

“Goodness, How You’ve Grown!”

Texts: Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24

Preached: 4/26/15



I don't remember much about my grandmother. She died 40 years ago. But I remember how she looked. And I remember her greeting me more than once with these words, “Goodness, How You’ve Grown!” And then she would open her arms wide and hug me tightly and I would kiss her on the cheek.



Perhaps you can remember such a grandma or maybe an aunt. She seemed genuinely impressed that you had gotten so much taller since the last time she saw you, even if that was only a couple of weeks. Older people see the world differently. But, you don't have to be a grandmother to see physical changes in others. It's easy to see the growth in, say, a 14 year-old...especially when you are buying his pants!

Those spurts are how we naturally grow – not just in teenagers, but in very young children, as well.



Science News confirmed a while ago how healthy young children, once thought to grow by regular rates, are now seen as growing in sporadic fits and starts, each lasting less than 24 hours, followed by no increases in body length. The researchers call growth saltatory, that is, abruptly jumping and spurting increases. Just prior to these saltatory spurts there was fussiness, hunger, sleepiness...



Could it be the same with our spiritual life?
What if spiritual growth was a sporadic phenomenon, full of fitful starts and stops?
When was your last faithful spurt?

During those times when we are tempted to grow discouraged in our life with Christ, it is helpful to know that lulls and logjams are to be expected.

Perhaps you are ready for a growth spurt!
Some are:



This weekend 25 East Union women and friends focused on their faith by examining their speech as window into the spiritual life. My friend, Rev. Page Creach led our Women's Retreat. I know she was to begin by focusing on the Book of James: *Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.* – stressing that all our communication with one another, all of our speech – is about loving and creating connections with people. Page planned to finish with Paul's Letter to the Colossians: *Let your speech be always full of grace...* Spiritual growth and maturity, I imagine Page saying, has much to do with how we talk.

Interesting that last Sunday's Cottage Meeting between our services centered on communication and this Sunday's addresses Spiritual Growth. I have to believe we are headed in the right direction! I hope you are headed there with us.



I have been enlightened by the modern mystic Evelyn Underhill. She offers this parable of the spiritual journey.

She writes that the spiritual journey is like the migration of English sparrows, each weighing about an ounce and a quarter, who twice each year take off into the unknown, committing themselves to the air and flying over the ocean where there are no landmarks to give them any guidance. And yet without any hesitation, every autumn, thousands of them take off, and in the spring thousands return undergoing the same hazards.

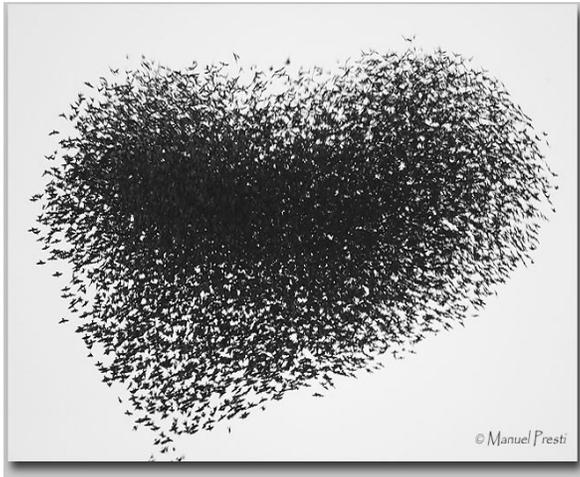
This migration, she claims, is a good example of what the spiritual journey is all about. We have no idea of where we are going. There are all kinds of difficulties we cannot foresee.

The birds commit themselves to the elements by way of blind trust in their instinct. The spiritual journey is basically a surrender in blind trust to our conviction that what we hope to find on the journey we either already have or will certainly find.

But there is no guarantee that we will arrive safely on the basis of the evidence or our circumstances. We must let go and let the wind (that is: the Holy Spirit) take us where we hope to go ... There is no turning back once we have started because the sky is a big place, and we had better stay with the flock.

The image of these little English sparrows fighting storms and winds to get to their destination is a moving symbol of our own situation





The call God has given us is a promise that is just as reliable as the instinct of the birds. Instead of surrendering to a migratory instinct, we surrender to God's transforming process.

What intrigues me about Underhill's parable is this sense that we take this spiritual journey together. We're each on our own journey, but we have been called to fly together, headed toward the same destination.

Genuine spirituality makes demands on us, challenges us to overcome selfishness, to love from the depths of ourselves so that we may establish community with others.



I spent multiple hours this weekend working in my yard. Planting grass in some patches, relocating a White Pine that has been growing for several years right on the edge of our patio and redding up the flower beds. It was great to be outside, even if it was a bit chilly. My yard is alive with birds and bees, buds and trees!



I could not help but think of the church. We are alive, too, vibrant with activity. East Union bustles and there's always a lot going on with our people.

Thursday I had dinner with a couple who has been worshipping with us – they are looking forward to settling down here at East Union and having their daughter baptized.

Friday I heard from a long-time member who wanted me to know her sister, for whom we have been praying, had died.

Saturday morning I heard from one of our college students who is thriving and looking for a reference for a unique scholarship opportunity.



I read once that “Churches are organisms, not organizations.”

For plants to flourish, we must cooperate with God who grows the plants, but we cannot grow plants.

Just so, God grows churches. We do not.

As the apostle Paul put it, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.” The best we can do is cooperate with God and do our best to remove hindrances to growth and create conditions friendly to growth.



Of course, we cannot create seeds, but we can plant and water the seeds God gifts us, and watch God make them grow. God is sovereign and growth comes in God’s time. Generally, however, this expert pointed out, church health and growth result from cooperating with God.

How can we corporately and personally cooperate with God? It’s all about love, knowing the love of Christ and demonstrating that to others, John says:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another...Little children, let us love, not [just] in word or speech, but in truth and action...And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

As we take these words of scripture to heart and commit ourselves to them – someone may just say to us, “Goodness, how you’ve grown.”

A friend here at East Union this week forwarded me an OpEd piece by David Brooks, of the New York Times.

Oddly enough, even though he is a political pundit – he happened to be writing about spiritual growth and maturity, particularly people who exhibit such things:



ABOUT once a month, he wrote, I run across a person who radiates an inner light. These people can be in any walk of life. They seem deeply good. They listen well. They make you feel valued. You often catch them looking after other people and as they do so their laugh is musical and their manner is infused with gratitude. They are not thinking about what wonderful work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all.

He muses -- When I meet such a person it brightens my whole day. But I confess I often have a sadder thought: It occurs to me that I've achieved a decent level of career success, but I have not achieved that. I have not achieved that generosity of spirit, or that depth of character.

A few years ago, says Brooks, I realized that I wanted to be a bit more like those people. I realized that if I wanted to do that I was going to have to work harder to save my own soul. I was going to have to have the sort of moral adventures that produce that kind of goodness. I was going to have to be better at balancing my life.



I came to the conclusion that wonderful people are made, not born — that the people I admired had achieved an unfakeable inner virtue, built slowly from specific moral and spiritual accomplishments.

There are such wonderful people here at East Union, people whose inner light shines bright. It's worth it to take some time to get to know the folks in worship with you, to ask for their story and then listen with a humble, open heart.

These are the kind of people to whom you might say, "Goodness, How You've Grown."