaken? What are we looking at or feeling with this?
- This tells us that the shaking is specifically designed for one purpose: to remove excess.

- To remove the old stuff we still cling to
- To shake us down to the core of the kingdom of God, to learning what we need to from who we need to, rather than holding on to old traditions that keep us blind, that keep us bound to the same positions, that keep us from being with each other and supporting each other.
- In short, these old systems, are designed to be shaken free as we move forward into new growth in new wilderness.
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- As Kirstie told us all last week, the promise that we are given is that of new cuttings, new life, in the image of the original, but planted in new ground for new growth.
- This means that we aren't growing in the same place we have been.
- It's a brand new environment.
- We're not in the same pot that we were in. We're not crowding out others, nor are we being crowded out.
- We can learn from previous growth and see patterns of how growth happened, but the pure nature of the wilderness is that we are going to experience new things and new obstacles that our predecessors did not experience.
- Because of that, we can't possibly grow in the exact same way and in the exact same patterns as the ancestors.
- We can take lessons, and learn concepts, but the actual growth has to be new and appropriate to the environment we have been planted in.
- This is why the old is being shaken off.
- This is the Philistine camp that Jonathan and the armor-bearer were running into.
- Today's environment.
- We can ready Hebrews all we want, but I can 100% guarantee you that there is nothing specific in Hebrews about how to deal with a global pandemic or a highly-polarized political divide in a massive democracy.
- We are the new generation, the new cuttings, the new growth, in a new wilderness.
- We need to look for, and follow, those who are gifted to grow into and lead into this new wilderness.

- Those whose prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness and specifically designed for such a time as this.
- Designed for 2022 and beyond.
- Designed to grow where the ancestors would have no clue on how to grow.
- And we are called to be the armor-bearers for these people.
- To support and provide a solid foundation for them. To trust their skills and gifts and follow them as they lead us into what is new growth.
- To support them as they free us from the bondage of the old ways so we can stand tall and move forward in confidence.
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- Jesus himself portrays this in our gospel lesson for today.
- Here in the gospel of Luke is a story of being freed from bondage and freed to new growth.
- A little bit of background, though.
- In this time, the Jewish people had their Sabbath day.
- This stems from the 10 Commandments, where God commanded them to have a Sabbath day, and to keep it holy.
- Many of their laws centered around this, preventing working from being done on the day, and in some cases, even restricting how far one could walk on the day.
- Now, on this Sabbath day, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue.
- Suddenly, a woman shows up, who had been crippled by what is called “a spirit” for 18 years.
- For 18 years. 18 years ago was 2004.
- Imagine being bent in half, unable to stand, unable to grow, unable to effectively do much.
- Every single second of every single day since August of 2004.
- Jesus saw her and immediately called her over.
- When she arrived, he said to her “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”

- She immediately stood up straight, for the first time since 2004, able to stretch her back.
- For the first time in 18 years, able to look forward.
- For the first time in 18 years, able to look another person in the eyes.
- For the first time in 18 years, able to smile at another person and see them smile back.
- Of course, she started immediately praising God for freeing her from this agonizing bondage!!
- Many of her friends and people there started too!
- But the story doesn't end there, because one more person just had to pipe up.
- The leader of the synagogue decides now is the best time to start quoting the law.
- Now, keep in mind, Jesus was doing the talking, and Jesus just did the healing, and this was all done on the Sabbath, when no one was allowed to do any work.
- How dare Jesus do work on the Sabbath, right?
- Wrong. That's not what this guy says.
- He turns to the crowd, and then blames the woman for the issues.
- He says to the crowd. "You all know you can only work for 6 days, right? How dare you come on the 7th day to be healed!!"
- HE. BLAMED. THE. WOMAN. FOR. BEING. HEALED. ON. THE. WRONG. DAY.
- This REEKS of using the old traditions to maintain power.
- It's the same as churches today restricting the pulpit to only those whose reproductive organs are on the outside, rather than the inside.
- These are the bonds that God is shaking us to remove and dissolve.
- What was Jesus' response to this synagogue leader, though?
- Jesus, who at this point had essentially just been an onlooker, turns to the leader and chews him out 9 ways from Sunday!
- "You hypocrites!" he yells at him. "Do you not untie your ox or your donkey and lead it to water on the Sabbath?? And what about this woman? This "daughter of Abraham" he says. 18 YEARS she's been bound by Satan, doubled over, unable to grow, and somehow, she's less worthy to be cared for than your donkey?"

- There's a key word here that we found during our Wednesday evening class: Satan. Jesus says this woman has been bound by Satan. What does that mean? Is Satan a physical entity that came through and tied her up?
- There is a ton of information and ideas about Satan out there, much of it from famous fictional pieces of work, but as far as the Bible goes, it's interesting to see how the idea of Satan progresses and changes slightly through time.
- But when we look at what precisely the word "Satan" means, and at how it fits in the context of the few times the name actually shows up, we get a different perspective.
- The Bible first talks about Satan as an "adversary." Nothing specific, not a particular person, just "an adversary."
- But, by the time of Jesus, that definition had been clarified and specified.
- We get a clear picture of Satan as, yes, an adversary, but one who is an accuser or a slanderer.
- Satan is that which prosecutes and accuses, but with hostile intent.
- It is that which does everything in its power to take someone down, for no good reason. Sometimes it's spite, sometimes it just doesn't like you, but often, it's just cause that is what Satan does.
- Satan has no sense of justice or reality. It looks for something different, declares it evil, and does everything it can to shut it down.
- So, when Jesus says this woman has been bound by Satan, is it a literal binding by Satan? Or is it a massive, unlucky inconvenience?
- That question is moot. It's nonsensical. It's neither, and it's both. The fact of the matter is that she is being prevented from being her full self, both by the ailment, and by the synagogue leader who is trying to deny her healing because it was on the Sabbath.
- In this case, both the synagogue leader, AND the ailment are acting as Satan.
- But this also means that we, church, can be Satan at times. Do we find ourselves limiting the effectiveness of others? Refusing to let people serve with their gifts because they're different, or not the right fit, or somehow not quite qualified?
- Are we sure we're edifying the church? Or are we being Satan, and putting people into bondage to maintain the old traditions?
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- “Daughter of Abraham”
- This phrase was very interesting to our Wednesday night class. It seems like a very particular turn of phrase.
- Turns out, this is somewhat of a catchphrase for Jesus. He uses the term “child of Abraham” to make particular points elsewhere, even when the subject wasn’t Jewish.
- Paul, in the book of Romans, clarifies this for us when he points out that “a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God”
- When Jesus called Zaccheus a child of Abraham, and this woman a daughter of Abraham, he’s not just naming them as part of the Jewish nation, he’s making a very specific point. That these people get it.
- This woman, rather than complaining of a sore back after being bent over for 18 years, when she’s healed, immediately starts praising God for her new freedom and ability to grow.
- This is the work of Christ, church. The work that we, as a church, are called to continue. To follow leaders, to be armor-bearers for leaders, who have been freed to lead us into new growth in new wilderness.
- To unbind the bound, and empower people bound by the old traditions, to empower women, to stand up straight and tall and to be who they are designed to be.
- To support them, to follow them, to hear them and listen to their gifts, skills, and experience in such a time as this.
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- This is why I am glad to be here church.
- Leaders in the church are called to be leaders, regardless of any physical trait. Old tradition tells us that leadership is limited to men. God has shaken the world and has shaken that old tradition of bondage off our shoulders.
- He has freed us from the ailment that keeps women bound and bowed, and freed women to be equal to everyone, to look anyone and everyone right in the eye. To lead.
- Week after week, I see Kirstie, a strong, powerful, gifted woman with the skills, experience, and gifts to lead our church into our new wilderness of 2022 and beyond.
- She stands straight and tall in who she is, the spiritual leader we need for solid and good growth.

- I am proud to be an armor-bearer for her.
- To enthusiastically, and without hesitation, say “Do what you think is best. I’m with you completely, whatever you decide.”
- I can see her gifts; I can see how they are helping to grow this church, to solidify it, and to strengthen it.
- She has what it takes to grow into the new wilderness, and so, that is the answer to the question: From where do we learn growth? From the leaders. From those who have the skills and experience. For us at First United Methodist, from Kirstie.
- Church, every week, we talk about furthering the Kingdom of God. We talk about the work of justice, of reconciliation, of inclusion. We made and adopted our statement of inclusion in 1985.
- That was then. This is now.
- We are a new generation.
- We are cuttings from that generation.
- We are growing into a new wilderness, and we have the leaders to guide us.
- Let us not be the old traditions to be shaken off.
- Let us not be the ones too terrified to run into the wilderness to find new growth.
- Let us not be Satan, binding our leaders with old structures, traditions, and useless boxes.
- Church, let us listen, let us learn, let us be armor-bearers, and let us bring the love, justice, and reconciliation of Christ in a new way to a new world.
- THE KINGDOM OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD.
- THANKS BE TO GOD!
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