

40 DAYS OF COMMUNITY-CONNECTED TO GROW TOGETHER

By Rev. Leo Douma
25th May 2008

I read a quote the other day that said "Growing old is inevitable. Growing up is optional". The story is told of a man who was very excited to go to a forty year old school reunion. The closer the day came the more he began to think of all the wonderful stories he would hear about the changes and achievements of his old friends. The day after the reunion a friend saw him and asked how the reunion went. The man said "It was one of the saddest experiences of my life." "Why, what happened" asked the friend. "It wasn't what happened but what didn't happen. It has been forty years, forty years and they haven't changed. They have simply gained weight, changed clothes, gotten jobs...but they haven't really changed. And what I experienced was maybe one of the most tragic things I could ever imagine about life. For reasons I can't fully understand, it seems as though some people chose not to change." There was a silence for a while. Then the man said to his friend: "I never, never want that to be said of me. Life is too precious, too sacred, too important. If you ever see me go stagnant like that, I hope you give me a swift kick where I need it- for Christ's sake. I hope you'll love me enough to challenge me to keep growing." Today is the fourth Sunday in the 40 Days of Community. Our theme is "**Connected to grow together**". Our spiritual growth is a very important aspect of our being in community together. If we are not growing spiritually there is something seriously wrong. Let me put this way. We all love babies. There's something delightful about the innocence and angelic look of our little ones. You just want to open your arms and cuddle them. But, cute as babies are, and even though at times we wished they would stay small and cuddly, we all know they are supposed to grow up. If a small child never learns to walk and talk, never figures out how to feed himself, never grows out of his need for nappies, it's a sign that something is terribly wrong. My brother has a son with Down Syndrome. He is in his early twenties with the mind of a toddler. The antics of a toddler can be cute in a three year old, but so sad in a twenty year old. We are all supposed to grow up and become mature adults. It's the same thing for all of us spiritually.

But why? Why do we have to grow up? Why can't we stay as spiritual babes? You know, as long as I trust Jesus and will go to heaven, why do I need to become spiritually mature? Look at Ephesians 4:14 "*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.*" Paul mentions two problems about being "*infants*". The first is "*being tossed back and forth.*" He gives the picture of a little boat in a huge storm, first going in one direction, then tossed in another direction. Children are like that. They have short attention spans, five minutes on this then five minutes on that, like a storm, all over the place. Teenagers can still be like that, when their hormones kick in. One minute they are in their grunt mode, the next like a storm blowing through the house they are all excited, on a high. The second childish behaviour Paul mentions is being naïve and undiscerning. They are those caught up "*...by the cunning and craftiness of men in deceitful scheming...*" Our children can be so naïve to danger, like a toddler approaching a power point with a fork. We freak out when we see it, but the little one is oblivious to the danger. Teenagers too can be so naïve, taking terrible risks because they don't think through the consequences. That's the sort of problems you have with baby Christians. Instead of a steady grasp of the whole of scripture, there's a chasing after the latest fad, the latest book they have read, or that preacher who sounded so good. Baby

Christians are so easily led along by the culture we are in because they don't have the biblical sense to see where it's wrong. Baby Christians are easily distracted from focusing on the kingdom of God, to focusing instead on wealth, material possessions, fame or whatever. Staying baby Christians is not right. We are supposed to grow up and mature, for our sake and God's sake. A growing Christian is less vulnerable to temptation, is more joyful in the Lord and thankful, and is more stable in a time of crisis.

So, what does this maturity look like? We have an idea of what it's like to grow up physically, and even mentally, socially, I'm sure. But what does spiritual maturity look like? Well Ephesians 4:13 says we are to "...become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." And verse 15 says "...we are to grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ." So what does maturity look like? It looks like Christ. If we are growing in maturity, our character is becoming shaped more and more like Jesus. That is God's goal for us. Keith Green, the Christian song writer wrote the lyrics "I want to, I need to be more like Jesus/ The end of all my prayers/ is to care like my Lord cared/ My one and only goal/ his image in my soul/ He's faithful and he's true/ to complete the work he began in you." The apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 2: "*Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus. Who being in very nature God did not cling to his rights as God, but humbled himself...to the cross.*" Thinking of this one commentator has suggested four levels of maturity. 1. "I'm going to do what I want, regardless of any thought for God". 2. "If God gives me what I want, then I will give him what he wants" 3. I will give God what he wants, with faith he will give me what I want". 4. "I will give God what he wants, regardless of any thought for myself". Do you recognize yourself any where in these? How is your maturity?

So if maturity is the goal, being more like Jesus is what we are all to become, how do we get there? Well note verse 14 where Paul is concluding his sentence: "UNTIL *we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the son of God and BECOME MATURE...*" Note also verse 15 "*Instead (ie instead of being tossed about infants) speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up... From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*" Now do you see the things there that lead to growth- "*unity in the faith and knowledge of the son of God...speaking the truth in love, ...supporting each other in love, ...each doing their work.*" We see two factors for growth here. The first is a "*build up*" in the "*unity of the faith*". Not just a growth *in faith*, but in the unity of the faith. In other words it is a shared understanding by everyone in the church of the great truths of the bible. That is, we as a community all share in the receiving and telling of the story of what God has done in Jesus. The unity of the faith comes about by us teaching each other. It may be a mother telling the stories to the child on her lap. It may be an elder with the bible open on a home visit. It may be a minister preaching. It may be a group in bible study sharing insights or a friend sharing and praying with another over coffee. As a church we all have the one faith. And we are to build each other up in that faith. Baby Christians will grow when they make an effort to understand the bible with the help of the more mature Christian. Now you notice it's a growth in unity. It is a growing up together in our understanding. It is a communal affair, not just an individual one. Faith is lived and shared and grown in community. The implication is that the growth will not be so good where there is not an increase in shared understanding. So you can see the need for each of us to be part of the everyday life of the church. We need to learn to bounce off each other if we are to mature. That's why the devotional book "**Better Together**" will this week talk about being examples to each other, encouraging and teaching each other, even warning,

confessing and forgiving each other. Over the years I have noticed something; where there are those who say they are Christians but don't need the church, you will tend to see individuals who continually struggle on the same points. There isn't a lot of movement or growth. Our becoming like Christ, our unity in the faith, is a "*building of the body*" says Paul. It's something we do with and to each other.

The second factor is that there must be an increase "*in the knowledge of the son of God.*" This is a bit different to the previous growth element. '*Knowledge*' here is not just an intellectual knowing of Christian doctrine, but a personal knowing of Jesus himself. And how does this personal knowing increase? It comes by being constantly in prayer with the Lord, seeking, realizing his presence, knowing him to be with us. And that knowing, that experiential knowledge of Jesus, occurs when the knowledge of faith is put into practice. Look with me at 1 John 2:3-5. "*We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commandments. He man who says "I know him" but does not do what he commands is a liar and the truth is not in him. But if any one obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete (that is mature) in him. This is how we are in him. We must walk as Jesus did.*" To know Jesus personally we must follow him. We must walk in his steps. Imagine being at the beach as a child and playing a game with your dad. He walks first with little steps, then big steps, and you as the child walk in those same steps in the sand; walking in dad's footsteps! When we read the gospels, we see Jesus and his character. When we obey his commands we begin to see Jesus in ourselves. We see his character in us. We walk in his steps; we "*walk as Jesus did*". It is in the doing that we see who we are- the body of Christ. So it's not just about having the right theology but the right practice. We need to live right. The Hebrews had a saying "if you say you know it, but are not doing it, you don't know it." Knowing is not just head knowledge, it's a lifestyle. And it is also here that the others in the congregation help us to grow. Our experience of the Lord is deepened and enlarged when we pray with and for each other, or when we serve each other. Remember Matthew 25:40 "*...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers, you did it for me.*" We experience Christ in us when we obey him in our relations to one another. Love expressed to us through others, through the church, is Christ's love to us. The love we express to others is done to Christ. Paul extends this thought when he says we are to "*speak the truth in love*" to each other. The word here is actually "*truthing in love*". In other words "truth" is a verb, it is something we do. We are to be open and honest, and loving in all our words and actions towards each other. And that sort of thing only really happens when we are closely connected in fellowship with each other. Paul speaks of "*the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament.*" It's the joints and ligaments that connect us to other parts of the body as we rub up against each other and lean on each other and cooperate with each other. It requires that "*each part does it's work.*" In other words we are all doing our part in the ministry.

So what can we say about all this? How are we doing, personally and together as a congregation? Have we grown? Are we maturing? Can you see a bit more of Jesus in us? Some of you have shared with me how the experiences of your migration have been used by God to bring you closer to Him; you have grown up in the faith. Others might say; "Well, I can see I am still very young in the faith. I might be (16, 40,) but I am still a baby Christian. I have much to learn, to know about the bible, to get to know Jesus personally. You know, I realize I grew up in a church culture but now I am getting to actually know Jesus." Or maybe you say, "I've been in the church for years but I've stayed in a rut. I realize now that I need to grow, and I'm glad there's lots of you to help me grow." I read of a man who complained to his boss that he was still in the same job with the same pay.

"After all" he said, "I have 25 years of experience here, so should I get a raise". His boss replied, "Unfortunately you have not had 25 years of experience but one year's experience 25 times." The remark was once made about the church in America that it was a hundred kilometers wide, but a millimeter deep. So many Christians are very shallow. Many of us are doing all sorts of study, extra work, tough assignments to advance in our career, to grow in our work experience. Some have their careers all mapped out, certain goals they want to attain. What have you got planned to grow in your spiritual experience? Yes, what have you planned for your spiritual growth? Work is important, but nowhere near the importance of your relationship with God. What plans should we make for us together as a congregation to grow, to mature, to become more like Jesus? It's the best thing we can do for ourselves, for the communities we live in and for God's glory.