



**BIRMINGHAM FIRST**  
A UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
**BERKLEY FIRST**

**Three Sermons on our FORWARD Initiatives**  
**April 15, 22 and 29**

“Reflections”

Rev. Elbert Dulworth

“New and Renewed”

Rev. Dan Hart

“The Necessity of Growth”

Rev. Zack Dunlap



## “REFLECTIONS”

Genesis 1:26-27, 31a

John 21:1-19

Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth

First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan

*Note: This sermon was preached at the Berkley campus on April 15, at Birmingham Traditional Worship on April 22, and at Shine Contemporary Worship on April 29.*

Several years ago, when I received my first appointment after seminary, a retired teacher in one of the churches, named Don, approached me and asked if I'd like to go fishing. I love fishing and it had been a little while, so I was more than willing to go. We decided that we'd go out early one morning on a beautiful inland lake which was stocked with splake, a hybrid of brook trout and lake trout.

Don had a nice aluminum fishing boat. When we got on the lake, we started fishing at a spot that looked good. After a while, it didn't seem like we were even getting a nibble. Don looked over at me and said, “Preacher, you might need to say a few ‘Hail Mary’s’ and ‘Our Fathers’ to get them to bite.” I laughed, knowing that I didn't command that type of authority, but still I prayed a little nonetheless. It couldn't hurt, right? Still, it seemed as if nothing was biting.

As I sat there, I remembered several fishing trips with my grandfather when I was younger. He would always remind me to focus on the beauty of the scenery around us. I remembered him telling me that sometimes you just have to be patient when you're fishing.

After a little while, Don said, “I don't know about you, but I'm not out here just to go fishing. When I go fishing, I intend to catch something.” With that, Don opened up a bag he had brought with him and pulled out a fish finder. Fish finders scan the bottom of the lake and tell you where the fish are. Dropping the sensor into the water, Don said, “This should help us catch something.”

Watching the fish finder's screen, we went around the lake and eventually found a school of splake. In no time, we caught our limit and went home with a beautiful fish supper for that evening. That day, Don became my favorite fishing buddy. When he went out fishing for the

day, he meant business. He was always determined to do more than just waste bait. He went out to catch something.

Our gospel lesson takes place shortly after the first Easter experience. The disciples have already seen the risen Christ. In fact, they have returned from Jerusalem and are back up north along the Sea of Galilee, which is also called the “Sea of Tiberius.”

Back home in their old stomping grounds, Peter decides to go fishing. Several others decide to go along with him. Many were originally fishermen and it’s what they know best. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, it seems somewhat normal that these disciples returned to what was comfortable. They had journeyed with Jesus for three years by that time. Without his constant presence, it’s only natural that they might return to their original occupations as fishermen.

After fishing all night, however, they catch nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus calls out to them from the beach, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They don’t recognize Jesus, but answer back nonetheless that they haven’t caught a thing. Can you imagine, fishing all night long with nothing to show for it. How frustrating!

Jesus encourages them to throw their nets out on the right side of the boat. I mean, really, does it make a difference? Either the fish are there or they are not, right? Who was this guy giving advice from the shoreline, anyway? But what do they have to lose? So they do it. Before long, they find themselves dragging in nets filled with 153 large fish. Clearly someone counted every last one! Where else do you come up with a number like that? Actually there seem to be almost as many theories about what that number might mean as there are fish.

In that moment, John realizes that it was Jesus, so Peter puts on some clothes and jumps into the sea. Talk about *Caught Fishing with Your Pants Down!* Now that’s a sermon for another day!

You can sense Peter’s excitement to be the first to get to Jesus. Yet, I wonder what he felt the moment he stepped up on land. As everyone is excited about the catch, the gospel writer notes that on the shore, there was a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread. When they arrive, Jesus invites them to breakfast. It takes a long time to make a charcoal fire, doesn’t it? I wonder if Jesus was watching them all night long.

Not only that, but the last time that a charcoal fire is mentioned in John’s gospel was on the night before Jesus was crucified. As Jesus stood before the high priest, Peter remained out in the courtyard. Do you remember the story? Warming himself with some others around a “charcoal fire,” Peter denied knowing Jesus three times before the cock crowed.

I wonder what went through his mind as Peter stepped onto the shore to discover that fire. Did that fire remind him of his own brokenness and denial? Did his heart sink as he saw it? Was he speechless?

After breakfast, Jesus brings Peter’s sense of loss to the foreground, as he calls him by his birth name, Simon. Jesus had given him the name “Peter” by this point in his life. Yet Jesus asks him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” You can almost feel the weight in

Peter's heart as he rushes to answer, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus tells him, "Feed my lambs."

Whew! That's over, right? Nope! Jesus presses a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Have you ever had someone ask you that question more than once? This has to be crushing. Does Jesus not trust his answer? What's with this? Can Jesus read his thoughts? Does Jesus know what happened on that night not too long before this?

Still, Peter responds a second time, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And Jesus tells him, "Tend my sheep."

If that's not crushing enough, Jesus asks him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Even the gospel writer tells us how "hurt" Peter is at this point, but you can almost sense it in his response. Peter says, "Lord, you know EVERYTHING; you know that I love you." A third time Jesus tells Peter, "Feed my sheep."

In this post-Easter encounter, Jesus meets Peter in his brokenness and redeems his experience. For guilt and shame, Jesus seems to offer mercy and grace. Around a charcoal fire before Jesus' death, Peter shivered in the cold and denied knowing Jesus three times. Around a charcoal fire on a beach, Jesus met Peter and the others with food and grace, reminding them of a time when he fed over five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish not too far from there.

When they had abandoned the task of "fishing for people" and returned to what they knew, they came up empty handed after an entire night of fishing. At the shoreline of their defeat, Jesus meets them and fills their nets when they had gone back to business as usual.

After breakfast, Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter affirms his love for Jesus as if cancelling out his former denial. This is what redemption and restoration looks like, friends. This is new life. Jesus meets Peter and the disciples where they are and reminds them who they have been created to be.

Speaking of the whole story, we hear in Genesis that in the beginning, God created humans in God's image—in God's own likeness—and God called us "very good." When the image doesn't seem to shine through because of our own brokenness, God meets Peter and us in Jesus Christ to restore that image, that we might better reflect who God is for the world around us. When we forget who we are, Jesus meets us to remind us of the "very good" image that God sees in us no matter how deeply we hide that image.

More importantly, Jesus doesn't leave Peter there. Instead, he reminds Peter that to love Jesus is to feed and to tend the lambs and the sheep. To love Jesus is to care for the sheep and lambs.

Throughout this past year, our FORWARD team has been at work to help us discern where it is God is leading us in the next three to five years. We believe that God often speaks to us as a gathered community. That's why so many of you participated in a survey during worship last September, several of you participated in listening circles throughout October and November, and some of our leaders gathered in January to discern what God may be saying to us through

your voices. We reflected on our history as a church as well as demographic studies of the areas surrounding Birmingham and Berkley. Stepping into this process, we remembered who we are and have been as we sought to listen intently for who God is calling us to be.

At Birmingham and Berkley First, “our purpose is to gather, nurture, and equip disciples of Jesus Christ for ministry and mission in the world.” Gathering is not simply getting together the family for a fish supper along the seashore. When we talk about gathering disciples for Jesus Christ, we also mean “intentional evangelism.” When we say we’re going fishing, we intend to be catching. If somehow we’re seeing empty nets, then it’s time for us to throw them out on the right side of the boat. And when our nets come back in full, we’re not throwing a few back, but we’re making sure that every last one is valued.

As a part of the body of Christ, we recognize that all human beings are created in God’s good image. When others see us at Birmingham and Berkley First, we hope they see a full reflection of who God is. We realize that in our diversity, we more accurately reflect who God is for a world that needs to know that they, too, are created in God’s good image. In our diversity, others are able to recognize more easily what God looks like and discover that they, too, are reflections of that good image in the world.

Jason Gray, a Christian musician, wrote a song entitled *Remind Me Who I Am*. The lyrics begin with “When I lose my way and I forget my name, remind me who I am. In the mirror all I see is who I don’t wanna be. Remind me who I am. In the loneliest places, when I can’t remember what grace is, tell me once again who I am to you. Tell me lest I forget, who I am to you; that I belong to you.” He goes on later to sing, “If I’m your beloved, can you help me believe it?”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the song, Jason is singing to God about how easy it is to forget that we are beloved. He asks God to help him remember his sacred worth as “beloved” when he loses his way; when the world causes him and us to forget that we belong to God. Is this not also our work as the body of Christ? God invites us to be so reflective of God’s good image that others not only see God at work in us, but are able to see that they, too, are “beloved,” created in God’s good image with intrinsic worth.

Many of you might know that currently the United Methodist Church, similar to other mainline denominations in recent years, is struggling around issues of biblical interpretation, especially in regards to theological understandings of human sexuality, sexual identity, and gender expression. Some of you might know that in February of 2019, there is a special session of our general conference, a global gathering of United Methodists from around the world, which has been called to help our greater church discern a way forward as we are a global church with differing thoughts and approach our dialogue from different cultural perspectives.

As a denomination, we have been divisive at times and harsh with one another. Sometimes our dialogue has been similar to the political discourse and division within our own nation. At Birmingham and Berkley First, however, we are committed to praying for the unity of the greater church while expressing openness to diverse perspectives. Many people who disagree are striving to be faithful together. “We affirm a way forward that strengthens and expands Christ’s mission in ways that value and enable the Church at large and our congregation to reach more

people with the good news of Jesus Christ in a variety of contexts with faithfulness, humility, creativity, and generosity.”

We know that whenever we talk about these issues, we are talking about more than issues. Rather we are talking about someone around us, or someone’s son, daughter, grandchild, mother, father, but most importantly, we’re always talking about God’s beloved child.

We realize that we are on this journey of faith together, but our faith journeys are not exact replicas of one another. Together, we honor one another as faithful Christians on the journey. Sometimes we’re going to get it right. Sometimes, Jesus will meet us on the seashore when we’ve returned to what we know rather than who we’ve been called to be. In it all, however, we will love one another.

We need one another, in all of our diversity (socio-economic, racial, political, theological, sexual orientation, gender, age, class, education, career choices, and so much more) to fully reflect who God is for our world. Recognizing our need for one another grounds our strategic initiatives over the next three to five years.

That being said, our first initiative is: “Growing in Relationship with God through Discipling Ministries.” If we are to grow in the next several years, we know that we need to better define and develop paths for discipleship as we reach out to those who are new to the Christian faith. Regardless of where people are on their journey of faith, we are committed to offering a variety of opportunities to support spiritual growth, faith development, and fellowship. A key to our growth is expanding the regularly occurring points of entry that people experience in our church across our campuses with a comprehensive and transparent plan for adult discipling ministries. Those opportunities will be varied in site, location, and setting as well as format and content.

Small groups provide key avenues for growth. I belong to a few key covenant groups that keep me accountable and help me to grow in my Christian faith. My friends and colleagues in those groups don’t always tell me what I want to hear, but they always love me and help me to be who God is calling me to be. We pray together and lift one another up even when we disagree.

Our second initiative is: “Building Relationships with those in their 20s and 30s.” This is not to say that other age groups have become less important. When we look out over our current population in across our campuses, however, this is an area where we need to expand our outreach. We are committed to reducing and removing barriers to develop authentic relationships and pathways for worship, discipleship, and fellowship focused on the needs and preferences of those in their 20s and 30s.

Currently, across our denomination, this is a demographic that is not being reached well. Frankly, this is the initiative that feels a little like a God-sized dream. If very few are reaching this demographic well, what will it take for us to expand our ministries to reach this demographic? This is an area of challenge that stands before us as a congregation where we are committed to providing leadership.

Finally, our third strategic initiative is: “Extending Relationships through Multi-Site Ministry.” Together, as we seek to be all that God has called us to be, we realize that the call to more accurately reflect God’s image for the world around us in all of God’s diversity will not happen in one location. To reach other demographics, we must expand our vision to the horizon. There is not so much diversity within a two- to four-mile radius of Maple Road and Pleasant Street in Birmingham, Michigan. Yet, as we set our sights on the horizon, we can realize an expanded and diverse mission field in the areas beyond us. While not every site will look like Birmingham or Berkley First, and some could be found in storefronts or homes or a variety of other locations, God is calling us to continue to extend our relationships beyond these horizons that we might embrace and reflect a fuller view of the image of God.

Our initiatives are grounded in who we are as we seek to “gather, nurture, and equip disciples of Jesus Christ for ministry and mission in the world.” So what would you tell your unchurched friends about us and who we are trying to be through these initiatives?

Simply put, at Birmingham and Berkley First, we are the place where you belong. We know that God loves you and so do we. We love you as you are. We’re going to help you get connected and grow into who God is calling you and us to be. We’re going to be the church that makes sure there is room for you so that together we might witness what God looks like for the world.

So let’s go fishing, friends!

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jasongray/remindmewhoiam.html>



## **“NEW AND RENEWED”**

Matthew 9:16-22

Rev. Dan Hart

First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan

*Note: This sermon was preached at Birmingham Traditional Worship on April 16, at Shine Contemporary Worship on April 22, and at the Berkley campus on April 29. It was adapted slightly for each worship venue. This is the version that was preached at the Berkley campus.*

What a joy it is to be worshipping with you this morning. My name is Dan Hart, and I am usually in our Shine Contemporary service at our Birmingham Campus. I am thankful for this opportunity to be here at Berkley for the first time. Over the last three weeks you have heard from Pastor Elbert, Pastor Zack, and now you get to hear from me as I talk about some of the directives that have been brought forth by our church through our FORWARD process.

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well. (Matthew 9:16-22)

What would it mean to reach out in faith, to change our circumstance, to be made well by making a faithful but bold choice? That was the choice of one of our boldest characters in the Bible.

In our scripture we find a woman who had hemorrhages for twelve years. According to the societal norms and the Levitical code, she was unclean, and any that interacted with her would have been excluded from religious rights. She would have been an outcast. Even more so, she would not have

had the opportunity to walk and meet Christ face to face. As a woman in that society, she was relegated to the background—unlike the male leader in the synagogue from our scripture who walks directly to Christ and asks for healing for his daughter. But as a sick woman, she makes the only choice she knows she can make: to reach out to touch just his cloak as Christ walks by.

And Christ responds, ignoring the rules of law and society: “Take heart...take courage...your faith has made you well.”

Holy Boldness—even when it seems like it might not work or others say it is not possible—comes from a Christ who calls us to confidence.

So as a body of believers who are called to live with courage and confidence, we have to ask ourselves: How can we most authentically live out our faith in the context of a changing society and world?

Sometimes it takes us realizing that we are not playing by the same rules. Our expectation for what it means to be a church participant has changed. What many people are looking for in a church and how the church is portrayed in the world look very different than they did 50 years ago.

But one thing has not changed in 50 years or 500 years, in 2,000 years or across time: that God in Christ is the answer to what ails us.

In the scripture text that comes just before our brave woman, we hear a teaching on unshrunk cloth and new wineskins, which comes out of a conversation with the Pharisees, the scribes, and the followers of John the Baptist, all of which were faithful people trying to follow the law. They were asking him, “Tell me, why don’t you follow the same law? Why do you eat with sinners and tax collectors? Why do you and the disciples not fast?” And Jesus responds to their inquiry with grace and truth.

I love that in Christ’s response to those that are questioning his intentions, he never says, “You are wrong and I am right.” Instead, he essentially says, “At some point something new requires a new vessel.” He says, “You are asking me if I am following the rules. I am here to say that what I have to bring doesn’t fit with your rules, because your rules don’t apply. I am talking about new wine, and that requires a whole new wineskin. You can’t just add something on to fit what you already know. You need to change what you know.”

I also love that this scripture is made even more relevant because, even now, we live in a different context than this scripture. You know, glass wine bottles and boxes aside, they are literally making jeans with holes in them. It is a new reality we live in.

But we also live in a different reality than the Pharisees, scribes, and dedicated followers of another prophet. We have seen the living Savior who is in the world today. We have received the new law: Love God, love your neighbor.

So we are not challenged to shuck off the holds of our doctrinal assumptions, but instead we are called to be open to what God is doing in this place. We are called to live, to act boldly in faith.

New wineskins mean we aren't asking for the gentiles to be Jews, but are saying we are made one in Christ. We are one in Christ.

And so when we look at the world today, we do so without the expectation that everybody will conform to do and be who we are, but that we can be moved, and grow by being in relationship with others seeking in faith to love God, and love our neighbor.

In the early Christian church, they were asking some of the same questions. How do we live out our faith? What rules do we follow? The answer was, from the words of Paul and the teaching of Christ: We are united in Christ, so in all things, show love.

And as early Methodist house churches sprang forth and small bands of people gathered together, they asked, "How will we learn of Christ?" By gathering together and supporting one another.

I think of my own faith journey. Growing up in my home church, I had so many people who cared for me. And when I attended Albion, there were small groups, our chapel service, and other opportunities, each of which I came to because of a personal invitation. Each time I sought Christ, it was usually with the support and love of community that both heard my voice and taught me I was loved.

And nothing is different today. People are seeking authentic relationships—with God, with friends, and to make a difference for others.

We are instead called to authentic relationships. We are called to see the fullness and humanity of all people, no matter what age, race, sex, need or ability, orientation, economic station, faith foundation, doubt or faith confirmation. We are all made in the image of God, and that reality calls us to love God and love one another.

That means if you are worshiping in Berkley or Birmingham...if you have been a Christian your whole life or walk in today saying, "I don't even know if I am a Christian right now"...if you have prayed daily, or raise your hand if you sometimes forget to even really hear our opening prayer...no matter what, we are made stronger when we can rely on one another no matter where we are in our lives. Because each experience, each profound moment can move us to know God just a little bit more.

That also means we have to see the value and worth of all people—people who have been part of our broader church from early on, and those who are walking in brand new.

Baptism is a reminder that we are incorporated into the body of the church to grow and learn together, to build one another in faith, to love and serve together, to know we are one in Christ. All that has distinguished us is essential. We can learn from the uniqueness of our creation, experiences, and beliefs. But we are still made one in Christ. My experiences and beliefs are not more informative or important than yours.

That is part of the important work that we have been sharing together around the FORWARD process. We have been asking our congregation to share their experiences: what has moved you, helped you, brought you closer to Christ and neighbor? And also, what can we do together to

continue to help others connect? Who are we failing to see or invite? Which voices are missing at the table?

Coming out of our conversation, the FORWARD team, with the guidance of many, has listened and compiled information, and has proposed some areas of growth in ministry. They have encouraged our church to continue to stand on the strength of Worship, Children and Youth, and Missions, recognizing their worth and asking them to continue to explore forward. But FORWARD has also introduced three directives that are key to gathering, nurturing and equipping areas of ministry that can grow. The three areas identified are Discipleship and small group ministry, 20s and 30s ministry, and Multi-site ministry.

My question today is, What would it look like if we embraced the possibilities that have come out of our conversations?

What would it mean for our church, our community, and the reach of Christ's love if our church had all of our FORWARD goals come to fruition?

What would it mean if we had dynamic, diversified small groups that reached a wide range of ages, faith journey stages, styles of learning, and locations, so that every time somebody asked in our church, "Do you have a group for people who aren't really sure what they believe?" Yes! "Do you have a group for somebody who has read every book of the Bible, but is ready to read it with a spiritual mentor?" Yes, we do! What if each and every time we were asked if we had a group for somebody, we could say, "Yes, we do!"

What would it look like to have the desired "young people"—the future of our church—instead be the present leaders of our church? What would it look like to build relationships of mutual respect and adoration, not trying to protect the ways of church we are already most comfortable with, but to say, What does church look like to you? What would it look like to connect with students who go to college and question most of what they have been taught in the early parts of their lives, and yet invite them to bring those questions to our church, with confidence in a God that loves them and a church that loves them just as much?

What would it look like to reach out in forums where younger generations can connect? What does it look like to provide meaningful opportunities for mission, service, and study? How about: Let's go put some drywall up in a house in Detroit that will be used to host mission teams across the country, or come to my house—or George and Julie Work's house—for five weeks and talk about God? What would it mean for us to be open to new opportunities that forge new relationships with the generation we tend to want the most, and question the most? What would seeing our younger generations as an important and present voice in our congregation mean for our church and for our ability to honor a group often relegated to the proverbial transepts of our church décor?

What would it mean to reach further beyond ourselves—naming that diversity is limited in this space, but not limiting in our love for people? What would it look like to provide worship space for another church like Berkley to burst forth at the seems? What would it look like to provide a space and place not like Berkley, maybe not in an existing Methodist church, for our congregation to break forth? What if our way to honor the full diversity of the kingdom of God, and to really

reflect the image of God, means we are called to partner with somebody we would be anxious to greet in our pews in this church?

This church has a passion for people. What about connecting with people who know Christ, but worship differently than we do? Or people who want to know God but are intimidated by a hymn book with words they've never heard, or a rock song about a bloody savior who died to save their soul? Maybe the relationships are built when we can say, "We don't have the market cornered on worship. Our worship teams are amazing, but others may experience God in a different way. How can we be a part of that!" What would it look like if we could be a part of something new—building new relationships, open to the work of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in the world?

What would it be...who would we include in the conversation... how would we honor the voices that have built our campuses to be what they are and honor as well the voices of those we have yet to reach, or have unknowingly excluded? What if we could sit side by side—with different backgrounds, different social and faith beliefs, different economic situations, different stages in life—and still see one another as God's beloved creation? What would it look like to find our commonality in Jesus, the one who said, "It is your faith that has made you well."

Let us be open to a shift—away from fear, self-preservation, and stagnation—to instead see that if we can just be open to it, God has and will continue to do some profound and beautiful things in this place. What can it be?

Let us be renewed to dream again. Let us believe that in Christ we can be made new to live out love in our world. Here we are, Lord. Embolden us, use us, send us!



## **“THE NECESSITY OF GROWTH”**

Acts 2: 42-47

Rev. Zack Dunlap

First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan

*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.

\* \* \* \* \*

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.”