



Luke 18:1-8
Sermon
St. Michael Lutheran Church
Sunday, October 21st, 2007
Elise Stringer, Faith Formation

"Growing in Faith"

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Do you remember standing with your back against the wall, and having your mom or dad, grandparent or even teacher mark your height above your head with a pen or pencil? Do you remember what it felt like to hear someone say, "Wow you've grown two inches this year"? Or maybe what you remember is that one year you were taller than your brother or sister. Or maybe you were the parent doing the measuring. Inch by inch, mark by mark you watched your children grow.

I remember stretching and straining, squiggling and squirming, hoping the mark on the wall would be just a little bit higher than the last time. Sometimes it was and well sometimes it wasn't.

"I've grown a lot this time, haven't I...I'm getting bigger," that's what I'd say each time my parents measured me." They would say, "You're getting there, a little at a time." I wanted to be tall so badly; and of course I did grow, just not as tall as I dreamed. To this day those marks are still on the frame of my closet door at my parent's house. A reminder of my childhood, of my growth, of my life.

We all know something about growing.

We've all grown; we've all watched children grow; some of us have planted flowers, trees or crops and watched them grow. Some of us have witnessed growth in business and investments, some growth in marriage and family. However we may have experienced it, growing is a part of life. It happens to all of us. And it's not always easy.

Growing pains...do you remember those? No not the ones you have in your shins between the ages of 8 and 12, or the ones you have in your knees much later in life.

The growing pains I'm referring to are moments, moments in our life when change is inevitable. When growing up and growing older are not an option, but a reality, and at times a harsh one. The moments when we struggle to understand the person God is shaping and forming us to be, desperately holding on to the person we think we want or need to be. Those are growing pains.

We all know something about growing, and as Christians we are called to grow in faith, even when it means we struggle, especially when it means we grow closer to God and our lives are transformed because of it.

Growth is a good thing. Change is a good thing. But for some reason, as human beings, we have a tendency to fight against them. Honestly, we like things just the way they are, we like doing things our own way, even when it means we're being unfaithful to God's will. **Growing pains.** Jacob knew something about fighting against growth and change. Jacob understood what it meant to "wrestle with God," and Jacob experienced deep, intimate, life changing growth, growth in faith and life.

"Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him."

Just like Jacob, there are times when we're left to wrestle; wrestle with ourselves, wrestle with one another, wrestle with God. Sometimes it's simply a tug of war and we eventually give in, let go and let the change come. And sometimes it hurts, because we, in our feeble attempt to control God and the world in which we live, fight the ever so gentle nudging of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We resist the life giving change God can bring about in us, and rather than open our hearts, minds and hands to what God is calling us to do, we turn away, we fight, we struggle, and our hip gets knocked right out of socket. Yep, and there's something about a blow to the hip that gets our attention very quickly; it's a growing pain too tough to ignore.

Maybe we're wrestling with selfishness, taking more than we give; maybe we're wrestling with anger, finding it hard to forgive and forget; maybe we're wrestling with pride, talking more than we listen; maybe we're wrestling with doubt, looking back rather than forward; maybe we're wrestling with fear, stunted rather than growing.

We all wrestle, whether yesterday, today or tomorrow, with this, that or the other.

But the Good News is that just like Jacob, in that wrestling, in that growing, God blesses us, calls us His beloved child, picks us up, dusts us off and sends us on our way, renewed for work in His kingdom. Maybe on our way we're limping, maybe we're tired, maybe we're even still in pain, but our life is preserved and we have grown. It's not the kind of growth we can measure on a chart or the door frame, but it's an amazing, powerful, faith forming growth.

When we allow the Holy Spirit to do its work in our lives, we do not simply become more human, we are not simply made aware of our weakness as human beings, but we become more like God, in whose image we were created. We are reminded that we are God's chosen, loved and forgiven children, always in the hands of God, never abandoned or forsaken. In the wrestling we change and we grow. We grow in faith and in faithfulness to God and God's word.

Growing in faith is a wrestling of sorts.

What are you wrestling with? What are we wrestling with? What tug of war is going on inside of you? Or inside this place? What is God calling us to do? Are we growing in faith?

In elementary school we played tug of war during our gym class. I loved tug of war. I always wanted to be at the front of the line, because even though I got pulled into the mud first, I wasn't at the end of the line being trampled when everyone fell backwards. And if for some reason I got tired of pulling, if my hands got sore or my arms got weak, I knew there were still people behind me pulling the weight for our team. I was on a team. I wasn't alone.

Last week at the young youth campout at Smitty and Elaine's house, I had the kids play a similar game of tug of war. But instead of pulling on opposite ends of a rope, the rope was tied together and we stood in a circle, each holding onto the rope.

We all sat down and as a group we all pulled on the rope at the same time, trying to pull ourselves up, without getting on our knees or using our hands. It wasn't easy, we needed each other. We had to work together. Each person around the circle was being pulled up, while helping pull someone else up. It took a few times to get it without falling and sliding, but we got it. Together, with persistence we were all able to stand up just by pulling on the rope and after a while it seemed easier.

The Gospel lesson says, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart."

Now a widow in a certain city was persistent in asking a judge for justice against her opponent. The judge was not a man of God; he didn't fear or respect God. But the widow, someone cast out, ignored and forgotten by most in her day, was persistent in her pleading and because of her persistence the judge granted her justice. Not because he felt it was the right thing to do, or because he feared punishment if he ignored her, but because he couldn't ignore her, he granted her justice. This is a powerful parable, a tangible testimony to the power of persistence.

"And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?"

If a widow ostracized and alone receives justice because of her persistence, how much more will we receive if we pray always, day and night, and do not lose heart. If we stand knocking at what seems like a locked door, knocking until our knuckles are bloody, praying, waiting, watching, hoping, then we have been persistent.

Just as the disciples heard that day, we hear this day, that prayer is a practice of faith, and growing in faith means praying with persistence.

Going to God in prayer for justice, for mercy, for forgiveness, and not giving up when we feel as though we hear nothing, or not what we want to hear, or when we hear ***wait***, be patient but persistent. And God who is faithful, God who is loving, will hear our prayer, cradle us in His arms and not let us go.

Growing in faith is about being in relationship with God. It's about seeking out a true and abiding relationship with God our creator and redeemer. Growing in faith is about wrestling like Jacob, it's about praying with persistence and not losing heart. Growing in faith is about pulling each other up. It's about gathering together as the body of Christ in this place, as the family of faith we call St. Michael Lutheran Church and strengthening and encouraging one another, it's about knowing that we're part of a team, working together to learn and grow.

As Disciples of Christ we are called to pray continually until Christ returns.

And while we wait and watch for His return, while we pray without ceasing, ***we grow in faith***. When we dedicate ourselves to reading God's Holy Word, and eating at God's Holy table, our hearts, our minds and our hands are opened to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and we are drawn into deeper relationship with God and one another; strengthened and encouraged to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel message.

The Good News that we are children of the Living God. A God who chooses to enter into a life giving relationship with us and be with us forever. A God who chooses to call us by name, wrestle with us, love and bless us and send us out to faithfully do His work in the world.

We all know something about growing and growing pains...

Today's Gospel lesson, today's Old Testament text and today's reading from the New Testament each give us measurements for growing in faith.

A life of faith means that we might wrestle with God; it certainly means we are called to care for the widow, the orphan and the sick. A life of faith calls us to be persistent in prayer and preaching the Gospel, even when the world is not eager to hear it; it calls us to be courageous in bearing one another's burdens, eager to do the work of an evangelist and vigilant in seeking justice for the outcast and forgotten.

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" The Grace of our Baptism into Christ says YES! Yes, together through the grace of God, we will grow in faith.

May our hearts be stirred by the words of today's hymn, "O Christ, create new hearts in us that beat in time with yours, that joined by faith with your great heart, become love's open doors. We are your body, risen Christ; our hearts, our hands we yield that through our life and ministry your love may be revealed."

Thanks Be To God. Amen.