

# Growing Together...

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Phil 2<sup>1-5</sup> / Acts 4<sup>32-37</sup> / Prov 27<sup>17</sup>

Early in life I developed a profound interest in growing stuff and when you work with plants you go on a journey because you're basically always looking for success in growing whatever you want to grow. So you evaluate each attempt and wonder why it worked or didn't work and you learn some pretty harsh lessons. Many things don't work and many plants suffer and die while a gardener is learning. Lack of minerals, poor cultivation, wrong Ph balance, wrong site, wrong time to plant, wrong neighbourhood plantings, wrong weather! So many things can and will affect how a plant grows. But perhaps the greatest temptation in gardening is to 'overcare' for a plant – to overwater it, to overfeed it and to overshelter it and when you do this, this is what you end up with.. (picture of tall spindly lettuce seedlings)

These seedlings were planted indoors and allowed to sprout and grow under cover in wonderful conditions – conditions which basically haven't challenged the plant in any way. And under these wonderful conditions the plant grows and it grows and it grows. Indeed it grows out of all proportion to what it would normally grow to the point where it is pretty much

useless for anything. You can't do anything with these seedlings. When you transplant them they usually just fall over and rot and that's if you don't damage them while you're transplanting them.

It's actually quite frustrating because you think, man I gave that plant everything it needed and look, it's just useless. I mean by now with all I gave it, it should be a lettuce already and it's never going to get there. And so you end up chucking the lot out if they look like this because they are just never going to reach maturity and maturity is what we're after as gardeners. Maturity is when vegetables actually produce something edible. Maturity is when flowering plants actually flower and maturity is when forestry trees actually get big enough to produce wood or pulp or whatever else they were grown for. These seedlings, grown in the most ideal conditions, given everything they need, blessed with the kindest and most tender care – are just never going to get to maturity. Rather, when seedlings which are going to have a chance of getting to maturity are grown properly will look like is this: (picture of shorter, stronger plants)

Notice how much leaf there is compared to stem and how much thicker the stems are and they grow like this not because they are given the most wonderful warm environment to grow in but quite the opposite – because they are grown in slightly less than optimum conditions. They grow strong because they are challenged a little and specifically they are grown in colder

conditions. The fact is that many plants are like this – they need a challenge to grow properly – they need cold, they need darkness, they need desiccation, they need a challenge. Many seeds won't germinate until they've been left in cold temperatures for months. Others won't germinate till they've been through a fire. Others are covered in an oily substance that doesn't allow water in till they've been sitting in the ground for several months or even years and all of this is a metaphor of the Christian journey.

You see we too, if we are to mature in Christ, must face certain tougher conditions in order for us to grow in a healthy way. And there are many of these conditions and many **kinds** of conditions which work to help us mature in Christ but the one I want to focus on this morning is often not seen as much of a test and yet it is the one I think we fail at as Christians and as a Church most consistently and it's the 'doing life together' test.

Proverbs 27v17 says this

**<sup>17</sup>As iron sharpens iron,  
so one person sharpens another.**

The general principle here is that we act to improve each other but only when we rub against one another. More broadly this can be interpreted to mean that community is good for us but, **it's hard**. It rubs against us knocking pieces off. It causes friction and heat; it creates wear and tear but it leaves us, better.

Almost wherever we look in the NT we find encouragement to be together, to be a community and not just a community as defined by the surrounding culture but a radical community where we do radical things like feed the hungry and heal the sick and care for those who cannot care for themselves. The proper way for Christian to be is to be 'in community' and we find this imperative expressed radically in that passage from Philippians we read today.

**<sup>1</sup>If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, (Phil 2)**

We could spend quite some time unpacking this amazing exhortation from Paul today but I want to get to something else first. Suffice to say that what we have here is a key, I believe, to real community and that key is the work we need to do to give ourselves, mind and body, to the interests of 'the other.' Paul says, whatever else you do, be 'other-oriented.' Strive to agree with each other; strive to understand each other; strive to enjoy

each other, strive to be humble before each other; strive to share each other's concerns. Work, in other word, to create a loving community of love.

You know, all of my experience in Christian community over 50 years tells me one thing about these words... they are hard!!! If we're going to fail anywhere as Christians – this is where it will be. We struggle to really do well with each other. Yes we might get on with one or two, but we might really not like the preacher. Or we might like the preacher but the rest, well we really can't identify with them. Or we might like most of the people but there's a couple who just really shouldn't be in this Church! And Paul says... 'be of the same mind, have the same love, be in full accord, be of one mind.'

This stuff is not easy. It makes us work and fail. It convicts us of our need of Christ and it turns us back to the resources of Christ because we find our own limits very quickly. An unredeemed heart cannot live the way Christ would have us live. Only a heart that has been exposed, as it were, to the rough edges of community and been found wanting will realise how much we need Christ at work within. We can never assume that we will easily live in Christian community. It just doesn't work that way and yet... this is what makes us stronger as Christians. When every bit of natural Richard cries out – 'I don't like these people' then you only have one choice. Go back to God. Seek God's work in your life. Seek reconciliation. Seek one mind.

Living together, growing together is an enormous challenge but it's one we must rise to because just as with the seedlings – unless we give ourselves to the great test of community we, as Christians, will grow weak and spindly – useful for very little and unable to cope with life as it is. And there are two sides to this coin.

The first is that involving ourselves deliberately in Community provides for us an appropriate test of our faith. As we do this we enter into the context which will work to strengthen us and make into productive members of God's Kingdom. It behoves us then to make the effort; to commit ourselves at the beginning of each year to choose to be involved in a community and to work together to allow God to make us stronger in our faith.

But there's another side to this whole scenario which we miss at our peril. You see when we deliberately involve ourselves in community in this way we not only give ourselves a chance to grow but we create a wake which everyone else, including our family, can see. Everything we do creates a wake; it's there for all to see. You can't hide it and when we create a wake we tell everyone without words – this is the way I'm going – walk ye in it!

My father created a wake when he involved himself in church for years and years. And I would hear about things that went on in various church meetings and I would ask myself – why does a competent accountant keep doing this to himself? Why does he

put up with this bad behaviour? Why go to church at all. I didn't like it much and wished he would stop going... but he didn't. Instead he created a wake which I could simply not ignore and, as with most things, actions speak louder than words.

The more he gave himself to this work the more I knew he was serious about God and about the need to serve practically and it was this that led me back to God when all my own efforts ended in disaster. What we do speaks loudly to our children even when they rebel and seem to be rejecting God – what we do creates a wake they cannot deny.

You know we can share what we know about God and the Gospel as much as we like... but if we're not doing it it's our wake that speaks. So we're saying – go over here – this is where God wants you and our wake says – 'I'm going over yonder!' then guess what our message to all and sundry including our children is?

Every time we commit to a community we create a wake our children can see clearly and they'll never be able to deny it. And that wake says, as much as this community struggles and fails and does things in a funny way and believes some funny things – **these people, my parents, my friends, they believe and they're staking their life on it... you know what – I admire that.**

**I'm going too!**

Actually it probably doesn't usually happen like that but what does happen is that this plants a seed that will one day germinate and will produce faith – not a spindly faith but one which has been tested and approved, ready to go on to maturity, ready to be put to work.

All this is related to our willingness to be in community – to reject the constant, selfish, march towards privatism, towards seeing communities only for what they can give us. God is calling us to be committed to a community of faith together and so I want to challenge us this year to seek God on this matter. It is so important for our own faith and for our witness that we be prepared to expose ourselves to the testing of a small community. We have a number of small groups at Church but I am looking for 10 more and so I want to ask you – are you willing to lead a small group this year and to actively promote God's work amongst a small community of believers? Please think about this week and let us know because I want to run a short training session as soon as possible.

Will you create a wake this year? Will you do some hard yards in community so that you can grow and so that others will follow Christ?