



“THE NECESSITY OF GROWTH”

Acts 2: 42-47

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Note: This sermon was preached at the Berkley campus on April 15, at Shine Contemporary Worship on April 22, and at Birmingham Traditional Worship on April 29. It was adapted slightly for each worship venue. This is the version that was preached in the Birmingham First Sanctuary.

I'm Pastor Zack, and it is such a joy to be with you all in traditional worship this morning! While I spend the bulk of my time at our Berkley campus, it's exciting to be a part of the same church together, and across the board, at all of our campuses and worshipping communities, it's clear that God is up to good things. Over the past two weeks, you've heard from Pastor Elbert and Pastor Dan about where our church is heading in the next 3-5 years. I hope to add to that conversation this morning. The work of FORWARD is moving forward, and good things are in store.

Today's scripture reading comes from Acts, chapter 2, verses 42-47. It says, in the early church:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

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I want to start out my message this morning with a basic assertion. I believe, deep down in my heart, that *healthy things grow*.

Kids come in all shapes and sizes, but when the growth of a child is stunted, parents, friends and medical staff begin to be concerned. Adults don't grow in the same way kids do, but we do hopefully continue to grow as we learn and experience new things. Trees, interestingly enough, never stop growing. In fact, some trees grow faster the older they get. And even if they stop getting taller, old trees bulk up like a bodybuilder. Some of us adults do that, too. We might not be getting taller, but we do bulk up as we age.

Whether we're talking trees, people, or even churches, healthy things grow. We see that in our Scripture reading from Acts, chapter 2. Clearly, there's a lot in Acts 2 that we could talk about. There's community sharing around meals and with their finances. Wonders were being done among the people. They devoted themselves to prayer and to the apostles' teaching. And, it says, "The Lord added to their number *daily* those who were being saved."

The early church was a growing church. Now, you may say it's easier for things to grow in their infancy than it is later in life. And that's true. Part of the reason our church is big into multi-site ministry is that new people are more apt to try new things, where they know that pretty much everyone else is new, too.

Multi-site ministry—starting new worshiping communities and ways to plug in—is a helpful growth strategy. But just like trees, even older faith communities, when they're healthy, continue to grow. They might not get taller, but they bulk up, becoming spiritual giants that keep in touch with God, with one another, and with the communities they're called to serve. Can you imagine what it would be like to be a part of a church where "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved"?

Two things stand out to me here. First of all, there's that word "daily." Last year, Birmingham and Berkley First brought in 66 new members. That's fantastic! We're healthy! We're growing! But I wouldn't say it's happening *daily*—yet.

Second, it doesn't say that the early church in Acts 2 was amassing attendees or manufacturing members; it says that "the Lord added to their number daily *those who were being saved.*" This wasn't just about participation; it was about salvation. Not about numbers on a page, but about transformation. Not about checking a box, but about expanding the Kingdom of God.

I love this notion of "being saved." It fits nicely with our Methodist tradition. As Methodists, we should be able to say with confidence, "I was saved. I am saved. I am being saved." Ultimately, it's all about God's grace unfolding in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

A fiery young Baptist approached an old woman seated on a park bench one day and asked, "Do you know if you're saved?" "Yes," said the old woman. "When? When were you saved?" asked the young man. "Well," said the woman, "I don't know the *exact* time it happened." "Oh, it's important that you know the exact time," said the young man. After thinking about it for a moment, the woman said, "I suppose it was around two thousand years ago."

We are saved because of what Jesus accomplished on our behalf. Maybe you can point to a particular place and time where you gave your life over to God. My wife Rachael can; she was saved at a Billy Graham crusade. But not everyone's story is like that.

It's more important to know *that* you are saved than *when* you were saved.

We can say "I was saved, I am saved, I am being saved"—because the moment we trust Christ, the Holy Spirit enters our lives, working to grow us up in the faith, making us more like Christ and less like our former selves, such that we should not be the people we were five, ten, or twenty years ago. This lifelong process could be called the work of sanctifying grace, but it's also the work of discipleship—of following Jesus in community together and growing in our love of God, one another, and the wider world. That's why one of the three strategic initiatives coming out of the FORWARD process is **Growing in Relationship with God through Discipling Ministries**.

Healthy things grow, and that means each of us should be growing in our walk with God.

It's the church's job to make sure you have the opportunity to do that. It's your job as an individual disciple to take advantage of those opportunities.

This past Monday, an innovation team focused on *Growing in Relationship with God through Discipling Ministries* began looking at our current study groups, programs, tracks and experiences, filling in gaps, putting in new tracks and structures, and working to ensure that we are offering the best, most comprehensive discipleship plan that we can.

In the meantime, while that work is being done, take advantage of all the wonderful opportunities we already have.

A new Summer Catalog will be coming out soon, with tons of places for you to plug in to gather, learn, grow and serve alongside others. We all come from different places, we have different backgrounds and perspectives we bring to the table, and all of us together, as we grow in discipleship, will work to fulfill what is written in Ephesians 4:15: "Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ"—bulking up and strengthening ourselves for the work ahead.

As we look at strengths and growth areas as a church, we've noticed a segment of the population that we're not reaching like we think or hope we should. We have tons of kids, we have tons of adults of *many* ages, but as we look around, there are not a ton of people in their twenties and thirties. So, over the next 3-5 years, another one of our strategic initiatives is **Growing in Relationship with those in their 20s and 30s**.

At 30 years old myself, I'm right in the middle of that window. But I'm self-aware enough to know that, as a Methodist pastor with a wife and four children, I am not a typical 30-year-old. An innovation team has formed to figure out who we're reaching, who we're not, and what barriers we can remove and initiatives we can start to make sure we're connecting with those we're not currently.

The point is not to start up new programs for the sake of programs, or accumulating seat warmers so that our church spreadsheets look bigger. *Numbers don't matter, except that every number is a story, every story is a life, and every life matters to God.*

“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

The strategic initiative that I'm most personally involved with is the third and final one: **Extending Relationships through Multi-Site Ministry**. Since I'm the campus pastor at our first multi-site location, many would say that it makes sense for me to be involved with this initiative. But the reality is, Shine, the Birmingham Contemporary Service, is also a multi-site. It's not a separate campus, but it is a church within a church. There's back-and-forth between the traditional services and the contemporary service here at Birmingham, but there are some people that are a part of Shine that don't now and won't ever make their way down the hall to the traditional services.

And, more than that, there are people that are a part of the church at large who would never be here had we not started up Shine back in the day as Saturday Night Alive, people who continue to plug into the life of the church who would never find us if Pastor Dan, Will, Kristin, and the rest of the team down the hall weren't doing what they do.

The same is true at Berkley. Last week, we had 120 people in worship; that's a normal week at the Berkley campus. On Easter, we had 185. Just last year our average attendance was only 88, and at the old Berkley First United Methodist Church, before we went multi-site, a good Sunday might have only had 30 people in attendance. *The point of multi-site ministry is not to add buildings or increase our footprint; it's to reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ who we never would have reached otherwise, people who might never have been reached at all.*

Church growth matters because people's lives matter. I said earlier that healthy things grow. But I want to let you know I'm well aware that there are also unhealthy things that grow. Cancer, for example, can take root in one organ and spread rapidly throughout the whole body. The opioid epidemic in this country is growing, and that certainly is not healthy. I'm glad we're doing our part as a church to fight it with informational classes and Take Back Drug Sunday last week. Everything that's healthy grows, but not everything that grows is healthy.

If I'm honest with myself, I tend to lead with my gut. I make quick decisions and move on. If you're like me, you may have been frustrated at times with the FORWARD process our church is engaged in. You may at times have wanted to push things quicker or move it along, but in retrospect, I'm glad we're taking the time to do this right.

The Berkley campus is only 15 months old. We have to be able to make quick decisions and turn on a dime. Birmingham First is nearly 200 years old. It's like a tall masted ship that has to be steered carefully. It's important to take time for thought and reflection, time for multiple voices to be heard. That's what we've done with the survey last year and the listening circles, with the Leadership Summit and the hard work of FORWARD, Compass and Administrative Council.

And now we're ready to move forward with FORWARD. Birmingham and Berkley First have accomplished great things—or, rather, God has accomplished great things in us and through us. But we are not a church content to rest on our laurels. We're always looking to what's next, while taking time to engage deliberately and meaningfully in the work at hand.

I want to close with a story of two churches. These are churches where I was blessed to serve. The first was about ten years ago, where I served in my first church staff position as the Youth Leader. At the time, they were worried—worried about growing, worried about the building, but mostly worried about having enough money. And so they made the decision to cut.

In an effort to keep going for as long as they could, they chose to cut programs and staffing and salaries and ministry. In so doing, they cut off any chance of church growth. Anything that was actually engaging new people was brought to the chopping block.

I was back at that church to visit a month and a half ago—a church I love made up of people I love dearly—and the choice they made ten years ago and continued to make since has reaped the obvious result. Unless something changes dramatically, that church will close within a few years. But the sad thing is, hardly anyone will miss it.

They lost sight of who they were and what they were there for. They forgot their mission of making disciples, and instead settled for a mission of self-preservation, a mission of “what's in it for me?”

The other church I want to tell you about is the place where I trained to come back up here and start the new Berkley campus of Birmingham First. Twenty years ago, they had one worship service in one location on a Sunday morning with about 200 people in weekly attendance. Today, they have four campuses, at least eight weekly worship experiences, and worship attendance of over 2300 a week.

Now, obviously there are a whole host of factors that influence what grows and what doesn't, and we don't have control over all of them. But I believe that at Birmingham and Berkley First, if we think strategically, grow into all that God has in store for us, and hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess in Christ (as spelled out so beautifully in the Apostles Creed that the fifth graders are leading us in at the 9:30 service), the best is yet to come.

Remember: the one who plants and the one who waters is nothing. It's God who makes things grow. “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”