

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Wherever God Is

Acts 2:42-47

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Everybody and everything that is alive grows up. And as they grow, they change. We've already seen that growth in the spring of the year. Little leaf buds seemingly overnight turn bright, brilliant green, and then after some time, they begin to turn that deeper, richer shade of green that means they are past leaf-childhood and have moved into leaf-adolescence as they prepare for leaf-summer. Summer will bring August mid-life-leaf crisis. By fall, the leaves will begin to come to their end. They will begin to get wrinkles and become a little more brittle. Some leaves end in a bang of orange and yellow. Others don't need all that attention: they just turn brown, mind their own business, and fall to the ground to give what is left of their life to the soil.

Everything grows and changes. But this isn't a bad thing. It's life. The leaves on the ground give their carbon to the soil which gives life to the same tree that gave life to the leaf. This, too, is life, the gift that gives and receives and gives and receives and gives in life and in life after death.

People grow, too. Even Jesus. We don't know much about Jesus' young adulthood. Luke's gospel tells us only one story when he was 12 years old and then jumps to when he was about 30 years old. The gap years are summarized by one verse that just says, "Jesus grew." Jesus grew, like his brothers and sisters, like his mom and dad before him, like all people, he grew up. Jesus grew up well.

Luke 2:52: "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and with people."
Jesus grew in his mind, his body, his spirit, and his relationships. He grew the way we hope to grow—for a long time this was one of my favorite verses. When someone would ask me my favorite verse in the bible, I would say, Luke 2:52... Doesn't seem to be a particularly inspiring verse, taken by itself, but as a young person, it gave me a kind of model for the hope for my own life and now it is the way I hope and we hope our children will grow.

Luke, the writer of the gospel of Jesus also wrote the book of Acts, which is about the birth, growth, and life of the early church. And in our reading this morning, he uses just about the same words to describe the church growing as he used to describe Jesus growing.

The church grew in wisdom, stature, in favor with God, and in favor with the people. The church grew in wisdom by *devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching*, which for us, is by studying scripture. The church grew in size through baptism—*day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved*. The church grew in favor with God—literally, this means grew in the grace of God—they experienced awe and wonder, they praised God daily; they were devoted to prayer. The church grew in relationship with others—in the grace of

relationships—through sharing their meals and possessions with one another and anyone who had need.

In the days following the resurrection, the church's Eastertime, this is how the church was born and how it grew up. By devoting themselves to the apostle's teaching and fellowship; by breaking bread and prayers; by breaking bread in their homes with one another; by selling their possessions and giving to anyone who had need. What a life they shared together!

Who told them to do all of that? Who told them to devote themselves to the apostle's teaching and to fellowship and to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Who told them to hold all things in common, to sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need? Who told them to break bread at home and eat their food with glad and generous hearts?

I don't think anyone told them to do any of those things. The Christian life isn't just a checklist of doing what we're told to do or a playbook that lays everything out like a recipe to follow. Christian life is living life in the spirit of the resurrected Christ with one another in joy and in love and in all the implications of that for every aspect of our lives. The picture we get of life in the early church in just a few verses is Christians just doing that instinctively. So why? Why did they do it?

It was what they needed and wanted. Their lives had been blown apart by Jesus. They had a powerful experience of the living God and the resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit, and they needed one another. They needed people they could trust to help them make sense of it all. So they turned for guidance to the ones who had been closest with Jesus: the apostles. What would Jesus say about this? Can't you imagine them asking questions like that? What was he like? And they needed one another. They needed to be close to people who experienced the same things and could share the same questions, mystery, and delight. Usually in most social situations, we'll be ok if we're just given some sense that we're welcome, but what we desire is a deep sense of belonging, especially when we have a deep sense that we're a part of something big. They needed one another; they needed God; they needed guides to show the way. So the early church's life together was simply what they needed. It was their instinct to cling to one another and to hold one another tightly.

Also, it was the presence of Christ alive in them. They knew they'd met God in Jesus on the streets of the towns of Galilee, and the empty tomb in the garden. They'd met God in the Holy Spirit and in one another. But now, where do you meet God? The temple was what they knew, the temple of Jerusalem. So they went there, like moths to the flame, they went to the temple to meet God. They were so ready and that readiness meant they were perfectly willing to let go of everything so their hands and hearts would be free to embrace God anywhere God could be encountered—in one another, yes. In the prayers, yes. In the poor, yes. Wherever God is, that's where we want to be. That's a pretty fair description of the early Christian church: wherever God is, that's where I want to be. It was their hunger. Above all else, they wanted more of God. So they went to the temple and spent time with one another in one another's homes. They sold

what they didn't need, which more and more was just about everything, and gave it away to those who had need. They wanted more of God and to hold lightly anything else.

It was the only way for their lives to make sense of the gift they'd been given. It's amazing how something so simple can mean so much. So very simple. Simply, the breaking of bread—that's prominent in this story. They broke bread together. For Luke's gospel, the words 'the breaking of bread' is basically code for the liturgical act of celebrating the eucharist. They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and prayers. Of course, they did . . . Jesus had said, "Do this in remembrance of me." And they remembered the power of that moment and those words. Jesus said, I am the bread, take and eat. And they wanted nothing more than to be with him. This is the sign, this is the way, this is the remembrance. This is how we are close to him. They broke the bread just as they had received the bread broken from Jesus.

This was just the beginning. They broke bread in their prayers, and they prayed as they broke bread in their home. Bread is also the common word for common meals, and the early church shared their food with one another. Every meal became a sacred act of communal gratitude and remembrance. The common meals, the common spaces, the common activities. The Spanish mystic Theresa of Avila said that God roams among pots and pans, and this was their experience from the first days. Among pots and pans and food on the table, God is there. And so they shared their tables with one another.

But there was something even more to all of this they seemed to understand. Jesus, they understood, wasn't just the bread broken for them to fill them up and satisfy their spiritual hungers. Because Jesus was living in them, they, too, were like bread, now broken open for others. This bread and this breaking, the sign Jesus gave and the life they were living becomes the icon of the church's whole life. And so like bread broken to feed a table, they saw their food as a gift to share with one another and saw everything they had as something to be distributed—to all as any had need.

What started as a simple, sacred gesture—the bread in Jesus' hands broken as a symbol of his life and death radiated into their common table, and extended through every part of their lives, their glad and generous hearts.

A lot would change in the church in the years to come as it grew and organized and dealt with problems. A lot would change in the church over the centuries as it grew and changed and adapted to different cultures, and different eras, and discovered new challenges to what it thought it knew and understood. A lot would change, some of it was good for a season, some of it good for a long, long time, and some of it not so good. But in every place and in every time, this story of the beginnings shines like a beacon, calls like a lover, stands like a witness. These are the stories that make a people, no matter how they grow and change.

In 1995, just a few years after DaySpring sprang to life, the small Dayspring group looked in the mirror and saw themselves experiencing what they described as "a new vitality in church and

on the journey of faith.” (The Vision of DaySpring pamphlet, ca 1999). They attributed this freshness to some very simple things that they wrote down, such as:

A renewed emphasis on worship
A deep sense of belonging
The involvement of children
Less time at the church building
Reaching out to new people
An organization light on its feet

Within a few years, they wrote, “That’s what we were enjoying, and we still are. . . Although we know that vision is a dynamic thing and that all intuitions must respond to the reality of change, as best as we can tell, this is who we are.” A community experiencing:

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All of that sounds, to some of us today, like a long, long time ago. 1995. To many of you, that’s a lifetime, more than a lifetime ago. Last week I went to a concert, a little house concert in Houston. During which, the singer announced, “I was born in 1989.” I wanted to shout back, “Thanks. I’m feeling super old right now.” That list from 1995 may feel super old to some of you, but it is really not. It’s really not that long ago. More than that, it doesn’t feel that old to me, because it feels as fresh and vital today at DaySpring as it must have then. Even though the wisdom is true: vision is a dynamic thing and all institutions must respond to the reality of change.

Visions are dynamic things, and institutions do change. In 1995, they said their freshness came in part from less time at the church building, which was kind of natural because they didn’t have a church building to spend less time at. So, less time, meant no time, at least not in their own church building. But it did mean moving chairs and pushing a broom and setting out hymnals in someone else’s church building every Sunday morning. They dreamt of having their own place, where presumably, they could spend less time, I guess. But that’s not really what they meant. What they meant was: without a church building, they were experiencing an integration of life and faith into hearts and homes and dinner tables and a mission that a church building cannot replace, and they were growing toward a fresh vision of what it would be like to have their own place—as they described: a future home, a combination church building and retreat center near Lake Waco. And they did it.

And here we are. People and things all grow and change, trees and children and institutions and churches. And we’re growing and in some ways, coming near to another inflection point in this journey as we consider these things as they relate to trees and children and the institution and

the building. Another moment to look in the mirror—who are we, as best as we can tell and what are our dreams now?

What do we cling to, and what do we hold on to lightly? Where is the bread breaking open—the bread of our lives breaking open for the world? What are our sacred instincts—and how might we join those Christians through the centuries who have experienced the gladness and generosity of being swept up into something good?

That's where God is. And wherever God is, that's where we want to be.

Amen.

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