

**Sermon – Providence UMC 2/13/11 Scout Sunday
“Controlled Growth” Deut. 30:15-20; 1 Cor 3:1-9**

We are living in some interesting if not historic times. There are many changes happening all around us...from institutions changing from what we have known and trusted to possible change in governments in Egypt and other Middle East countries to climate change. We are trying to listen and learn about what these changes mean for us and our lives.

Added to these changes, polls indicate that in the U.S. 70% of us think that religion is losing its influence on how we live. This opinion is further supported by those asked to self-identify their membership in a church or synagogue. 61% considered themselves a member of one of these, which is the lowest percent recorded by Gallop Polls since the 1930's.

Going one step further, this year Providence UMC recorded our lowest number of participants in Disciple Bible Study in recent memory. What does all of this mean? Is any of this data important enough that you and I should take note?

We have been talking about growing our church through our Strategic Plan over the next 5 years and using the 5 Practices of a Fruitful Church to lead us in this effort. We read how smart growth/prudent growth is desired for housing; that there is no growth in our economy; and, controlled growth in various sectors of the economy and our agricultural sector is desired. Growth or no Growth? How does that happen? This morning I want to lead us through some moments of reflection on how growth happens and more importantly a source of spiritual growth in our lives.

I grew up in North Carolina living in the city (Charlotte) and spending some portion of my summers on the farm with my grandparents (Snow Camp, Alamance Co.) When I would arrive at the farm in the summer it was harvest time. It was time to bale the straw, fill the silo with food for the cows and to prepare things for the soon to arrive winter. My main job during cutting of the grain was to ride the combine where I would bag the cut grain, tie the filled sacks, and dump the sacks in the field for later retrieval. It was a learned skill to know how to tie the sacks so that they did not spill open when dumped in the field and also to know how to dump the sacks without also dumping yourself, which usually happened a couple times until you got the hang of things. After the cutting, then the tractor drawn wagon would slowly make its way around the now-cut field as we retrieved the bags that evidenced the harvest and transported them to the grainary for storage. It was lots of physical work, and I did not appreciate all the work that had gone into preparing for the harvest before I arrived. What I did notice and still remember was the community that formed around the event of harvest. Each morning Monday – Friday we started early and men from neighboring farms would arrive to help.

As we finished with our farm, then the group migrated to their farms until all completed the harvest. Saturday was the day to go to town and shop for groceries and other necessities and people watch. Sunday was church and visiting day. It was at

church that those who had helped bring in the crop all week would meet again around worship and conversation and relive some moments again that formed a bond among them that went beyond the actual event. It was a way of life.

I share that memory of a way of life to reinforce the teachings in our readings this morning from Deuteronomy and 1st Corinthians. They both relate to growing and how we live. In Deuteronomy, Moses is addressing the Israelite people as they begin to live out a dream. They had left Egypt, wandered in the desert for a generation, and now in the 30th chapter are on the brink of moving into the Promised Land to begin a new life. They have been nurtured during the desert time by God's abiding Presence and the rules of life that God had shared with them through Moses as commandments. The admonition as they move into this Promised Land is not to forget who God is. You will be enticed and courted to follow other ways of living and other gods. But choose to love God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Choose life not the ways that lead to death. For the knowledge of God is something that has been gifted to us and the love of God has been what our families have experienced through our living to get to this point in our lifetime. And it has been God's love that has prepared us for this next step in our lives. So love God...follow his ways...and know life...Abundant Life, is what Jesus would later add. Do not forget God as you move into a new phase in your life!! Consider what these words could mean to the people of Egypt as they enter this most exciting and challenging chapter of their lives. We need to be in prayer for them.

In 1st Corinthians, Paul is writing a letter to a congregation that is living in Boomtown...Corinth...in which every kind of lifestyle and sin known to man is being practiced and the city is flourishing. Paul is trying to help this congregation understand in the midst of these challenges how important it is to stay with the message of Christ ...to heed the wisdom that leads to life. He also urges them, like Moses before him, to love God of the Exodus who has given us Jesus Christ, who is the source of finding LIFE amidst all of the changes and chaos of the city in which you live. And if there were not enough challenges in their lives outside the congregation, it has now surfaced in the congregation itself. The argument within the church is who is the best minister and who has caused the most growth in their lives. They are bragging within the congregation about their spiritual lives as people brag about material things in their lives...like how much salary they make, or how big their house is or what trips they have taken. In this case, some are saying they received a superior faith because they learned from Paul or Apollos or whoever.

Paul reminds them that such quarreling and boasting is not what the church is about. Faith in our lives is incarnational as it was revealed to us in Jesus Christ. But the teachers/preachers/ are only servants in the field...one plants the seed, another waters, another nurtures and each are equally important to the process...but like with crops, the growth that happens in our lives is always a gift from God. We do not have it in our power to control whether the seed grows or not. We can plant, water and nurture, but the growth is a God-thing. Sometimes the yield is 60 or 100 times the effort and sometimes because of drought, disease or something else unforeseen, the growth does not occur that

time and in the way that we were expecting. As we carry this metaphor over to our spiritual lives, we ponder how the growth does or does not happen.

Like farming and education and lots of other things in life, growth is part of a process that we cannot control. Paul suggests as does the writer of Deuteronomy that it all begins with our loving God. When our love for God is central, then things begin to happen that nurture us in the faith.

Robert Greenleaf, noted author and philosopher, writes, “Everyone, at some time or in some areas, is a follower, and it is just as important to be discriminating in choosing whom to follow as it is to prepare to lead.” The wisdom of the Scriptures urges us to choose to follow the God revealed to us in Scripture as made manifest in Jesus Christ. In the writings of Scripture and the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, we are given the blueprint of how to navigate the time and the path set before us in life. Choosing to follow God, the writer of Deuteronomy says, leads to life. Each of us, Paul reminds us in 1st Corinthians, is God’s field in which seeds are planted, watered, nurtured and by the grace of God our lives mature and grow in the likeness of Christ. The important ingredient is our willingness and desire to be open to the growth. Reading Scripture, our prayers and living our faith in community with others are the disciplines that allow openness within us for God’s Spirit to produce its fruits in and through us individually and corporately as a community. We dare not boast; rather we should always marvel and be inspired by what God can do with so little.

Abraham Heschel, a great Jewish rabbi and theologian in his book God in Search of Man, writes, “To sense the presence of God in the Bible, one must learn to be present to God in the Bible. Presence is not a concept, but a situation. To understand love it is not enough to read tales about it. One must be involved...just as one cannot test thinking without thinking....Presence is not disclosed to those who are unattached and try to judge...(or) to those who sense the story, but not the pathos (or) the idea, not the realness of God. The Bible is the frontier of the Spirit where we must move and live in order to discover and to explore.”

So Scripture invites us, as it has across the centuries, to consider loving God enough to trust the teachings that discipline our life, that call us to love one another and that point us to life experiences where we can encounter the Spirit of the living God of the Bible, even now! How do we control our growth and grow closer to God? Growth is God’s gift; we can only enter into the life process by our choices and with an attitude of prayer and awe!

Look at the life of being a Scout. Her/his oath is to promise to do my duty to God and my country...to obey the scout law...and to keep myself physically fit and morally straight. In that oath there is openness to being led and to being a disciple. Scripture tells us that God’s Spirit dwells within our bodies. So if we follow the scouting discipline and carry it a step further to open our minds and hearts to Biblical reading, daily praying and being in community with others, then we have set a lifestyle in which God can produce the growth that we seek in his way. Each of our life experiences, whether they are in

scouting, sports or farming during a summer, become the catalyst for growing spiritually even when we are not aware. God amazes us with what can happen with so little.

John Wooden, a great coach and equally great teacher at the college level, has written a book that I got as a gift at Christmas. It is a reflection from his lifetime as a coach and teacher. In it he sets forth his philosophy in a pyramid fashion for success in life. At the foundation of the pyramid is Industriousness, which relates to work and doing it to the best of our ability in whatever our endeavor; and coupled with that is Enthusiasm, which relates to desire and attitude. At the top of the pyramid with many blocks in between sits Faith. He defines faith this way...“we must believe (things) will work as they should as long as we do what we should do.” I would tweak that a bit adding the wisdom of Deuteronomy and Paul from today to say...“things will happen in life and we will learn to cope and adjust to find life in the midst of change if we love God and believe.”

In closing I remember as I was a freshman entering Wake Forest that we were assigned to small orientation groups and each had a faculty member as our mentor. One night with tears in his eyes the elderly English professor who mentored my group reminded us that we were embarking on a great time in our lives...the experience of getting a college education. He used the illustration that we each had two trees inside of us...the tree of knowledge and the tree of faith. What you want at the end of your 4 years here is to have nurtured both trees so that they have had the opportunity to grow equally... feed yourself each day academically and also spiritually. Otherwise, you will be anemic in one and the other will be strong and towering. Wooden has a great saying that fits this model...‘Ability may get you to the top, but it takes character to keep you there.’

These are great metaphors as we think about growing spiritually. We are invited to love God with all our hearts, and mind and souls; and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Armed with that agenda and seeking God to lead us...we are promised that we will be allowed to grow in faith and discover Life. What an exciting opportunity awaits us!!!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit...Amen.