

“Growing Together”
Nehemiah 9:6-9, 20-21;
1 Corinthians 10:12-17; John 6:47-59

Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
October 7, 2012

We have just gotten done with a section where we heard Jesus, over and over again, give us agricultural images—vineyards and sown seeds and all of that. So I was thinking about what it was like for a seed to begin to grow. As the seed begins to change and send up its shoot, the first things to come up are the cotyledons and then the true leaves. But it was that moment of breaking through the surface that interested me. I don't know what a plant feels, but I think about what it would feel like to break through the surface into the sunlight. The best I can do is in the morning to throw open the shades and feel the sun come streaming in. For a plant, it means even more because when it hits the sun, its life really begins and it begins to create that life. It's an incredible moment.

There are times in our lives when we have that kind of incredible moment. But what I'm thinking about is after that moment, what happens? The plant simply keeps growing. If it gets the sun and the water and minerals it needs, and can withstand the wind and the weather, it just keeps growing.

Have any of you simply watched a plant grow? It's not something we tend to do, is it? There are some times when we look at corn that we think we can almost see it growing, but most of the time plants grow and it's pretty imperceptible. It's really hard to see. The basic way I can tell if a plant is growing is to go back the next day and look. Sometimes you can see the difference in color of the new leaves, but most of the time it's pretty imperceptible.

As we think about this idea of growing, we often think of that first moment when a plant pops out of the ground. I think it's like those moments of our faith when we really recognize the growth. But I would guess that most of the time our growth in faith, like every other kind of growth, would be pretty imperceptible. We have to look back to see where we grew. Sometimes we can see the changes in our lives; a difference in color of our lives.

When Jesus is talking with these people who are coming again, saying, “Where did you go?” he says, “Are you just looking for me so you can have more food? You really want something more than that. You want more than the bread that I gave you the other day.”

I think that's true. We want more in life than just the food we eat. It's amazing to me that most of us can get the food we need to be satisfied physically, that we need to move on, but is that enough? I wish I could say that were always

enough and that I didn't want to go back for more. There seems to be more that we want than just physical satisfaction, isn't there? There are things we want out of life. We want to feel really alive, perhaps. So I think that what Jesus is inviting us to do is to recognize that it is more than food. To have that, you need to listen to him.

But how do we want things today? I want to have that next bit of growth. I want to have that next experience, like growing up out of the ground. It feels to me that sometimes that's what we do, or are encouraged to do, is to find all those moments that make life so wonderful, as if we just have all of those, then we know we're growing. Who wants to talk about the imperceptible stuff, the stuff of daily life, moments that really are growth?

So it is easy to really look away from Christ because I think oftentimes what Christ is inviting us to do is to grow on a more consistent basis like a healthy plant grows. A plant that's growing too fast is not a healthy plant most of the time. He wants us to be healthy, to grow well. But my tendency is to find the thing that can make me feel full for the moment. I can look to my work to see how it might be the thing that could satisfy my hunger for being full and feeling alive. Or I can go look for the right kind of people to be around. Or maybe if I have enough money or the right kinds of pleasures in my life, then I'll be satisfied. I won't feel thirsty for life.

It's my sense that's often not the case. In fact, what it feels a little bit like is this struggle that I have with sugar. You see, I like sugar. When you're going after things, why not just go to the source? Why not pour out a bowl full of sugar like I have here and eat it by the spoonful? We eat that much sugar all the time, but going right to it? I can just see you going "Ewww! Are you really going to eat that?" We need more than sugar in our lives, don't we? Many of us probably experimented with eating straight sugar as children, but we find that all it really does is make us sick, or we might get a sugar high for a moment, but you know the other side of that—a crash. We know we need the balanced life. We need a balance. We need more than just the energy from sugar. We need the vitamins and minerals and all the things that make for a healthy body.

I think Jesus is telling these people, telling us, that we need more than just food, more than just a physical existence. And we all know that in some way or other. Sometimes we allow ourselves to overlay other things on the physical hunger in our lives. Sometimes I think the desire for food gets mixed up with other desires. But we know we have more than that. We hunger for things that feed our spirits and our souls. We thirst for life. We can go and look for things like sugar that will satisfy our hunger for a moment, but Christ is inviting us to recognize that the spiritual hungers we have, the thirst for life we share can't just be satisfied in a

momentary thing like sugar of our lives. We need to let our roots go deep into our faith to allow ourselves, like the plant, to get the full spectrum of what we need. You can't go out and feed plants just nitrogen. It's not enough. They need more than that. We need more than that. But the basic thing we need is what Jesus comes to bring us.

This language here, I don't think I've very often used this passage because the language is kind of "in your face" language. Eat my flesh. Drink my blood. You almost want to back away. But in the course of the conversation that Jesus is having with these folks he wants them to know it's really important, and they're not really paying attention. So the language gets even more graphic. He wants them to really think about this, take it in.

So we have to think about it. What is he offering us? What kind of balanced meal is he offering us? It's more than sugar. It's something real. Something we need. It's the thing that will give us the spiritual health and life that we are looking for. It's interesting, if we go all the way back to the beginning of John it says "...and the Word became flesh." He's telling us to take it in and make it part of who we are, just as when we eat food, it becomes part of who we are. It's our life. He's saying take in the very Word of God that has come in the flesh. Remember, Word is more than just a word, a language. It's God's whole way of thinking, God's reasoning, God's way of doing things that has come to us in Christ. He's saying we should take that in. To eat, take in, make it part of who you are.

He's doing the same thing with drink. A little later on in verse 63, he says "This is good for your spirit and for life." He's talking about how the substance is there. Then he talks about the blood. Two thousand years ago, blood would have always been considered to be about life because they saw it as what was moving in the body, so it must have been the stuff that was animated. So that's the way they thought of blood: life. So take on the substance and the life of Christ, that Christ is giving us. It's a full meal. It's a balanced diet that comes to us. If we are hungry to satisfy our souls, we will find it in Christ. We take in the Word, we drink in the grace, and we know something that changes us.

The struggle is that what it does is changes us as we live. Like a plant growing, almost imperceptibly it changes us in our lives as we live day by day and we become the body of Christ. We become those who recognize how life is present for us. Grace surrounds us. Sometimes you might ask, is it just coming to communion? That's one way we remember this. It's one way we open our hearts and minds to God and say, "God, we do want to take you in." I invite you to do that as we come today—to remember and to allow ourselves to be open to God's grace as we come to communion.

But there are a lot of ways our roots could grow—in studying scripture, studying it alone, studying it together, having fellowship, having classes where we talk about the nature of our life together, in times where we share in service as we follow Christ, in prayer as we extend our lives to God and as we sit and wait and attend to God. That's one of the reasons I think Taizé is so important. The times of contemplation give us time to be attentive to God in silence. All of those times are times where we are allowing God to feed us. Those are ways that God gives us the balanced meal we need for the good of our souls so that we might grow in Christ and grow to be folks who know the wonder of the God-given life that we have, the life we share.

So Jesus is inviting us to think about that and to come to this table and remember that it is in God that we have our sustenance, that God feeds us, the Spirit works in our lives to give us life and to gather us around a table with people all around the world to know that we are the body of Christ present today. It's a wonderful thing, an opportunity we share. Amen.

Gracious Lord, thank you for times of remembering. We really know a lot of things that are good for us and sometimes we forget or push them aside. We go after things we recognize in the long run aren't good for us. Help us again remember the grace you have given us that allows us to begin that growth, and the way you continue to work in our lives through the fellowship of believers, the worship we share, the study we do, the moments of prayer. Lord, let us open our hearts and minds to you as we come today to share in this communion. Gracious God, we are thankful that you are our God and that you give us the food we need, the food that our souls need. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.