

“Growing in Jesus’ Likeness”



Dear Friends in Christ

Today is an extra special day for us here at Faith and for God's Kingdom as well because 8 young people are making a public confessing of their faith through confirmation.

And for their encouragement as well as ours, I would like to invite you to meditate with me on the text of 1 John 2:12-17 where the Apostle John tells us: ¹² I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

¹³ I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. ¹⁴ I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. ¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides for ever.”

It is not easy being a Christian this time in history and its only getting worse, and that is the world in which you Confirmands are making your confession of faith today. And as happy and encouraged that I am today for you, I also recognize a sad truth, and that is the fact that many young people are leaving the church right after confirmation. I hope this would not happen with this group, but the fact shows a sad reality that makes us wonder, why? What is the problem?

There could be several reasons; however I have identified two big ones. First is how we treat God's Kingdom and his Church, and second our faith growth.

For instance we have forgotten that Church is not so much what happens in these four walls but church is where we are at, who we are in God's Kingdom and our role in it, and that Christ is with us here and all over.

I'm sure you are familiar with this statement, School is my second home. And that is true, yet we forget that home is our first school. The same can be said of the Church too. Church is our home, our second home, but we forget that home is our first church. Home is where we are to learn about the Scriptures, the commandments, prayer and so on. That's why Martin Luther prepared the catechism so that parents can teach it at home. The Catechism begins with this statement: “As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.”

Now, what if I ask around if you have taught the Catechism at home? What would you say? Among the answer I have gotten before is something like this: “Well “I was confirmed long ago, and that time yes I did study the catechism.”

But after confirmation, we don't read the catechism ourselves let alone teach it to our households. That's one of the reasons that our younger generations leave our churches. There is no continuity and strengthening of that faith at home and by extension there is no interest by the things the church offers, when they are available.

So what are we to do then? Just keep on going the same way we used to do? Or should we grow to something else? God's word tells us that yes we should, through Word and Sacrament.

Faith growth is the second problem for our young generations to leave church. To understand this better the reading from 1st John, will help us. The text helps us to think about the need for our faith growth, especially in a world where our faith is being challenged every day. The need is nothing new though, for it us a struggle happening since after the day of Pentecost.

But there is encouragement in knowing that God is leading us somewhere, to grow in the image of his Son Jesus, just as John tells us previously in the same chapter verse 6: "Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." (1John 2:6)

John describes three levels of growth which he compares to being small children first, then young men and lastly fathers. Now some theologians think that the descriptions here are literal, however the context that we are given refers to the spiritual life, and this is what I would like to point out today.

The little children are those who are still very young in the faith, infants; the stage where we begin our faith, at our baptism or when we come to faith in Christ. It is a wonderful stage in which God gives us a new birth claiming us as his own and receive the forgiveness of our sins. From that point on we can face eternity without fear of judgment for Christ has been our judgment and we rejoice at God's grace given to us every day.

However, the infant in Christ doesn't know what lies ahead, all the struggles, obstacles that a Christian faces. And there is also the danger of following false teaching, as they often attach themselves to self-proclaimed spiritual heroes and follow their teachings; following false teachings can be compared to diseases that stunt our growth.

They know the Father of course how else would they receive forgiveness? But their depth and kind of knowledge is still growing. At this point, little children know their father as the provider and protector. They are secure in the knowledge that their Father loves and cares for them, but they still know so little about their heavenly Father's nature. That's what a little child in the faith would look like.

Then we have the "young men." John writes: "...I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one." (vs. 13b, 14b)

Young men are the ones in their prime of life, aren't they? So it is with our faith. Young men are strong, strong to defeat the evil one, not on their own power of course, but they know the source of their strength for their everyday battles.

As you see, after our childhood in the faith, we are faced with the conflicts with our old nature, the world and satan. The old nature likes the things of the world, our flesh is weak and satan loves to keep us there, however, because young men are not only strong in the word, but the word abides in them, are able to identify when the Holy

Spirit convicts them of sin, and so ran back to Christ their captain, seeking forgiveness if they have sinned and in that forgiveness seek God's victory.

And because young men in the spiritual sense are fighters they want to pursue growth in the likeness of Christ, for they realize who they belong to. They realize that they are no longer slaves to sin, and they know that the Father is powerful to help them combat the evil one, and realize that in him there is joy and peace.

They hear God's word of love and grace. If someone wrongs them, instead of becoming filled with rage, they turn to the life of Christ seeking forgiveness for them and for the ones who wronged them. When temptation to lust is presented, they recall the word of God and the temporary nature of this world's pleasure. These young men are covered with the whole armor of God, they are warriors.

Think how much stronger the church would be if believers moved on from being babes in Christ to strong young men? There will be not growth stunt, instead there will be lots of fathers.

But, here is the thing, instead of deepening our life in the Word, we battle old temptation on our own, the problem is that we fail, we fail miserably. Although we do ran to Christ for forgiveness, and we should for we are sinful human beings. However, more often than not, we use that as an excuse, we are sinful human beings so, what is there to expect, right? But something is wrong with this picture. Yes, it is true we do have our great enemies, the flesh the world and satan, and yes, we must keep confessing our sins, we must repent and come to the cross, but dear friends, forgiveness leads to new highs in the Spirit. It seems like we like to just say, I repent, and thanks for forgiveness, but don't realize the power that that forgiveness brings in the Spirit and grow spiritually, in the faith. Therefore we need to grow in God's word in intimate communion with the father. Growth is a natural process both in the physical and spiritual worlds, but growth is also a sign of health. It is normal to expect growth of our spiritual life (2 Thess. 1:3), and for that we need to take care of ourselves through our walk with Christ, through His word and the Sacraments.

Lastly, John describes the most mature Christians, they are the spiritual fathers, the ones who "know him who is from the beginning...." Twice he says that! (V. 13) (v. 14)

Of course all Children know the Father, but it is the fathers who know him deeply, who experience God's guidance deeply, more than children and the young men do, and that knowledge turns into total dependence on Jesus Christ and not on the things of the world.

Their time spent in the Word has led them to understand God's nature and ways, deeply. Those who are like fathers don't expect things to always be easy or to always get what they want. They appreciate the times of need as well as times of abounding but they have learned the secret of contentment. (Philippians 4:12) Nothing can shake them (Psalm 16:8). Their passion for the Lord is stronger but tempered by wisdom, patience and humility. They continue feeding in intimate communion with God through Word and sacrament, because of their love for the Lord.

The fathers are the ones that should be elders in any congregations of believers. Their intimate knowledge of Jesus leads them to base their decisions not on personal preferences but on the leading of the Holy Spirit, through the Word. As Jesus looked to

the Father in everything, fathers look to the leading of the Spirit to know the mind of Christ.

Just imagine this, what if we, what if we have lots of fathers, many fathers in this congregation? It would transform our church, our congregation and beyond. When we are guided by the head of the Church who is Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit we are growing spiritually!

That's my prayer! Because the reality, is that we have failed. We are not growing into fathers, many still remain as children and some as young men, but mostly as children. That's why churches have failed, that's why many young leave the church because we haven't modeled for them a strong spiritual growth. But that failure doesn't come overnight, no! It's a long process, sometimes a long life process that is based on choosing that which pleases the flesh instead of looking for the things that please God.

I'm so grateful that we have six men being confirmed today. We also have a group of elders, although young, they are being developed into spiritual fathers, but it will take more work to keep growing, and let's be honest, we are overworked, aren't we? We need your prayers and support. It takes a life of consistent discipline, dying to self, killing the old man and let the spirit bring about a new man every day. It takes discipline to be in the word, being led by the Holy Spirit.

It's not all about men; that we know. Women too have a unique role in the body of Christ and the examples of John includes all of God's people, except that the Scriptures talk about men being the head of the family, of his household, and so we need to reclaim that position and calling so we can grow into spiritual fathers modeling a healthy growth system to our younger generations.

That's what we get from the text of John who identifies three stages of Spiritual growth, and as we heard them, which one describes you best? Little children, young men or fathers?

Growth is a natural process both in the physical and spiritual worlds, but growth is also a sign of health. Stunted growth usually means a lack of nutrition that is the Word feeding us in the Spirit, and the presence of disease which is any false teaching that we have believed. It is normal to expect growth of our spiritual life (2 Thess. 1:3), and for that we need to take care of ourselves through our walk with Christ, through His word and the Sacraments.

That's what the word of God through the apostle John wants to tell us today. That we keep growing in Word and Sacrament into the likes of Christ. That's the encouragement for each one of us today, for you confirmands so that you continue growing after this day in which you make a confession of your faith. It is the encouragement for each one of you parents and congregation members so that we all together work and encourage one another in growth, so bleeding in our young generation to leave the church would be stopped.

We are to grow in faith and Spirit. And how are we not to grow spiritually, if we belong to Christ? He who dies on the cross of Calvary to forgive our sins and give us a new life?, He is the one through the power of the holy Spirit who will make sure we grow, I hope and pray that may the Lord then encourage us and stir up our hearts, lead us and grow to his likeness.

As we close this meditation I would like to leave with you the words from the apostle Peter, who said: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour

Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” 2 Peter
3:18

In his name, amen.