

*We are Making a Difference through. . . Spiritual Growth*

Or:

May 4, 2008

Year A: Seventh Sunday of Easter

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

The other day I attended a Dean training event out at Norwesca with several other pastors. Dean is now the name we use for those directing each individual camp. Anywhere, we were sitting there having lunch and we started talking about age and since I'm old now, I felt like I could chime right on in. I soon learned on our more life experienced pastors. So when I came across this cute little illustration, I thought of that lunch discussion. It is called *You Know You're Getting Older When. . .*

You know you're getting older when: Everything hurts, and what doesn't hurt, doesn't work. The gleam in your eyes is from the sun hitting your bifocals. You feel like the morning after, and you haven't been anywhere. Your little black book contains only names ending in M.D. Your knees buckle, and your belt won't.

You get winded playing cards. Your children begin to look middle-aged. You join a health club and don't go. You decide to procrastinate, but never get around to it.

Your mind makes contracts your body can't meet. You know all the answers, but nobody asks you the questions. You look forward to a dull evening at home. You're turning out lights for economic rather than romantic reasons.

Your favorite part of the newspaper is "Twenty-Five Years Ago Today."

You sit in a rocking chair and can't get it going.

You're 17" around the neck, 42" around the waist, and 106 around the golf course. Your pacemaker makes the garage door go up when you see a pretty girl.

The best part of your day is over when the alarm goes off. Your back goes out more than you do. A fortune-teller offers to read your face instead of your hand. The little gray-haired lady you help across the street is your wife. You've got too much room in the house and not enough room in the medicine cabinet. You sink your teeth in a steak and they stay there.<sup>1</sup>

Today we continue our sermon series on our Core Values. Last week I mentioned that our first three Core Values focused on who we are or on what we want to become. Then our next three focuses on what we do. Today we discuss, *We are Making a Difference through Spiritual Growth*. Our topic is not so much on what we do but on where we are going. Our Core Value is on growth, on going out into the world, on maturing our faith. Our Core Value is based on the last words Jesus gives his disciples before he departs from the earth.

[Matthew 28:19-20 \(NRSV\)](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Morgan. *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, & Quotes: The Ultimate Contemporary Resource for Speakers*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. 2000.) 15.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

When we think of growth we think of those things that we can easily watch. We watch our children grow and as long as we feed them, love them, and nurture them, they grow. We watch our garden grow. As long as we water it, weed it, put on a little fertilizer, the garden will grow. We watch ourselves grow old. As long as we get out of bed and celebrate that birthday every year we grow. But when it comes to our spiritual growth, we have the mindset that we'll just watch it grow. Pray a little bit, join a church, send our children to Sunday School, and "wall-ah" it grows. But that really is not the message of our Core Value.

A little boy who lived far out in the country in the late 1800s had reached the age of 12 and had never in all his life seen a circus. You can imagine his excitement, when one day a poster went up at school announcing that on the next Saturday a traveling circus was coming to the nearby town. He ran home with the glad news and the question, "Daddy, can I go?"

Although the family was poor, the father sensed how important this was to the lad. "If you do your Saturday chores ahead of time," he said, "I'll see to it that you have the money to go."

Come Saturday morning, the chores were done and the little boy stood by the breakfast table, dressed in his Sunday best. His father reached down into the pocket of his overalls and pulled out a dollar bill – the most money the little boy had possessed at one time in all his life. The father cautioned him to be careful and then sent him on his way to town.

The boy was so excited, his feet hardly seemed to touch the ground all the way. As he neared the outskirts of the village, he noticed people lining the streets, and he worked his way through the crowd until he could see what was happening. Lo and behold, it was the approaching spectacle of a circus parade!

The parade was the grandest thing this lad had ever seen. Caged animals snarled as they passed, bands beat their rhythms and sounded shining horns, midgets performed acrobatics while flags and ribbons swirled overhead. Finally, after everything had passed where he was standing, the traditional circus clown, with floppy shoes, baggy pants, and a brightly painted face, brought up the rear. As the clown passed by, the little boy reached into his pocket and took out that precious dollar bill. Handing the money to the clown, the boy turned around and went home.

What had happened? The boy thought he had seen the circus when he had only seen the parade!<sup>2</sup>

In our spiritual journey the parade is what is safe and comfortable. The parade is that time we can sit back and watch and hope that we grow. The parade is something easy, it's OK, it's ordinary, it's mediocre. But that is not the Core Value represented by Matthew. Jesus here gives us an ultimatum. He's

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Rice. *Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1993.) 56.

leaving. His earthly presence will not be felt anymore. He's giving his followers a clear sense of direction. Go out, make disciples, obey what he commanded, and then you will grow. Sit back and watch and wait and all you have is the parade. But if you are willing to step out and allow growth to occur then you will experience the spectacle of the circus. These Core Values do not allow us to sit back and do things gradually. They are constantly pushing us forward and outward in a direction that leads us to grow.

You see Spiritual Growth just doesn't happen gradually. It needs to be nurtured and this is why we value study (Christian Education). It needs to be challenged and this is why we value an Open Door policy (A Sense of Belonging). It needs to be risky and this is why we value mission and volunteering our service (Mission to the Community – next week). Spiritual Growth just doesn't happen if we sit and expect things to occur. Spiritual Growth doesn't take place in a safe environment and it certainly won't happen when we run away from problems and issues. Spiritual Growth happens when we face our fears, when we tackle our challenges, when we venture out beyond our comfort zone. Most importantly growth happens when we move beyond what is just ordinary or acceptable to something that is truly incredible.

Sir Edmund Hillary was the first man to climb Mount Everest. On May 29, 1953 he scaled the highest mountain in the world – 29,000 feet straight up. He was knighted for his efforts. He even made American Express card commercials because of it! However, until we read his book, *High Adventure*, we don't understand that Hillary had to grow into this success. You see, in 1952 he attempted to climb Mount Everest, but failed. A few weeks later a group in England asked him to address its members. Hillary walked on stage to a thunderous applause. The audience was recognizing an attempt at greatness, but Edmund Hillary saw himself as a failure. He moved away from the microphone and walked to the edge of the platform. He made a fist and pointed at a picture of the mountain. He said in a loud voice, "Mount Everest, you beat me the first time, but I'll beat you the next time because you've grown all you are going to grow . . . *but I'm still growing!*"<sup>3</sup>

That is the value of growth. It occurs when we do not accept the status quo. If we did, we'd never get anywhere. Accept the ordinary and cures would have never been found. Just be mediocre and inventions would have never be thought of. Stick with the status quo and trying something new, something radical, something that knocks our socks off would never even happen. Spiritual growth is supposed to be a bit challenging. In fact, if we are not fearful of growing then may be its still a little too safe. And I think Jesus knows that about us and that is why he concludes his wonderful speech with these words: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." If Jesus expects us to grow and be difference makers then he made sure we will not be doing it alone.

A little boy was spending his Saturday morning playing in his sandbox. He had with him his box of cars and trucks, his plastic pail, and a shiny, red plastic shovel.

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Cavanaugh. *The Sower's Seeds: One Hundred Inspiring Stories for Preaching, Teaching and Public Speaking*. (New York: Paulist Press. 1990.) 11.

In the process of creating roads and tunnels in the soft sand, he discovered a large rock in the middle of the sandbox. The lad dug around the rocks managing to dislodge it from the dirt. With no little bit of struggle, he pushed and nudged the rock across the sandbox by using his feet. (He was a very small boy and the rock was very large.) When the boy got the rocks to the edge of the sandbox, however, he found that he couldn't roll it up and over the little wall.

Determined, the little boy shoved, pushed, and pried, but every time he thought he had made some progress, the rock tipped and then fell back into the sandbox. The little boy grunted, struggled, pushed, shoved – but his only reward was to have the rock roll back, smashing his cubby fingers. Finally he burst into tears of frustration.

All this time the boy's father watched from the living room window as the drama unfolded. At the moment the tears fell, a large shadow fell across the boy and the sandbox. It was the boy's father. Gently but firmly he said, "Son, why didn't you use all the strength that you had available?"

Defeated, the boy sobbed back, "but I did, Daddy, I did! I used all the strength that I had!"

"No, son," corrected the father kindly. "You didn't use all the strength you had. You didn't ask me."

With that the father reached down, picked up the rock, and removed it from the sandbox.<sup>4</sup>

Folks, we are here to make a difference and the only way we can do that is by using everything we've got and that means doing it with God's help. That is why Growth – Spiritual Growth – is a Core Value. God does not want us to become stagnant. God does not want us to stop growing spiritually. We were not put on the Earth to just sit. We did not become part of A Church Family that Makes a Difference to watch our faith become ordinary. Our Core Value is to grow with God by making a difference in our world and we do this by getting off our duff and getting out of our comfort zone. We do this by moving into something incredible. This is why our Core Value is Spiritual Growth.

Several years ago I was leading a youth group on a mission trip to Mexico and we needed a translator. I asked one of our college students and she told me that her summer was much too busy. When I pleaded she said that she wasn't that fluent in Spanish and she was also a bit reluctant to help sponsor a bunch of youth, more excuses came. I tried everything I could but I could not convince her to go with us. Well, whatever, I did must have sat with her for awhile, and the next year we decided to go back to Mexico I called again and this time she reluctantly said yes.

That was back in 2002 and that college student soon graduated and headed off to Denver to work in the financial field. I didn't hear much from her after that. Then one day I was sitting in my computer in the office here when I got an email from this former parishioner saying that she got involved with a church in Denver and went on a trip that reminded her so much of our trip to Mexico. She told me that it touched her so much that she was going to enter Illif

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Rice. 36.

Seminary in Denver. I was amazed. This woman showed no signs of thinking about the ministry. In fact, we had other college students on the trip that I thought would go into the ministry before she ever would. It is amazing when I think back to that first conversation I had with her and how reluctant she was to respond to an opportunity to serve God. But when she took it, it sparked something and just last week I saw that this woman, her name is Greta Leach, has recently accepted an appointment to be the new Associate Pastor in North Platte. Spiritual Growth happens when we go out into the world, face our fears, and do not accept the ordinary. Growth happens when we do something incredible for God. We get to grow with God.

I want to conclude with you one of my favorite poems. You've heard it before – it is called *Butt prints in the Sand*.

One night I had a wondrous dream,  
One set of footprints there were seen,  
The footprints of my precious Lord,  
But mine were not along the shore.  
But then some stranger prints appeared,  
And I asked the Lord,  
“What have we here?”  
Those prints are large and round and neat,  
“But Lord, they are too big for feet.”  
“My child,” He said in somber tones,  
“For miles I carried you along.  
I challenged you to walk in faith,  
But you refused and made me wait.”  
“you disobeyed, you would not grow,  
The walk of faith, you would not know,  
So I got tired, I got fed up,  
And there I dropped you on your butt.”  
“Because in life, there comes a time,  
When one must fight, and one must climb,  
When one must rise and take a stand,  
Or leave their butt prints in the sand.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Butt prints in the sand.” *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations. Part II.* 41.