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A Time to Grow, Part 1

Mark 4:26-34

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

I have the opportunity, the privilege today, to talk with you about there being a time for you and I to grow in life. Obviously, our gospel reading has two illustrations of living things growing.

The first illustration is where Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day. The seed sprouts," which we talked about last week, the germination of a seed releasing life and new life coming and old life fading away. It's sort of a birth or a rebirth when a seed that maybe sat dormant for a long time all of a sudden gets what it needs to come alive, and the force within it, the power within it, is released and a new plant starts. The seed sprouts and it grows, and the farmer knows not how.

The earth produces by itself: first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. God wants us to understand this is how living things, biological living things, work in the way he designed them. But he's using this to illustrate for us about our spiritual lives.

You and I can be dormant in our spiritual lives for a long time, but then, at the right moment, God can sprout our spiritual lives or germinate our spiritual lives through the revelation of Jesus as God's Son. And when a person comes to believe on the Lord Jesus, the Bible says they're born again into the family of God.

Now, this is helpful to understand, that we can have a biological birth, and then, at some point in our life here on the earth, we can experience a spiritual rebirth. And Jesus said this: to see the kingdom of God, you must be born again.

And so we're biologically alive, but we come into the world spiritually dead, separated from God. But somehow, when we hear the message of Jesus and the quickening of the spirit works within us, any person on the planet can be born again, place their faith in Jesus, and then the Bible says the Holy Spirit takes up residence in their spirit, and they start to cry out, "ABBA, father!" because they know they're now a child of the Most High God.

They've been born into the family of God, adopted into his family, and in a sense now they're spiritually awake to God. Their sins are not counted against them. Now they can live a new spiritual life, not just a biological life, but a living, alive spiritual life. And that spiritual life, just like our biological life, is designed by God to grow and to mature.

God made living things to grow and reproduce after themselves, and God wants you and I to grow up and reproduce in our spiritual lives as well. It doesn't really matter how old you are. You can be born again into the family of God in your 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s and start infancy in your spiritual life. The spiritual life and the biological life don't necessarily run together in maturity.

All of us have a physical maturity that we go through, and then it declines because of sin, and it's a temporary life that we have here on the earth in this body. But the spiritual life actually can be birthed at any point along that physical life, and then it can well up and go on forever.

Ideally, as Jesus is the model, early on in our biological lives we begin our spiritual lives, just as we prayed for the young baptism there, that the spiritual life would come early in the young child's life. And this is what we want for all the children in our community of faith here—for them to come to the knowledge of Jesus early on in their lives.

I just talked with a young mother this week who got a phone call from the school that her daughter attends. She's seven years old, and during the time in school this young lady, seven years old, something happened and the seeds had been planted in her heart. And she went to her teacher and said, "I want to turn my life over to Jesus. I want to give my life to Christ. I want Jesus to come into my heart and forgive my sin and make me one of his children."

And so the teacher, hearing this from the young girl, called her mother and said, "I just want you to know your daughter has just come to me and said she wants to turn her life over to Christ." And the young mother, even as she was describing it to me—and I'm sure she described it numerous times—tears were running down her face because this young girl that she's been praying for now has birthed into a new spiritual life at age seven.

How much time now does she have to grow and flourish spiritually because she's starting young? And the Bible says this: remember your creator, you young people, in the days that you're young, so that it may go well for you as you live long in the land. Seek him early.

And Jesus is, of course, the perfect example of this. Luke tells us, under the inspiration of the spirit, who actually had bear witness to Jesus, says this early on in Jesus life, somewhere between the ages of eight, nine, up through 30, this growth happened in Christ.

He grew in wisdom early on. Wisdom is not just knowledge; it's the proper application of wisdom in service and love to the world. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God, the reverence of God, the understanding of good and evil and what God has created us for.

Jesus grew early on in his wisdom, his spiritual understanding. He grew physically, just like all of us grow physically early on in our lives. And it says he grew in favor with God. His walk with God matured, his interaction with God matured, and his favor with God matured and grew from an early age onward. And the way he related with other human beings matured early in his life.

So emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually, Jesus matured early. We happen to, I would say, sometimes delay maturity in our world, and we do well actually to encourage growth. And that's what we're talking about here this morning.

You and I are called by God to grow up in every way, as Christ did, into him who is the head, to mature holistically in our lives. Now, the physical arc of our lives, of course, is somewhat short, but the spiritual life goes on for all eternity.

This is why the Apostle Paul said physical training and nurturing of ourselves physically is of some value, caring for the body, but in the end the death rate and the shedding of this body is still 100%. And so then Paul emphasized spiritual training and spiritual growth and spiritual nourishment is profitable for this life, so get it early, and it's profitable for the life hereafter forever and ever.

Paul, under the inspiration of the spirit, wrote to the believers in Corinth. He said, speaking of you and I being transformed holistically into the glorious image of God's Son, bit by bit, moment by moment, transformed over time into the likeness of Christ.

Think of the spiritual growth of Christ as he matured in his life. Certainly his faith increased, his hope increased. This was a man with such spiritual fervor that in all the resistance that he felt as a carrier of the truth, the embodiment of truth, knowing he was right before God, all of the resistance he felt in this world, none of it shook him. None of it slowed him down.

All that happened in Jesus was he continued to mature in faith, in an unquenchable optimism, to the point where the Bible says, "For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame." He went to the cross and suffered and died for human sin, for your sins and mine. Why? Because of his spiritual tenacity.

His flesh, of course, resisted. He was tempted away from it, but the strength of his inner being carried him to the cross. Angels strengthened him. The spirit encouraged him. And you and I are to be transformed to be like this.

I don't know how that strikes you, but it strikes me in such a way that I know I have room to grow. I know I have the opportunity for more faith, your unquenchable hope, more perseverance and tenacity in my spirit to keep going in the face of challenges.

You and I can be transformed into the glorious image of God's Son. And of course, all of this was done in love. His faith and his hope freed him to sacrifice his life in love. But of course, this just didn't happen for Jesus, and it won't just happen for you and I. We all have a part to play in this process.

And this is why Paul penned, under the inspiration of the spirit, these words: just as you start your life in Christ through faith in him, continue to live in him. Stay at it. Be disciplined so that you can be rooted and built up in the faith, just as you were taught.

Now, some people have never been taught these things, and it's hard to mature and to grow unless you're taught. Even physically, if you're not taught how to eat well and how to exercise and how to stay moving and doing the discipline of this, you won't do it.

But even if you're taught, then there's the action that has to be taken. And so sometimes the idea of motivation comes into play. Why should I grow? Should I put the energy in? Should I pay the price to keep taking care of my body? Should I pay the price to mature and grow spiritually?

Sometimes God puts us in positions where we have to answer that question. I remember when I went off to college, and I had grown up in a small town in a relatively small high school, and then I got to college and I was overwhelmed by the academic rigors that I was facing, and then also the idea of being out on my own and then venturing.

And it was an invitation from God for me to mature and to grow, to become more disciplined in my life, to have more faith in my life, to exhibit more courage. And I had to decide, am I going to grow or am I going to shrink back? Am I going to work through the college challenges that I'm facing, or am I going to shrink, drop out?

Then all of a sudden, I had this gal that I was dating for a period of time, and we dated for four and a half years, and I woke up one morning and I felt in my spirit the Lord saying to me, just kind of in this way, "Tim, you could get married now if you'd like to."

And I was like, whoa, get married. And I went that next day and proposed to her, and she said yes. And all of a sudden I realized, I'm not ready to be a husband. If I'm going to be a good husband, I've got to grow. I've got to develop an understanding of what good husbandry is about. I have to learn what it means to serve my wife in a good way.

And by the way, I would just say I'm still growing and still learning as a husband. But that was one of those points: am I going to rise up and mature, learn how to do husbandry well?

And then all of a sudden we got pregnant, and all of a sudden I was a father. I'd never been a father before, and God brought me to this point. Now, Tim, not only are you to be a husband and exercise those new skills, but now you're a dad and you get to raise a son and then a daughter.

And I had to grow and figure out, if I'm going to be a good husband and a good father, I need to know what that is, and then I need to take action on it and mature into it.

Then all of a sudden my kids grew up and I became a grandfather. It's another invitation for me to grow. What does it mean to be a grandfather, a father to your children, a husband to your wife, and then a grandfather? And who knows? And what is the weight of a legacy? And how should my spiritual life look? And how should I interact with them? And God, what's my appropriate role?

And I needed to grow. I've done a lot of spiritual leading in the world, but I've never been the head pastor of a church like this. And you all voted me in to be your head pastor a few months back, and it's an invitation for me to grow, to mature, to develop as a spiritual leader.

And let me just say this: I know this. There's a cost to growth. God squeezes us when it's time to grow, and you and I can shrink back and atrophy, or we can decide to put in the energy to grow. And to both decisions, there's a cost.

Growing has a cost to it: discipline, tenacity, energy, work, stretching, discomfort. But not growing has a cost to it. It may not be immediate, but apathy and laziness and carelessness—it has a cost.

And I can tell you this: I have a number of friends who, when they become husbands, fathers, wives, they decided not to take it that seriously and they decided not to grow. And some of them are paying a huge cost. There's cost to not growing as there are costs to growing.