

Sermon 28th August 2022

Sermon Spiritual Growth

What is spiritual growth? What do Christian spiritual practices look like?

Over the next ten minutes or so we will begin to explore spiritual growth which is widely known to be one of the four important pillars of church growth. But before we do that I would like you to have a look at the image on the screen. Do you all know what that piece of timber is across the neck of the oxen is called? Most of you have probably heard Jesus describe our call to follow him as an easy yoke and a light load. But when I look at that piece of timber keeping the oxen together and under control I think it looks quite heavy and uncomfortable and it make me wonder what Jesus means.

As someone who has been involved in nearly every aspect of church life I have always loved this passage because I have often felt like I have been carrying quite a load which became unbearable during my first year of ministry training in 2019. I spent the year in a state of high stress and at times a state of despair. During that year we were constantly being told to make sure we took time out, to have some downtime and to maintain and create boundaries for our own wellbeing. Yet at the same time we were being pressured to get our reports in on time and to only have a day off when it was an emergency, and so to be absent felt like the eighth deadly sin. Fortunately, the Dean of the College realised that we needed a lighter yoke so to speak, the hours we were expected to put in were reduced and we were encouraged to spend more time simply 'being' instead of constantly 'doing.' Being still and knowing God. The following year I learnt what that actually meant because I was forced to take time out due to a serious illness. For the first time in my adult life I experienced the joy of doing absolutely nothing.

During my time of recovery I spent a lot of time re-learning how to meditate according to the ancient Christian spiritual practice and I read many books that spoke about the mystery and beauty of God's love for us. I was spiritually refreshed. In one of those books I read the following phrase "God does not want what you do, God wants you". I realised that over the years I was doing lots of churchy things and being incredibly busy because I thought that's what Christians were meant to do and when I looked around, everyone else seemed to think that too. And there is danger in that both as individuals and as the church, particularly at this time in history when everything is rapidly changing and church numbers in terms of bums on seats appears to be declining.

During my research for my paper *'Words of hope to aging and declining congregations'* I stumbled across this warning:

"when survival becomes the primary motivation for change, the congregation will inevitably turn on itself and become so centred on its survival needs that it will be ineffective in responding to the real needs of real people in the world around it" ¹

¹James A Harnish, *You only have to Die, Leading your congregation to new life*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 99.

This quote is basically saying you will forget to be the church if you only focus on survival and although it points to a lack of missional focus it is equally true for our communal and individual spiritual growth. Here is a little story that illustrates that quite well. I am not sure where I first heard this story or where it comes from, but it goes like a bit like this; imagine you have died and gone to heaven, and when you first get there God takes you aside for a little chat. "Well, welcome to my kingdom" God says, "you made it," he laughs, "Tell me, how did your life go?" "Well", you answer, "it was full of ups and downs, and you owe me an answer for why there was so much suffering but apart from that God, you know I worked my guts out for you, I was on every church committee and went to every meeting, I volunteered for everything and even cleaned the toilets."

"Well that is wonderful" God says. "I really appreciate everything you did." God gives you a spiritual pat on the back. " But you know" God adds, "while you were doing all that stuff I really missed you".

The only time the yoke of Jesus becomes uncomfortable is when we neglect to be still and know God, in all the busyness of life our relationship with God can be pushed to the side or become mere lip service. God wants us, the real us, warts, and all, not who we think we should be or what we do.

So now back to the beginning, what is spirituality? Well, it can take many forms, it can be a spiritual practice such as meditative prayer, it can be an experience of either giving or receiving love or grace, it can be found in missional service and it can be found in simply enjoying your own hobbies, your creativity, or the beauty of nature. The foundation of spirituality however is the health of the relationship between us and God and like all relationships this requires practice, and dedication and time. We will wander away at times because our spiritual growth, if we are honest, is not a straight line from being a spiritual infant to becoming spiritually mature, it's more like a rollercoaster or a game of snakes and ladders than a smooth an easy ride to some distant and unachievable end goal.

So what is spiritual growth? According to our gospel reading today it is finding the way of Jesus easy and light, it is finding rest for our souls, that sounds like good news doesn't it. But how does it happen? It's quite simple really, it's about being in God's presence and not always doing, it's any number of practices, it's up to us to find the one that fits. According to Paul in Colossians spiritual growth is something we can ask God for, we read that, he and his helpers were constantly praying for the Colossians, so that they may be filled with "spiritual wisdom and understanding". Spiritual growth is a continual process that will not end until the end of our earthly days and possibly even beyond in the life to come. Paul also reminds us that we are made strong through the glorious power of God, it is definitely not all down to us, again this reinforces the need to rely on God's strength not our own. The times when I have found the burden heavy have always been the times I was doing too much under my own steam.

In many ways our relationship with God resembles our relationships with friends and loved ones, because it is as real as any other attachment we may have, except for one huge and glorious fact. If we ignore our friends or loved ones and fail to spend time with them, or

they with us, eventually the relationship will break down, not so with God. God's grace and love are so abundant that God will always be there waiting for us to wander back into the spiritual embrace no matter how wild or rocky our lives becomes, no matter the twists and turns or the ups and downs. Our God is a patient God who does not anyone to be lost, (2 Peter 3:9) our God waits with a yearning, yet patient heart for us to make the journey back again.

Amen.