

Sermon: Growing in Love  
11 Pentecost, Year B  
Ephesians 4:1-16

Shelby Ochs Owen  
Emmanuel, Staunton  
August 5, 2018

“We must grow up in every way.”

Summer is the growing season in both the agricultural and the church year. Outside, in this part of the world, if we simply open our eyes and look in just about any direction we see great green growing things. Green leaves on trees and plants, green grass and so far, in our back yard, a great green zucchini year! And here inside the church, you see the hangings, my stole and the print in the bulletin inserts are green, the great symbol of growth.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul, or likely one of Paul’s disciples, is eager for the early church to grow and he lays out what that growth should look like. He begins, “I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” In other words, *each* of us is indeed called to grow, both individually and as a faithful church body. And he tells us how:

- ~with humility, gentleness, patience,
- ~Bearing one another in love
- ~Maintaining the spirit of unity in the bond of peace
- ~believing that God has given each of us gifts to be used for the building up of the body of faith
- ~maturing and becoming Christ-like
- ~ becoming wise so that we are not easily rattled or distracted by people’s lies and deceit
- ~speaking the truth in love

It’s interesting that when some refer to church growth, they think of numbers. How many people do we have in the pews? How can we attract more? While those questions aren’t exactly *bad* questions, the type of growth Paul is referring to is of a deeper nature and one we need to consider as Christians. He’s talking about growing into the full stature of Christ, that inward and spiritual growth: change that comes from the inside, change that comes from the heart, change that comes from God. And that change is much more difficult to measure than how many people are in the pews!

Several years ago at a gathering in Lexington, VA, I met Stephen and Maggie Cherry. They told me to look them up if I were ever in England. Stephen was then about to take the reigns as the dean of Kings College at Cambridge University. In May my husband Steve and I connected with them, enjoying dinner at their home and attending Evensong at Kings College Chapel where the famous men and boys’ choir sings. In discussing my sabbatical, Stephen shared a story with us. When he had been a parish priest several years before, he had taken a sabbatical. Years later when it came time for him to leave the parish to take another position elsewhere, he was greeting people in the back of the church saying good bye. One woman came up to him, and said “do you know the best thing you ever did for this church?” He was feeling pretty good, eager to hear her forthcoming compliment. Smiling, he asked, “No, what was that?” She said, “The best thing you ever did for us was to take a sabbatical!” LOL. I’m sure his eyebrows went up. He was duly humbled. Speechless for a moment. But she went on to say that it was during his absence that she had seen the church grow spiritually, mature in a deeper way in Christ’s mission, and take more responsibility for doing the ministry to which they had been called.

Some of you have already begun to share with me some of your own adventures in growth while I was away, and I look forward to hearing more about how you have grown when we gather next Sunday, the

12th at 9:00 for refreshments and reflections. It's great to be back at Emmanuel, this place, and wonderful to be with Emmanuel, God's people. You gave me a great gift in my sabbatical time. It was a chance to rest, but also a chance to renew, refresh, and be restored in my life in God. With each new day, there was a chance to learn, to adapt, to grow in awareness, in knowledge and in dependence on God.

The sabbatical time was ripe with opportunities for me to grow. Those opportunities included: traveling, being exposed to new ideas, trying new foods (like pheasant, black pudding and local Black Sheep Ale); pushing myself physically, walking farther than I've ever walked before, being open to life unfolding before me and not having to have it all figured out before setting out, praying, all along the way. I share more in the weeks to come. One of the areas I worked on was trust, holding you in prayer and trusting you to be church when I heard that Jim Emory had died and that Jean Sydnor had lost her granddaughter and that Sue Buerkel's son-in-law had been elected Bishop of the Rio Grande. To not immediately be in touch and to let you handle this without me allowed for another type of growth for me, a growth that I have to say was not always comfortable. I hope all of us are learning to trust God in new ways, even in the midst of occasional doubts and anxiety.

This week we can consider Paul's words, remembering that growing in our trust of God takes time, a whole season. I close with a poem by the French Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin:

### **Patient Trust**

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.  
We are quite naturally impatient in everything  
to reach the end without delay.  
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.  
We are impatient of being on the way to something  
unknown, something new.  
And yet it is the law of all progress  
that it is made by passing through  
some stages of instability—  
and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;  
your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,  
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.  
Don't try to force them on,  
as though you could be today what time  
(that is to say, grace and circumstances  
acting on your own good will)  
will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit  
gradually forming within you will be.  
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing  
that his hand is leading you,  
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself  
in suspense and incomplete.

Together let us grow in God's goodness and trust in that slow work.  
Amen.