

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Growth

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:6-17

June 13th, 2021

“Growing in the New Creation: God Creates Beautiful Things”

Last week in our scripture reading, Paul tackled a couple questions, but mainly he focused on how those big questions led him to a place that reminded him of the Body of Christ’s togetherness by reminding everyone they are not alone in whatever they face in this life. Paul illustrated the journey of life and death as a journey we all face together, no matter who we are, and no matter where we were born or identify. Through Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection, Paul reminds us death is but an illusion. This week Paul’s theme shifts from these bigger existential questions and moves us to think about growth in the Body of Christ. Paul frames growth from the ministry of reconciliation as Paul recognizes Christ calls us to see the image of God in one another as we grow together. Paul asks a couple questions, How do we embody Christ-likeness and what was the purpose of Christ’s mission of the good news? He asks not just why, but what do that mean to be like Christ as he wrestles with the process of reconciliation.

In the rolling, green hills and mountains of Southwest Virginia, there is a small Methodist, liberal arts college called, Emory & Henry College, which is my alma mater. I’ve talked about Emory & Henry before but today’s story is from my junior year in college where a massive tornado nearly destroyed the college and damaged many of the surrounding towns and homes. Nestled just below the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains, tornadoes are not a common natural catastrophe of the region, but from time to time, a monstrous storm will form just over the valley protected by the mountains and wreak havoc on the communities located there. I was an R.A., or resident advisor, my junior year and we were all charged with the task of telling people, “do not be afraid,” as we were quite certain we were going to look up at some point and see the roof ripped from above us.

The destruction of Creation was ever present as the wind sounded more like a chorus of beasts coming to take us all away, and it was violent as the cracks of thunder seemed to be crashing right where you stand. We were all terrified, even if from the outside we showed calmness and stillness. Thankfully the tornado missed our college by just a couple miles although

there were some students who in between cracks of lightning filling the night sky saw the funnel slowly make its way down to the earth. The surrounding communities were not so lucky as homes, businesses and farms were destroyed, but thankfully only a few people and animals lost their lives due to the storm. This was the same year Central Alabama saw several systems destroy several communities, so the South as a whole had a sense of togetherness and unity as we came together to help our neighbors.

Emory & Henry became a disaster relief central hub. We had volunteers doing various tasks to live out the gospel of taking care of our neighbor. Whether people considered it the work of the gospel or not, we all stepped up that last week of our academic year and showed each other one of our Appalachian values is to care about our neighbor's well-being. As I've mentioned before, our motto at E&H is *macte virtute*, translated into English as, increase in excellence. We certainly grew with each other that day and grew together knowing our humanity and the life we have in common with all Creation is one of the most important aspects of life.

⁶So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. (NRSV).

The first word that strikes me in this passage is the word confidence. Confidence is a tricky characteristic because too much confidence comes off as arrogant, but too little confidence and one may think you lack assurance in who you are or whatever you are doing. If we are to have confidence like Christ, then I think confidence is a fine line of balancing humility and wisdom. Jesus did not just react to everything the Roman Empire was doing, however, he responded to their actions, responded to the needs of the people, and responded to needs of the disciples as they spread the good news. We must learn to respond to one another instead of reacting to each other, which is obviously easier said than done. In the study notes of one of my Bibles, it references a teaching in Rabbinic Judaism that says this in reflection on this passage, "Better is a single moment spent in penitence and good deeds in this world than the whole of the world-to-come. And better is a single moment of inner peace in the world-to-come than the whole of a lifetime spent in this world" (The Jewish Annotated New Testament p 322; Berakot 28a).

The second half of the passage depicts this image of a Divine Judgment as Christ presides over this task as Christ looks at the good and bad of all we've done as collective community, individuals, and as an entire Body of Christ. Paul goes in length in Romans through various chapters about how he envisions this Divine Judgment, however, for today's context, this judgment is an individual endeavor. Before reconciliation ever takes place, one must realize they are in need of repentance. When we begin the process of repentance, we can begin reconciliation and only then can authentic, sustainable healing in our world take place.

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. ¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

The phrase that stands out to me in this passage is, "the fear of the Lord." More often than not, I believe this phrase is interpreted into something it is not. We do not need to fear God. There can be some rather harrowing moments in life that may warrant fear, but if God is love, then I am not sure we should fear God but instead fear what takes place without the presence of God's love in our lives. This passage almost seems to interchangeably use fear and conscience in its context. To know the conscience of God is to know the heart of God because we saw the heart of God reflected in the love of Christ and the good news. Therefore, we must listen to the heartbeat of God to understand where we are being led by the gospel. John Philip Newell says this, "To listen to God is to listen deep within ourselves, including deep within the collective life and consciousness of the world" (Newell p 4-5 *Listening to the Heartbeat of God*). Easier said than done though, right?

If you go back and read verse twelve in any translation, it is rather confusing. I imagine this verse may have been a colloquialism of the day because it reminds me of our saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover." I certainly think Paul is attempting to say this and most importantly, it is not our place to judge our neighbor in need. We certainly will at times because we are human, but we must recognize to truly be in relationship with one another, we must refrain from judgment as we confidently spread the gospel. We are ambassadors of Christ as Paul uses that language to convey, we are only the messengers of the gospel. We must listen to the will of God and not the will of our own ambitions, not the will of the institution we are a

part of, nor the will of the Empire, but we must listen to the will of God, which is love.

¹⁴ For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

Love is what beckons us to follow and emulate the fruits of the gospel. It is through the love for our neighbor that we do our best to be the fruits of the gospel in this world. Love moves us and pushes us, and love also prunes us and shapes us as we grow in Christ and grow into the love of the good news. Growth is often painful leaving us questioning why growth even matters, but when we look back, we begin to see the love which fostered and nurtured that growth into who we are today. If we cannot look back and be more encouraged than disappointed, then maybe didn't grow in love as much as we thought. Paul understands Christ's death and Christ's example as a new beginning of creation. Christ's example of love becomes the new law. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* says, "Now, if never before, the law must be broken for the sake of Jesus; it forfeits all its rights if it acts as a barrier to discipleship" (Bonhoeffer 60-61). If the laws of this world, our denomination, or our communities hinder the gospel of love, then those laws have no value or connection to the gospel of Christ.

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view,^[b] we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

In today's world of Neo-Liberalism, we have commodified and labeled everything. This has birthed the destructive movement of consumerism which has consumed our lives by making us think our worth is in our accumulated wealth. It has led us to a culture of materialism, not the philosophical tradition, but a materialism that forces us to feel the need to take whatever I need to be successful regardless of the cost and harm it can do to others. We live in a world where people are making money off of other people's debt, and that debt they have accrued is because of enormous drug prices, monstrous hospital bills, and an education system that is built for profit, not people. We live in a world where corporations have promised for decades they will help us, save us even from the difficult economic conditions we face, but those promises were always hollow platitudes of the establishment elites. What does scripture teach us about the dire situation we face?

Christ breaks these rigid cycles of individualism and close-mindedness through his altruism on the cross. Christ beckons in a new cycle of creation's growth as he proves the old ways of the world no longer work for today. Christ calls us to a new space, a new place, a new way of being in the world. Look no further than at Jesus' arrest when Peter draws his sword, cuts the ear off of one of the Romans, ready to die for his friend, but Jesus instead of encouraging the violence, praying for the death of the Romans there to arrest them, Jesus says, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). We are not called to wage war on our enemies but love them. As Paul helps us understand in his letter to the Romans, sin is an abuse of power of another. We cannot let the sins of our world drive us to a place of violence or crippling apathy because Jesus calls us to a new life. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King says this in his sermon *Loving Your Enemies*, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction" (Strength to Love p 47).

Are we in the boat with Jesus witnessing a destructive storm of our lifetime? Is Jesus holding out his hand asking us, "Come to me, my child. Do not be afraid." Are we like Peter confident enough to jump into the mystery of our faith, but too fearful to let it sustain us?

If that love is in each and everyone of us it is our challenge in our growth as a Body of Christ to live into the image of God as we look to Christ to guide us in the fruits of the gospel. To live into our Christ-likeness, we must let love be our North Star as we are bashed, beaten, and bruised the storms of life. To live into the Body of Christ means, we must reach out like Christ did to our neighbor, and seek the goodness out in each and every one of us because we were created beautiful things, we are beautiful things, and for the love and justice of Jesus Christ to reign in our world, we must believe that God will continue to create beautiful things in our world.

In closing, Growth hurts. However, as the Body of Christ we know Christ hurts with us. Immanuel incarnate was born like us, died like us, and will resurrect us in the new life of the gospel of Jesus Christ as we shine our light in the darkness, as we love our neighbor in the midst of trials and tribulations. May we be Christ's light and love in a world in such desperate need of growth as we rise from the ashes as the Easter people of Christ. Amen.