

Lent 5, 21 March 2021
Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33
Called to DEEP Growth
First Mennonite Church

"...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

What an intriguing image for farmers and gardeners on this first day of spring! In order for something to grow it first must die. It's absolutely amazing how juicy tomatoes will grow from a single tiny seed, or how specks of basil seeds will turn into a forest of wonderfully fragrant herbs.

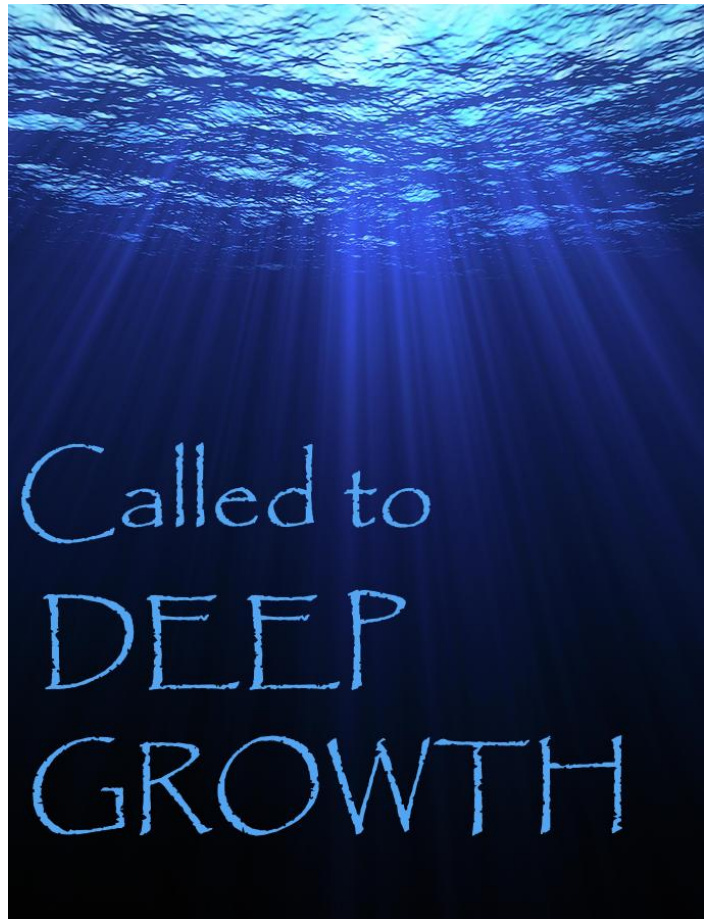
Rather than describing process of growth for you, let's watch this time-lapse video of a bean sprouting and growing.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w77zPAtVTul>

With this image in mind, let's look at Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a Jew who loved God and God's people. He loved them so much that he wanted them to grow, to become the kind of people God wanted them to be. Except, before Jeremiah could instruct his people how to grow in their faith, he had to first instruct them how to die.

Listen to how God calls Jeremiah:

...and the LORD said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.' (Jeremiah 1:9-10).

Why did God call Jeremiah to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow? Well, Jeremiah and the other Hebrew prophets understood growth within the context of the covenant at Mt Sinai that God had made with Israel following the escape from Egypt. That covenant stated that the people of Israel



would obey God and live God's way. People would grow in their faith when they loved God and loved their neighbour, when they cared for the poor and weak, sought justice for the widow and the orphan. And if they didn't obey and follow God's commands, there would be consequences that the people would experience as death or displacement.

Something happened over the years. People forgot about the covenant they made with God at Sinai. Another idea emerged among the wealthy and powerful in Jerusalem, and taught and promoted by the temple priests. They claimed that the God of Israel had made eternal promises to the temple and king. One promise claimed that God had taken up permanent residence in the Jerusalem temple. Another promise was that God would forever protect Jerusalem and the Temple from harm and destruction.

The impact of this change was huge. God was no longer the God of heaven and earth, but Israel's god, a permanent resident of Jerusalem. No longer was God the defender of creation, but was reduced to the protector of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. God was more like as a nationalist god. Instead of growing into the kind of people God intended them to be, the people stopped growing. Practicing the faith was reduced to offering sacrifices and offerings in the Temple.

God wasn't happy, so God called many prophets to remind the people of the basics of the faith, expressed in various ways in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Hosea put it succinctly:

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings. (Hosea 6:6)*

The prophet Micah put it poetically:

*With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you*

*but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6:6-8)

Jeremiah put it in more longing terms:

For on the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt-offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.' (Jeremiah 7:22)

The upshot of the prophets' message was that one does not grow in relationship with God by offering up expensive sacrifices and fragment burnt offerings, but through an ongoing relationship with God, and by practicing the basics of the faith again and again in the love of neighbour and seeking justice for the poor and weak, the widow and the orphan.

Something had to change so that Israel could grow into the kind of people God intended them to be. So, God called Jeremiah to preach death.

To pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow—God called Jeremiah to speak Israel out of its comfortable pew, out of its false ideology that God was only a local deity of Israel, out of its untrue belief that God was only housed in the Jerusalem temple—and into Babylonian exile. Babylon, by the way, is in modern day Iraq, just south of present-day Bagdad. Jeremiah was called to warn the people of Israel that God was going to dismantle Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, and the Temple.

You see, as long as the king remained safe in Jerusalem, people wouldn't listen to the prophets. As long as the Temple remained standing the people continued to believe that faith in God consisted of bringing offerings and performing sacrifices.



In 586 BCE, Jeremiah's warning came to fruition as the invading Babylonian armies reduced Jerusalem and the Temple, the centre of all holy life, to rubble, killed or took into exile all the royal family, priests, prophets and much of the population. A national crisis.

The destruction of the city and temple, was in many ways, the death of Israel. Jerusalem destroyed meant God had been defeated. A demolished temple meant that God was either dead or had abandoned his people. Ezekiel described Israel as a valley of very dry bones. All hope was lost. Psalm 137 described the devastation this way:

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)

Before Israel could grow and bear fruit, before they could hear Jeremiah's announcement that God would create a new covenant not written on stone but on their hearts, they needed to be released from their attachments: released from narrow understandings of God; released from the belief that God would always protect Jerusalem; released from a warped nationalism.

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In order for us to grow, we must release those attachments that prevent us from growing, get rid of the things that bind us and prevent us from bearing fruit.

My father grew up in a German-speaking environment. German was spoken in his home, in the rural community he grew up in, and in the church he attended. When he started school, he could only speak German. Instruction in the public school, however, was in English. At the time, the Canadian government was eager to turn everyone into proper English-speaking subjects, so teachers in the schools were instructed to enforce English as the only spoken language in school. Children who couldn't or refused to speak English were threatened with physical punishment.

My father was traumatized by the experience. I know this because my parents made a conscious decision not to teach my siblings and me, German. They only spoke English to us as they wanted to make sure we didn't have to go through the same horrible experience they did when they were young.

Of course, my parents spoke German to their parents and between themselves, especially when they didn't want us children to know what they were talking about. Of course, we need to pick up some of the language in order to know what was going on!

In contrast to the German-speaking world of my parents, my world was essentially English. School, friends, TV, and home was all in English. The only thing not in English was church. When I was a small child, church was still conducted in German. I still have vague memories sitting in the nursery while German sermons were preached, German songs from the Gesangbuch were sung, and German read from the Bible. My world for 6 days of the week was vastly different from the 7th day of the week.

This wasn't just my experience, but it was increasingly the experience of many others too. For many German-speaking "Russian Mennonite" churches, the 1950s and early '60s were very turbulent years as congregations debated and argued over whether to continue using German as the language of worship or English, or a combination of the two.



For example, in the late 1950s, Leamington United Mennonite Church was experiencing deep division about whether the language of worship should continue to be German or switch to English. Many believed the use of English meant abandoning the faith, while others believed that insisting on German would cause the church to wither.¹ After years of bitter debate, the families who believed that English was crucial for the faith development of their children began a separate congregation in 1961.

I chose this example for several reasons.

- 1. Growth requires change.** The Bible assumes that people of faith will grow and mature in their faith, that we will move from “spiritual milk to solid food” as Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 3:2. In terms of growth, there is no standing still. Either we will grow and mature or we will lose what we once had. I’m glad the decision was made to change to English, because it opened up the possibility for the next generation, like me, to have faith. And one of the questions for us today is what is God saying to us about passing the faith on to our children and grandchildren? Are there decisions we must make to open up the possibility that the next generation will have faith?
- 2. Growth can be hard.** As I thought about what the seed has to go through in order to germinate, sprout, and grow, I realized how difficult growth and transformation are! The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the exile of the people to Babylon was tragic, yet necessary for them to hear God’s voice once again. I was much too young to understand or appreciate how tough it was to make the change from German to English. When the language of worship changes, there’s a loss of what is traditional and familiar. The hymns and Scripture passages lose some of their comfort and meaning when they are expressed in what feels like a foreign language. As difficult as the change was, part of growing in our faith means stepping forward into the unfamiliar. It means giving up something familiar and good and satisfying. It frequently means a parting or separation.

¹ <https://canadianmennonite.org/articles/changing-language-worship-test-love>

3. Growth requires us to be open to God's Spirit. In our gospel reading today, there are Greeks who want to see Jesus. These folks were outside the faith, but were attracted to it. They just want to see Jesus. And who can blame them? Jesus has a pretty good track record up to this point. He has cleansed the temple, turned water into wine, healed a little boy, fed 5000, given sight to the blind, and raised Lazarus from the dead. I don't know why they wanted to see Jesus but I know the desire. I want to see Jesus. I'll bet you do too. Seeing Jesus makes it all real. After all, seeing, they say, is believing. We all have our reasons for wanting to see Jesus.

While these outsiders were keen on seeing Jesus, those who should have recognized Jesus—the scribes and Pharisees—were plotting to kill him. The ones who should have been most open to God's Spirit, weren't. Perhaps they were so busy pouring over the verses in their Bibles that the biblical scholars failed to look up and see Jesus standing in front of them. Perhaps. Maybe people were looking for the wrong type of Messiah—a general on a warhorse, not a carpenter's son from Nazareth. A powerful, authoritarian leader, not a servant king. Someone who would solve all the world's problems violently, not a Prince of Peace. Maybe they were a lot like you and me. Perhaps they were just too bound by tradition, had heard the messianic promises so often that they simply tuned themselves out. Perhaps they were so used to thinking that their way was the right way of thinking that they became closed to hearing anything new. Perhaps they were just too busy, too preoccupied with this and that, too busy preparing for the Messiah's coming that they managed to miss the Messiah when he finally came!

So my prayer for us today is: God, help us to seek after you each and every day, stir in us an awareness of your presence, deepen our understanding of your Spirit, and help our roots grow deep into the nourishing, fertile soil of your love.