

**“The Significance of Growth and Ways to Pursue It”**

**John 15:1-8**

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In his book *Practice Resurrection* beloved pastor and professor Eugene Peterson presents an extended study on the book of Ephesians with a sustained emphasis on what the text calls growing up into Christ in every way. Peterson argues passionately and with much biblical support that Christian faith is not just about the beginning pieces of salvation and baptism. It is about growing throughout our journey. But somehow this seems to have been lost by the church in our culture.

In the book’s introduction, Peterson says this (p. 3).

First birth and then growth. Neither metaphor stands alone. Birth presupposes growth, but growth proceeds from birth. Is it an exaggeration to say that birth has received far more attention in the American church than growth? I don’t think so. It is true that the metaphor of growth is used frequently, as in ‘church growth’ and ‘growing churches’. But it is also obvious that the metaphor has been torn out of its origin in biology and emasculated into an abstract and soulless item of arithmetic, a usage as remote from the biblical soil as is imaginable - an outrageous perversion of the metaphor and responsible for an enormous distortion in the Christian imagination in what is involved in living in the kingdom of God.

It is a pointed claim, but a difficult one to refute. It is true that in many ways churches like ours tend to struggle more with birth. We are reticent to talk openly about our faith and thus can’t even use words like “witness” and “evangelism” without cringing. But the church as a whole in our culture struggles more with growth, it’s why there are so many immature Christians, and even in churches like ours there is not a universal and sustained commitment to growth.

The familiar words we have read today from John 15 underscore just how significant growth is. Jesus presents a familiar metaphor in which God is the vinegrower, he is the vine and we are the branches. It is a literary form called a *mashal* where there is one image with many applications to everyday life. We know the image and have explored some its applications before, but the basic concern here is growth.

One does not plant anything, including a vine, wanting it to remain exactly as it is. There are certainly plants and shrubs that can grow too fast, like kudzu and certain varieties of wisteria. There are times when we need to know just how much something will grow. For example, previous owners of our house in Richmond, Virginia, planted a kousa dogwood right next to the house, not realizing how tall it would grow. But we don't plant anything wanting it to remain exactly as it is.

The vine Jesus describes in John 15 is intended to grow. We know this because he talks about the branches needing to bear fruit and he says that branches which do not bear fruit will be thrown into a fire. Growth is desired so that fruit can be produced and we don't have to work very hard to figure out what kind of fruit Jesus is talking about here. There are numerous lists of spiritual fruit in the Christian Testament. We are talking about things like kindness, patience, gentleness, mercy and love.

Most of all, if are looking at Jesus, we are talking about love. As today's reading from 1 John says, those who claim to love God but hate their brothers and sisters are liars. For love is from God and those who love God love their brothers and sisters. There is no fear in love, the author says, but perfect love casts out fear. Or in the words of a new U2 song, love is bigger than anything in its way.

What this means in the context of the metaphor is that we as branches are called to grow in our love for others throughout our lives, not remain the same, not speak and act as we did when we were five or sixteen or thirty or any other age. We are not even to remain as we were at the moment of our baptism. We are called to grow throughout life.

The author of Hebrews expresses frustration at early believers who should be eating the solid food of faith, but still need milk (5:11-14). You can almost hear him say – baby's milk. You need baby's milk! That is not God's desire. We are called to grow.

The question is – how do we do that? How do we make sure that we grow in faith as we should? Jesus describes a couple of ways we can ensure growth, both of which are familiar to us at some level. The first is called pruning. It’s what we do to plants to facilitate growth. It not just a way of cutting away weak or dead spots; it’s a way of stirring growth for the whole plant or shrub.

This was a concept I understood only in a limited way when I got married almost thirty-one years ago, but fortunately I was wise enough to marry someone with more horticultural sense than me. I didn’t think you should cut back the crepe myrtles that far. Do we really have the trim the shrubs that much? There is nothing like getting resistance from someone who knows nothing about what he is talking about!

Now, there are ways to prune and ways not to prune. Exhibit A is what some call “crepe murder” because of how poorly the plants are butchered. And there are times to prune and times not to prune. I know this now. But pruning is critical to growth in plant life and in our lives.

Some of the pruning critical to growth concerns things that just ought not be in our lives – attitudes, habits and practices that are just not consistent with Christian discipleship. Not everything in life must change with our conversion. St. Augustine was a rhetoric professor before he became a Christian and so, when he was baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rhetoric came forth walking in newness of life. We call it the sermon in modern-day form.

Some previous ways of being may be appropriate while others may not. In one setting where I served, a new couple ran a Casino business, not real gambling as that would have been illegal in that state, but an entertainment Casino in bars. They actually offered to do a Casino Day for the church, but even though this was a pretty openminded church, we couldn’t quite embrace that idea.

Some habits may need to be pruned, but pruning for growth involves more than addressing things that ought not be in our lives; it also involves cutting back on the clutter and sometimes choosing to say “no” to some practice so that we can so “yes” to another. Time is limited for all of us. We cannot add more and more, even of good things, and not subtract something.

If we want to make more time for family, something has to be cut back on, whether it is work or golf or tennis or hanging out with the guys or gals. If we want to make more time for church, something has to be cut back on. If we want to grow in faith, we have to make room to grow, we have to make time to grow, it doesn't just happen.

And sometimes pruning just means cutting something out and putting nothing in its place. Sometimes that's how we grow the most, by doing less so that we can do what we do well.

In his book *Simplicity – The Art of Living* Franciscan Richard Rohr talks about what he calls A Spirituality of Subtraction. Building upon the thinking of German mystic Meister Eckart, he says that spiritual life has more to do with subtraction than addition. In the West, he says, we have twisted the Gospel, making everything into a quest for spiritual success. We become the center of everything rather than the tiny part of creation that we are, a part that reflects only a fragment of God's glory. We don't need to do or be everything. Playing our small part is enough. Thus, it's "O.K." to slow down. We have nothing to prove to the One who loves us. Put another way, there is this thing called grace, and this kind of grace, the grace to slow down, is something we all need.

So, there are many ways to prune, but pruning is not the only thing Jesus talks about in this text. He also talks about abiding in him. As the branches must remain connected to the vine to grow, we must remain connected to Christ. I think of all the ivy we had in our yard when we moved here, some of it rising high into the trees. We couldn't climb the trees, but we could cut off the vines at their roots. When we did, they died, thus leaving less room for certain slithering creatures which shall not be named in Mary Alice's presence to hide. In like manner, if we are cut off from our source of life who is Christ, we wither and die.

So, our calling is to abide not only so that we may live, but that we may thrive and grow and bear fruit in God's realm. The question is – how do we do that? How do we make sure we abide in the true vine?

There are, of course, many different ways. Personal habits of devotion certainly help, though they may take many forms over time, and they don't always lead to the same experience. There may be days

when we feel very close to God, so much so that we feel like we can almost touch our Maker. I have experienced this in majestic locations like the mountains of Kenya and the shores of Lake Galilee, and in my own backyard. But there may also be days when we feel nothing at all.

In his book *Sabbatical Journey*, written during what turned out to be the last year of his life, spiritual guide Henri Nouwen writes about a period when he feels nothing in his prayer life, nothing at all, one of the greatest spiritual thinkers of the twentieth century! And yet, he kept at it, which is the key. He kept trying to root his life in Christ when it felt like he was getting somewhere and when it did not.

Perhaps that's what is most important, that we want to abide in Christ, remain connected to the source of our existence who is, all the while, wanting to remain connected to us. Thomas Merton once said that while he could not be sure that he was following God's will even when he was trying to, he trusted that the desire to please God does, in itself, please God. In like manner, the desire to abide in Christ goes a long way to enabling us to abide.

But there are other things we can do as well, like sharing in times of corporate worship like we are now and engaging in habits of service to others. Jesus did say that we would find him present in the hungry and thirsty, in the unclothed and imprisoned, in the alien or stranger in the land. Sometimes the best way we abide in Christ is not in some private place of reflection, but in some public place where life is messy and someone needs help. That's where our true vine just might be.

There was a seminary student years ago who had finished her degree, but wanted to make sure she continued growing. So, she asked her mentor for guidance. His wise counsel was to go to the ghetto, to live and serve among the poor. He told her she needed to take some of her blood, too much of which had been concentrated in her brain during her studies, and redistribute it throughout her body.

It was wise counsel for her and us. Growth happens in many ways, not all inside our heads, and not all when we are alone with God.

In his book *Leaving Home* Garrison Keillor includes a story entitled "How The Crab Apple Grew". Young Becky Diener has to

write a 750-word essay for Miss Melrose's English class. The assignment is to describe her backyard as if she were seeing it for the first time. How can you do that, she thought; if you'd never seen it, you would have grown up somewhere else?!

But eventually she gets into the assignment and reflects upon a particular tree linked to her parents' history of knowing each other and eventually falling in love. There is not time here to go into the details, but it is important to say that that crab apple trees and branches figure prominently in the story. When Harold proposed to Marlys, he did so coming out of the woods with a bouquet of flowering crab apple.

The tree came about years later when some of the gloss had worn off their life. Harold, trying to impress his kids and make his wife laugh, decided to jump off the garage roof. He landed the wrong way and twisted his ankle. As he lay in pain, his eyes full of tears, the kids said, "Poor Daddy." Marlys said, "You're not funny. You're ridiculous."

He got up, went into the woods and got her a pint of morels and a branch from a flowering crab apple. He cut a root from another crab apple and planted the root in the ground. "Look kids," he said, and sharpening the branch with his hatchet, he split the root open and stuck the branch in, wrapping a cloth around it. "Now, there will be a tree," he said. "Daddy, will that really be a tree?" they said. "Yes," he said. "Don't be ridiculous," said Marlys.

He watered it and tended it and, more than anything else, he came out late at night, bent down and said, "GROW. GROW. GROW." The graft held, it grew, and one year it was interesting, and the next it was impressive, and then wonderful and finally it was magnificent, the most magnificent thing in the Dieners' backyard.

Becky finished writing her 750 words, Keillor says, adding that a backyard is a novel about us, and when we sit there on a summer day, we hear the dialogue and see the characters.

There are many things that lead to growth, but somewhere near the top of the list is the desire to grow. If we understand our calling to grow up into Christ in every way, we have that desire and are willing to do whatever it takes - a little pruning, a lot of abiding, even bending down at night and whispering, "Grow!" Growth is worth whatever it takes.