

What is Growing in us?

Luke 2: 41-52

⁴¹Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." ⁴⁹He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Think back, if you can, to a moment just before Covid happened. Maybe it was a vacation or trip you took—on an airplane. Maybe it was a birthday party where everyone gathered with a care-free spirit. As I think back, I remember, just as Covid hit, we were going to have our first brew pub gathering that week. Then as a church we were going to celebrate Dick Patterson's 90th birthday on that Sunday after church—the decorations had been purchased, the invites sent out. If we allow our minds to float back before the pandemic, it seems like a lifetime ago, doesn't it? It's as if time has fast forwarded ahead. In the gospel, Luke fast forwards ahead. Jesus is a baby and then all of a sudden he is a puberty-aged tween—which is how it feels when we watch our kids grow. In the story, Jesus gets left behind. A day later mamma Mary realizes he's not with them. (We watch the same plotline in *Home Alone!*) What's most interesting here, is that we get a snapshot image as we watch Jesus grow.

So wonder: as we reflect over the past year or so, how have we grown? As individuals, perhaps our family grew. An in-law or a baby entered the family tree. Maybe our faith grew—we were faced with some new limitations and had to reorient ourselves, trusting God a bit deeper. Upon reflection, some may have changed their priorities around church: realizing that having church with coffee and pajamas over zoom was kind of nice. Maybe our mindset about our purpose grew. A pastor friend sent me a text last week that said, "Well, I've joined the Great Resignation!" When I asked him why he said, "I've grown over the past couple years to realize that I can't save the church." One out of three pastors are leaving. As are nurses and teachers. According to the Department of Labor, a record number of workers quit their job this year, citing dissatisfaction in their work-life balance. Maybe it was physical, or spiritual, or vocational, or psychological shift. I know it's been a hard year in general—full of voids and worry and loss—but let's take a moment to name what has grown for us over the last year or two? [space to name things here—invite zoom folk]

When we look at the story Jesus is growing. It says he is growing in wisdom and years, as well as divine and human favor. Look up the Greek word for "favor" and it might not be what we think. When we hear this, typically we think of Jesus growing more popular to God and to his

peers. Except, here the Greek word is *charis*. It means “grace.” As Jesus wrestles through what it means to be human, made in the image of God, he grows in divine and human grace. It’s like that kiddo who heard the ice caps were melting and polar bears needed help. So for Christmas she didn’t ask for video games or toys. Instead, she asked all her relatives and friends to adopt a polar bear. This is a child who is growing in *charis*—in *grace*.

If we look at our own lives, the last two years have been a struggle to grow in grace. With all that is happening right now with politics and vaccines it seems much easier to grow in frustration, or resentment, or Sinicism. With church attendance dropping and pledge cards missing, it’s easy to grow worried. But this passage invites to grow in a different way. You know the first question a minister is usually asked when interviewing for a job is, “What ideas do you have to help our church grow.” What they want to know is how the leader will attract new members. It’s the wrong question—it’s a capitalistic question. It’s a question based in anxiety. It says that we have a problem which needs to be solved and we want to hire someone who can help us solve it.

And while I get where this is coming from, why are the numbers what determine our sense of worth? Perhaps the invitation is simply to grow as a community, as a people who use their combined gifts to make a difference in our city. I mean, y’all raised \$5,000 for refugees. That was a growth moment. And while the \$5,000 figure gives us a great sense of pride, it was the joy and celebration of each other’s gifts and just being together that brought a huge smile across my face. Or look at the choir. Sure, they are smaller, but you know what: they’ve adapted and as a result have grown in so many other ways.

Some might call this survival, but I think it’s more: I think it’s God *charis*.

What if the invitation is to be a church that isn’t worried about dying, but about giving its life for something greater? What if the church wasn’t anxious about growing in anything other way than in grace and freedom and using the gifts which are already here to build a community of faith, hope, and love? My guess is if we continue with this growth mindset, all the other growing will take care of itself.

So perhaps we enter 2022 with a new and renewed spirit. It will be a year where we grow in knowing one another’s stories. Where we grow in becoming more generous and free to be who we are. Where we grow in divine and human favor: letting go of our anxieties about the future, becoming more aware of God’s *charis* which is present to us right now. In this moment. And for that the people of God say, “Amen!”