

# *Grow with Second!*

## *Signs of Spiritual Growth*

A Sermon Offered by  
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*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.*

*Psalms 1:1-3 NRSV*

*[Jesus] began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"*

*And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And*

*others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."*

*Mark 4:2-9, 13-20 NRSV*

We use a particular phrase a lot around here: "Grow with Second!" It's not just a slogan; it's an *invitation*, an invitation to people of all ages and backgrounds: "Come, grow closer to God and God's people." "Join us as we become who God knows we can be." "If you are tired of the way you've been living; if you're sick of the same old routines and the same bad habits, be part of a family of faith where life-change is happening in big and small ways every day." "Come, grow with Second."

We could have said, "grow *old* with Second." We are an intentionally multi-generational congregational family. We value people at every stage of life, from the cradle to the grave and beyond. We celebrate when babies are born, when they graduate, when they walk down the aisle, when they present their own kids for baptism, and when their own baptism is made complete in death. You may only be able to be part of this family for a brief time in your life, but however young or old you are, we want to grow with you. We will not leave you behind. You can grow old with Second. But our primary goal isn't growing *older*.

It's growing *up*. Our goal is spiritual growth. We might be part of one of the largest and most active congregations in our area, but if we aren't growing spiritually, what does that matter? In fact, if *you're* not growing spiritually, what do all the wonderful ministries and missions that we offer matter? I could present something of a State of the Union address this morning, telling you all about some of the great things that are happening around here. But this pulpit is for sermons, not speeches. Instead, I want to invite you to consider the state of your own union – your union with God and God's people. How are you doing spiritually?

There are several ways to measure spiritual growth and spiritual maturity. One of them is by thinking in terms of changes in the way we look at ourselves and approach the world.

We are growing spiritually when we notice that when faced with a challenge – or an opportunity – we no longer ask, “What’s in it for me?” Instead we ask, “How can I help?” New Christians are thinking, “What am I going to get out of this worship service?” Or “How will this program benefit my kids?” Those are good questions as you are starting out on your spiritual journey.

Maturing Christians go beyond “What’s in it for me?” They see every situation as an opportunity to serve God, to make God look good, to transform the ordinary into the miraculous. If we see our life as limited, if we think there’s only so much love and joy to go around, then we need to be gobbling up every kind of possible experience we can. There’s too much at stake.

I remember a trip I was leading with a church group of 30 or so in Europe ten years ago. It seemed like anything that could go wrong, did go wrong. Our outbound flight got diverted to another country. We missed our connections. The bus driver hit a pedestrian. The bus got broken into. There was plenty to complain about. And one couple, friends of another couple on the trip, made a point of complaining about everything that was going wrong at every opportunity. There wasn’t enough in the trip for them and I’m sure that that’s all they could talk about when they got home.

But other couples went on the same trip and had a great time. They saw the detours as an adventure. They were glad that no one got hurt in the accident. They helped fix the broken window. These couples actually enjoyed the journey. Because they were in a helping mood and open to the adventure of the trip, they could soak in the cathedrals and precious masterpieces. The art and architecture was the same, but it might as well have been two separate trips.

Some people try to squeeze every ounce of life out of this journey. But that effort is doomed to failure because some things are going to go wrong, terribly wrong, and they are simply beyond our control (and if they were in our control we’d still mess ‘em up. Other people take life as it comes and enjoy each moment. If we take a longer range view of life, an eternal view, then there is always enough time to help others, there is always enough grace to go around; God is in every moment. Mature Christians relax because they know how the story ends – and how it all works out in the end.

Another sign of spiritual growth is when we start to make some serious faith *commitments*. What do we call guys who forever date but won't commit to marriage? We used to call them "Playboys." They weren't called "Playmen." Because *men* commit. Guys like that need to grow up. There comes a point in dating and in our spiritual life when we can't grow anymore unless we make a serious commitment. It's only when that commitment is made that new possibilities open up. In romantic relationships the commitment is marriage. In spiritual relationships the commitment is membership.

When we commit to Jesus Christ we aren't saying that we have all the answers; we are saying that his life story – as strange and wonderful as it is - - makes more sense of our life story than anything else does. When we commit to a particular congregation – like this one – we aren't saying that this is a perfect fellowship – not by any means; you are saying, "I want to cast my lot with this people. I want to work with them and laugh with them and even cry with them as together we grow in faith." We make each of these commitments in the single act of confirming our faith and joining a congregation. Some people don't want to be tied down. Some people don't want to feel obligated. They see commitment only in terms of what options it forecloses. What they don't see is how making a commitment to God and God's people can unleash opportunities and experiences of love and grace that we never could have imagined before. Casual Christians don't experience life-change. Committed Christians change the world.

St. Paul said to the Christians in Ephesus:

*"We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind..... we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."*

*Ephesians 4:14-16*

As the old saying goes, we have to stand for something or we'll fall for anything. Spiritual growth and commitment go hand in hand. Even if you've been a member "forever," we still need to ask ourselves these questions if we want to move toward spiritual maturity.

Am I growing in my commitment to Jesus Christ?  
Am I growing in my commitment to his followers?

Am I growing in my commitment to God's kingdom?

One sign of spiritual growth is moving from asking, "What's in it for me" to asking "How can I help?" Another sign is moving from *casual* relationships with God and God's people to *committed* ones.

A third way to measure spiritual growth is by focusing as much on our *fruits* as on our *roots*.

Early in our spiritual journey we are focused on putting down roots that go deep and are very strong. We need that strong system of roots and relationships that allow us to receive the kind of water and nutrients we need to grow. So we go to Sunday School and Bible Studies and develop awesome networks of Christian friends to support us when the winds are against us. All this is good. We need strong roots.

But roots are simply a means to an end; they are a tool. Being tall and strong isn't the point for a tree. After a number of seasons, the farmer is going to want to see some fruit. Again: apple seeds aren't here to make apple *trees*; they're here to make *apples*. When the Bible talks about healthy trees it almost always talks about *fruitful* trees, not just trees that look good. People after God's own heart, says Psalm 1, "are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season." (Ps 1:3). And this doesn't change even as we age,

*The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit.*

*Psalms 92:12-14 NRSV*

When was the last time you checked your life for fruit? It doesn't matter how deep our roots go or how pretty our leaves are, it doesn't matter that we had a bumper crop a few years ago, if we aren't producing fruit *now* something's wrong and we need help. As James said long ago, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. [James 2:17] If there's no fruit in your life, the tree isn't healthy.

We know we're growing spiritually when we see fruit in our lives, when we move from simply taking in God's grace to pouring that grace back

out on others, every day. Have you ever met a person who loved to practice a sport, but wasn't so keen on actually playing it? I remember a kid on my baseball team growing up. He loved batting practice and doing calisthenics and shagging pop flies, but he wouldn't show up for games. He thought they were boring, or so he said. Maybe he didn't like the pressure of actually having to do the thing he had been preparing himself for.

All the time we spend in Sunday school and in small groups building faith and in forming strong spiritual friendships is preparation for what God wants us to do: bear fruit, help others, spread joy, offer healing, make a difference. What's your fruit look like this year?

Every person can grow tall and strong and fruitful with Second, because God wants you to grow and God is in this place. We can't force spiritual growth; it's a gift from God. But we have some choice in the matter. We can choose to look at the possibilities in a situation rather than the problems. We can choose to make a spiritual commitment and stick with it—even when the going gets tough. We can choose to bear fruit every day through simple acts of kindness and extravagant acts of generosity. We can choose to pursue spiritual growth like we would anything else that meant the world to us. Amen.

*Dear Friend,*

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*Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.*

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