

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, March 1, 2020

Rev. John Tapscott

“GOD GIVES THE GROWTH”

1 Corinthians 3:6,7

A favourite topic of conversation is growth. Naturally we hope that an infant is growing well, and we are pleased when it is. And when the child doesn't seem to be growing as it should, concerned parents seek medical advice. In the spring and summer farmers scan their fields and gardeners watch their gardens for signs of growth. An abundant harvest is a blessing. We watch our investment accounts for signs of growth, too. An investment or pension fund manager won't last they don't grow assets under their management, at least over a period of a few years. Business managers and executives are expected to grow the company and its value. Growth drives our economy and provides solid jobs, increasing incomes, and secure retirements. At least that's the theory.

Growth is a favorite topic of conversation in church circles, as well. When I tell someone that I'm the minister of a church, they often ask, "Is your church growing?" They're speaking about membership numbers and attendance.

It's not an easy question to answer. For numbers are important but they're not the only way of measuring growth. I usually answer by saying, "We're holding our own." For every congregation waxes and wanes, then waxes and wanes again. Congregational growth often seems cyclical, especially in the Sunday School. Communities change. Demographics shift. But there are other ways we can measure growth besides numbers. Are we growing in stewardship, that is, in giving and in service? Are we growing in Christ-like character? Are we growing in faith and hope and love? In understanding and knowledge? A congregation's fellowship can grow stronger even if numbers are static or declining. There are signs of such growth among us.

The apostle Paul wrote to the fledging church at Corinth and mentions the growth they had experienced. In 1 Corinthians 3: 6, 7 Paul writes, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." Whatever growth the church and individual Christians experience ultimately comes from God. The sovereign God gives growth when and where and how he pleases. God gives the growth.

But having said that God gives the growth I want to go a bit further. Let me draw out a truth that is suggested by the passage we heard from 1 Corinthians. Yes, God gives the growth, but human cooperation plays a role in growth. We are not just passive recipients of growth, but actively involved in the process. So let me say it again. God gives the growth, but our cooperation plays a role in helping it happen.

First, God gives growth in response to human faithfulness.

Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." One reason the Corinthian church grew was because of these two faithful ambassadors for Christ. Paul preached the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen in Corinth. Now some wise philosophers thought it was nonsense. But ordinary people were greatly attracted by the message of God's love, of One who gave his life for each one of them and was raised from the dead, as Risen Saviour and Living Lord. The Holy Spirit moved among the Corinthians in a powerful way and people came to faith in Christ. So the church was born and it grew. After Paul moved on to the next mission field, Apollos stayed behind, watering and nurturing the seeds that had been sown by Paul's preaching. Apollos taught the Scriptures and pastored the congregation. Paul and Apollos were faithful preachers, teachers and pastors, and God gave the growth in response to their faithfulness.

Now to be sure, growth in numbers can sometimes happen even where there is false preaching or unfaithful pastoring. People can be attracted to a church because of the wrong reasons. There are always people who want their ears itched by some new or novel idea. Sometimes good looks and smooth talk can play a role. Paul didn't have any of those things. In fact, he admitted he wasn't much to look at and wasn't a strong public speaker. But he was faithful. And God gave growth in response to his faithfulness.

Now there are practical steps we can take which helps the church grow. Appropriate use of social media these days is very important. So too is our welcoming attitude. But what makes the church grow in the long run is faithfulness to the gospel message, faithfulness to Christ and I would say, a sense of personal faithfulness in a preacher. No one is perfect, but faithfulness is a fruit of the spirit and it really matters in the church and in its preachers and teachers.

There are many things to look for when a church calls a new preacher. But I think that faithfulness to Christ and the gospel should be the baseline qualifications. And the faithfulness of each person who sits in the pews is very important too, faithfulness to the promises you have made to God. Do you remember them? "I will be faithful in joining with the Lord's people in the worship of God, in studying the Bible and in prayer." "I will enter into the life and work of the church, supporting it with my gifts and sharing in its mission to all people." "I will endeavour daily to respond to God's love, to do his will, and to fulfill my Christian calling and ministry in the world." So it's not only on the preacher to be faithful but on the whole congregation. God is faithful and calls his people to faithfulness. In fact, faithfulness is God's gift to us. So be faithful to the promises you have made. And God gives growth in response to our faithfulness.

Secondly, God gives growth when we are willing to pay the cost of change.

Throughout his ministry Paul paid the cost of being a faithful apostle of Christ. He suffered ridicule, beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, illnesses, and much more, including death for the gospel's sake.

Even the Corinthians paid a cost for their growing church. They had come out of a very godless, immoral culture. They were willing to let their lives be changed by Christ. No doubt that put some

of them in conflict with their former friends and colleagues and even family members. It must have been very costly for some of them. But they were willing to pay the cost. And because of that willingness God gave the growth.

Our situation may be different for sure, but wherever there is a willingness of God's people to pay the cost, God gives the growth. Sometimes a congregation will say to their minister or prospective minister, "We want the church to grow and we want you to make that happen." Well there's a couple of things wrong with that. For one, it is God who gives the growth. Yes, the faithfulness of minister and congregation helps. But real growth always comes from God. God gives it where and when and how he chooses. And secondly, if a congregation wants to grow, then not just the minister, but the congregation must be willing to pay the cost. Usually that means a willingness to pay the cost of change.

Now I'm not a believer in change for change's sake. But over my twenty years here there have been a few changes in the way we do things. For the most part they have been introduced gradually and have been quite well accepted. Whether they have led to growth or not I can't say. But hopefully some of them have been helpful.

Let me say again that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is essential and must not be tampered with. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever." He is the jewel, the main attraction. "And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself." Lifting up Jesus – there's the prime directive for any preacher. But there is nothing wrong with changing the box in which the jewel is set if it helps set off the jewel more prominently. Changes, when they are in accord with Scriptural principles and wisely implemented can be good. Yes, I know change can be sometimes uncomfortable, even painful. It takes some getting used to. But God gives growth where there is a willingness to pay the cost of change both in the church and in our own lives. So let's be open to the winds of the Spirit moving in us and among us.

Finally, God gives growth throughout our Christian lives.

Now the Corinthian Christians were still infants in Christ, said Paul. They had been fed with milk, for they were not yet ready for solid food. Most of them were recent converts to Christ and the old Adam was still hanging around. Paul mentions jealousy and quarrelling and party spirit. Paul calls the Corinthian Christians God's field and God's building. The plants had just nicely sprouted in them. They were still under construction. The first floor had just been completed. They were still growing in Christ and there was still much growth ahead of them. But God, through the Holy Spirit, was giving the growth and would continue to do so.

God gives growth throughout our Christian lives. God does not want us to stop at the infant stage, which unfortunately many Christians do. God intends for us to grow continually. Obviously not physically though some of us have continued to grow outward even though we stopped growing upwards long ago. God wants us to grow into the full stature of Christ. He wants us to grow in Christ-like service, in Christ-like character. He wants us to be fed by the presence of the living Christ in this sacrament to grow in faith and in hope, and love. God desires that the fruits

of the Spirit take hold of you and me more fully throughout our lives. And this growth comes from God.

Now on one hand the Gospel message is so simple that a child can understand it. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." On the other hand, the Christian faith is endlessly deep. There is never be a point where we can say, "I've had enough." There is always more ahead of us. God desires that we continually grow in Scriptural knowledge and in our prayer life prayer and in understanding of the faith. God wants us to receive solid food for our nurturing and growth.

God gives growth throughout our lives and maybe it will even continue in heaven. But certainly it's here for us if we are willing to receive it. And it happens. I know this from personal experience both in my ministry and in my own Christian life. I am still receiving new insights from Scripture and the Holy Spirit's help in applying those insights to my life and ministry. When each of us is willing to receive the growth God gives then the congregation will grow too. There will be solid growth among us, perhaps in numbers, though we can't be sure of that. But there will be solid, lasting growth.

God gives the growth and we all have a role in helping it to happen. For we are God's servants, working together; we are God's field and God's building. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."