

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“What is Spiritual Growth, and what Difference does it Make?”

Ephesians 4:1 – 16
Acts 9:19b – 31

February 21, 2016

I go to the gym five or six days a week to work out; and one of the main things that I'm trying to accomplish by doing so, is to grow in my level of physical fitness. So I ride the stationary bike, and I use the elliptical training machine, and I do push-ups and sit-ups and all that sort of thing; all in the effort to become more fit. And I'll be able to tell if I'm *becoming* more fit because, if I am, I'll lose some weight, and I'll be able to ride the bike a little faster a little longer, and I won't have a heart attack every time I try to keep up with the workout that Jerry Adams is doing! That's physical fitness *growth*... and I'm pretty sure most of us have at least some understanding of what it is and how it works.

And suppose I wanted to grow in my knowledge and understanding of the Civil War. To do that, I'd read a lot of books about the war, and I'd probably visit a lot of Civil War battlefields, and maybe I'd watch the Ken Burns documentary on the war, and I'd spend a lot of time hanging around Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, perusing all the archives and exhibits which are housed there.

And I'd be able to tell that I was growing in my knowledge and understanding of the war, because I'd be a kind of amateur expert on it all. I'd be able to lead discussions about it, and answer questions about it, and give opinions about it that other people might find convincing... and the complexities of the war would seem less complicated to me. That's historical growth, or intellectual growth... and I'll bet that most of us have a pretty good understanding of what *that* is and how it works.

And there are many other kinds of growth that you and I deal with and experience at various times in our lives... we grow in age, as we get older; we grow in experience as we spend more time on the job; we grow in skill as we practice a sport or a musical instrument; and on, and on, it goes. Over the years we experience all kinds of growth; and most of the time we understand it, and it makes sense to us. But there's another kind of growth that we talk about a lot around *here*, that we may not understand quite so well.

It's a very important kind of growth... but if we're honest, we'd probably admit that there's a lot we don't know about it; that we're not even completely sure what it is, or what it looks like, or what difference it's supposed to make in our lives. And, of course, the growth that I'm talking about is *spiritual growth*; the growth that happens to us, or at least is supposed to happen to us, as we live the life of Christian discipleship; and as we make progress in our efforts to be faithful followers of Jesus; and as we mature in our relationship with God.

We often talk about “growing in faith,” or “growing spiritually,” or “growing in our life with Jesus.” But, what does all that mean, really? Is it like working out? Or losing weight? Or getting older? Or developing a skill, or a talent, or a knowledge of some thing or other? What exactly *is* spiritual growth... and what difference does it make; to you, to me, to our life as Christian disciples? That's the focus of the sermon this morning; and what I want to do is to offer

a few thoughts and reflections which will, hopefully, strengthen our understanding of spiritual growth... and help us to appreciate its importance to our ongoing life of faith.

And I want to begin by talking for a minute about what spiritual growth *isn't*... or at least what it doesn't necessarily *have* to be. Because I think that sometimes we may have some misconceptions about the idea of "growing spiritually" which cause us to be afraid of the whole enterprise... you know, as if it's going to lead us into beliefs and practices which may be great for Baptists and Pentecostals, but which will cause Presbyterians to run for cover.

I think sometimes when we hear "spirituality" or "spiritual growth" we conjure up images of people speaking in tongues, or falling over backwards as some televangelist taps them on the forehead, or handling snakes, or other kinds of supernatural manifestations of God's Spirit that make us very uneasy. And I'm not saying that supernatural displays of the Spirit of God are all wrong, or invalid, or phony... not at all. But what I *am* saying is that spiritual growth, isn't limited to just *that!* There's more, much more, to growing spiritually than jumping over pews, and speaking in tongues, and waving our hands, and having God miraculously solve all our problems for us.

Spiritual growth may involve some of that, for some people, sometimes... but it may not; and it doesn't have to. So the first point that I want us to get is that we all probably need to *broaden* our understanding of spiritual growth... and realize that it's for *all* Christians everywhere; and not just for a few certain denominations, which may worship God in a certain specific way. Our spiritual growth may or may not seem "supernatural" or "miraculous." But whether it does or it doesn't, it's still going on... and it's still making a difference... and it's still helping us to become better and more effective Christian disciples.

And that, then, leads us to some thoughts as to what "spiritual growth" actually is... and what difference it makes in our lives. And a great place for us to find a nice working definition of "spiritual growth" is found in our Scripture lessons for this morning. In the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul the Apostle says this:

"I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

And then, speaking of Jesus, Paul goes on to say:

"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Then, in our lesson from the Book of Acts, we have a story *about* the recently converted Paul the Apostle, and his efforts to be received and accepted by the Christian believers in Jerusalem. And, although Paul is admittedly a pretty extreme example, he nevertheless gives us a glimpse of what someone looks like when they've experienced spiritual growth.

"Saul (who would go on to be called Paul) spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?'"

And then we're told:

"Barnabas took (Saul) and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus."

Okay, so what do these passages tell us about spiritual growth? Well, first and foremost, they tell us that spiritual growth is an ongoing process in the life of a Christian believer... in which that person is changed from something that he or she once was, into something new; into an altogether new kind of person. And, drawing on what Paul says elsewhere in Ephesians, what we once were, were people who are sinful, worldly, self-centered, and alienated from God... and the new thing that we're becoming are people who are less sinful, less worldly, more other-centered, and reconciled with God.

"Spiritual growth" describes that process by which we step *out of* all about us that is ungodly, un-Christian, and unrighteous... and step *into* a new persona, which is godly, and Christian, and at least in some small way, righteous. (Not self-righteous! But righteous in the sense of trying to be in tune with God's ways and God's will.) Now, this process can happen very quickly, as it did with Paul... who was knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus, and pretty much became a Christian disciple overnight; or it can happen very slowly, and gradually, and over many years' time... as has probably been the case with most of us.

But, no matter how quickly, or how slowly, it's happening... to experience spiritual growth means to be changed; into a new person, a "new creation" as the New Testament puts it, who is becoming more, and more like Jesus, and caring more and more about the things which He cared about.

Okay, that all sounds well and good... but, what does this change from old into new creation look like? How will we know if we're making any real progress in our spiritual growth? That's a good question, because it's very easy to talk the talk of spiritual growth... and to go through the motions of acting the part of someone who's becoming more like Jesus. But, as the old saying goes, talk is cheap, right? And as Jesus Himself once said, the tree will be known by the fruit that it actually *bears*, not by all its pious talk *about* the fruit!

Through all my many years as a pastor, some of the most hateful and mean-spirited behavior that I've seen has been perpetrated by people who talk constantly about the love, and the peace, and the grace of Jesus. So, how can we know that we're really growing spiritually... and not just mouthing the language about spiritual growth?

Well, Paul references some very important spiritual growth attributes in his words to the Ephesians... and while these attributes don't cover the waterfront of all aspects of spiritual growth, I think that they're a pretty good place to start. And the first thing that Paul mentions is: humility. Realizing that life and faith are not "all about me..." but that the lives and faith of others is also of infinite value and importance. In our world, where making ourselves the center of the universe is a daily preoccupation for so many, to practice genuine humility is a great way to grow spiritually.

Next, Paul lifts up: gentleness. A needed and appropriate antidote to the ruthless, hard-edged, "out of my way," "in your face," aggressiveness of our time. To treat people with kindness, and mercy, and understanding tenderness may not win us many points in any "tough guy" competitions... but it will help us make real progress in our efforts to really be more like Jesus.

Paul then sings the praises of: patience. Need I say more? We live in the age of impatience and running roughshod over people who get in our way. Even now in the middle of winter, right here in our village, people still drive like they're on their way to the emergency room after being bitten by a cobra. A three minute wait in line at the bank causes people to act like they're being held up from getting on the last lifeboat off the Titanic. To this frantic treatment of others Paul says, "Calm down; be cool; relax; and be patient with those around you." And in so doing, we become a little more like Jesus in our hearts and souls.

Paul then counsels the Ephesians to: bear with one another in love. Which may be one of the most Christ-like things that we can do... since every day of our lives, Jesus bears with *us*, in love, as we fall on our fannies over a dozen different kinds of sin and goof up. To try to bear with others, as Jesus bears with us... is to make great progress in the cause of spiritual growth.

All of which leads, at the end of the day, to our becoming more *mature* in our faith... which is the real goal of spiritual growth in the first place. To have a mature faith... that's more than slogans, and opinions, and half-formed ideas about something the Bible may or may not actually teach. A mature faith... which asks every day, "Is what I'm doing consistent with what my Lord expects of me?" A mature faith... which isn't satisfied with being tomorrow as I am today, but which insists on growing, and changing, and learning, and becoming the person that Jesus really wants me to be. That's what spiritual growth really is... and that's what spiritual growth is really all about.

So, there you go. To grow, to change, to mature, and to become better able to be about the work of the kingdom of God. This, in a nutshell, is what it means to grow spiritually. May each of us reflect and consider how we're doing in that effort... and trust that, whether we've made great progress, or whether we're just getting started, that our risen Lord will be there to help us every step of the way!

That's His promise... and that's our quest! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!