

**“Touching Heaven:
A PRAYER FOR GROWTH”**

Ephesians 3:14-21

*We pray for growth in strength, faith, knowledge, and love,
because our God is able!*

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
August 20, 2017

The longer I live, the more I like to read history— biographies and books about real events. Maybe it's because I am accumulating more and more history myself.

Theodore Roosevelt was one of the most popular and vigorous Presidents ever to serve our country. He was the 26th President, serving from 1901 to 1909. He was an avid athlete and outdoorsman. Entertainment at the White House in those days often included boxing matches, judo demonstrations, and long, strenuous hikes—and the President participated! TR (his nickname) was an explorer, a big-game hunter, and the leader of a cavalry outfit in the Spanish-American war called the Rough Riders. His enthusiasm and energy seemed boundless.

But it was not always so. In fact, Theodore Roosevelt grew up as a rather sickly, puny child of well-to-do parents in Manhattan. He suffered from asthma and poor eyesight. But at the age of twelve, he received a challenge from his father. “You have the mind, but you have not the body,” he said, “and without the help of the body, the mind cannot go as far as it should. You must *make* the body.”

So Theodore Roosevelt began spending time every day building up his body as well as his mind. He lifted weights, rode horseback, hiked, hunted, rowed, boxed, and did anything else physically challenging he could do. By the time he was an adult, he was a picture of physical fitness.

In the world of politics as well, Theodore Roosevelt followed a long process of growth. He started out as the police commissioner of New York City and eventually worked his way up to the highest office in the land. While President, he made the United States a world naval power. He got the Panama Canal built. He started the National Park system. And he won a Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating an end to the war between Russia and Japan.

After he left office, Roosevelt continued to lead expeditions to remote parts of the globe. When he died in his sleep in 1919, then Vice President Marshall announced that “Death had to take him sleeping, for if Roosevelt had been awake, there would have been a fight.” When they removed his body from his deathbed, do you know what they found under his pillow?

A book! To the very end, Theodore Roosevelt was striving to learn and improve and grow.¹

A successful life is a process of growth. What does not grow dies. Christians are a people of life, not death. So we believe in growth—spiritual, relational, emotional, numerical, financial—if it’s good, positive, beautiful, or true, we want to grow it.

We don’t stop growing just because we reach adulthood. Growth goes on until we die. The day we stop growing is the day we die, if not physically, then in a hundred other ways.

The Christian life is a process of growth. Too often we confuse becoming Christian with an event, a moment when we are saved or commit our lives to Christ. But life in Christ is a process of becoming. It begins when we are baptized, and it never ends until we enter our heavenly home at the end of our life. Christianity is not something you do for a while and then quit, because when you quit, you stop growing, and when you stop growing, you die spiritually. We can’t always say what our lives will look like in a year or two or five or ten. But this we do know: between now and then, we can grow.

The apostle Paul prayed for growth. He was all about starting and growing new communities of believers wherever he shared the Gospel. He wanted these new believers in Christ to grow as disciples. In this beautiful passage out of the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul mentions four aspects of our growth in discipleship. These can be our prayers for growth today.

First of all, we pray for strength. Paul says, *“I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.”*² We need more strength, don’t we? The struggles and difficulties and anxieties of everyday life sap our energy, tire us out, make us weary. We don’t have enough strength on our own. We need help from somewhere or Someone else.

It is a safe bet that you will never see me run a marathon. But I know people who do, and I respect their strength and fitness. Marathons, of course, are 26.2 miles long. But the experts tell you not to run over 20 miles at a time as you are training for a marathon. That means the last six

miles is “no-man’s land.” You don’t know what to expect the first time you go that far. Will you have cramps? Will you hit the wall? You will have to find strength from another source beyond your 20-mile capability.³

The Christian life is not a sprint; it’s a marathon. The strength to run the race, to cross the finish line, and to win the victory comes from two places: training well and being filled with the power of the Spirit.

We also pray to grow in faith. Paul prays “*that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.*”⁴ Faith is the fundamental currency of our relationship with God. God reaches out to us by grace—even in our sin, even though we don’t deserve it—and we respond in faith. We believe in God. We trust in God. We accept the saving sacrifice of Christ, and we put our lives under the Lordship of Jesus. This is faith.

But faith usually starts small. There is a statement that is associated with 12-Step programs that goes, “We give as much of ourselves as we can to as much of God as we understand.” That’s a pretty good start. We don’t start out knowing everything about God, but if we can give ourselves to the part we do understand, God can begin to dwell in our hearts through faith.

Anne Lamott, who writes novels and books about faith, described her own journey of faith like this: “My coming to faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land, and in this way I moved across the swamp of doubt and fear.”⁵

We pray to grow in strength and faith and knowledge. The truth of God is so immense, it’s like the words of the old spiritual, “So high, you can’t get over it; so low, you can’t get under it; so wide, you can’t get ‘round it.” But Paul writes to the Ephesians, “*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth.*”⁶ We want to understand, to comprehend the reality of God—to the greatest extent we can. A Biblical faith is never a shallow faith, and a shallow faith is never Biblical. There is so much to learn. God calls us to go deep, to grow in our understanding. So we start

where we are, and we learn something. Then we learn something else, and we continue learning until we have a better grasp on what God is all about.

Knowledge can be a valuable thing. Charles Steinmetz was a pioneer and a genius in the development of electrical engineering. He retired from General Electric in the early 1900's, but one time they called him back to consult on a problem that none of the engineers could figure out. Steinmetz spent several minutes walking around the complex of machines where the breakdown was occurring, then he took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and made an "X" on a particular piece of machinery. When the engineers took the machine apart, the source of the problem was right under the "X" that Charles Steinmetz had made.

When the engineers got the consulting bill from Steinmetz, they were even more amazed, because he charged them \$10,000—a huge sum of money in those days—for just a few moments work. They returned the bill with a request that he itemize the charges. A few days later it came back with this explanation: "Making one cross mark--\$1.00. Knowing where to put it--\$9,999.00"⁷

We may not get \$10,000 even today for knowing the length and breadth and height and depth, but we will have treasure in heaven. Learning more about the things of God is one of the most important ways we can grow.

Strength, faith, knowledge: then Paul prays that we will grow in love. Love is the glue that holds the Christian journey together. The head and the heart work together to produce Christian growth. Paul prays that the Ephesians will be "*rooted and grounded in love,*"⁸ and will "*know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.*"⁹ This is where the real power comes into play. Love is the power of life. It connects us to God, transforms our lives and sets us free.

But this love, too, is a process of growth. We have romantic notions of love at first sight. It happens in the movies all the time. But it seldom happens like that in real life. I did not fall in love with Carey the first time I saw her. In fact, I was her District Superintendent, and we met at a Charge Conference at her church. As Finance chair, she was presenting a proposal to sell the parsonage—pretty romantic stuff! She says I was "officially polite." I do not remember us meeting.

A few months later I had the opportunity to meet with Carey and her pastor about some other church business—just the three of us. This time I noticed her. I did not fall in love at first sight, but I was intrigued. Her pastor had told me she was widowed, and I was single, so after the meeting I called the pastor back, and asked a question I had never asked before, “Does your Finance chair have a boyfriend?”

Through a series of fairly awkward phone calls, Carey and I arranged to go to a Razorback basketball game together. And the rest, as they say, is history. We did fall in love and were married a little over a year later. But it was a process of growth.

God is in love with us before we ever meet God. As we grow in faith and knowledge, we begin to fall in love with God. Our lives become rooted and grounded in love, and our relationship with God becomes the core of our lives, the compass of our soul, the foundation of our being.

The goal of all this growth—strength, faith, knowledge, and love—is that we will live life in all its abundance. Paul says, “*so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*”¹⁰ That, too, is a process of growth. We don’t get filled all at once; it takes the rest of our lives until we enter God’s heavenly Kingdom. Only then do we know God in fullness. But we keep working on it, day by day. John Wesley called it sanctification. I call it the amazing journey of the spirit.

How is this even possible? How can we continue growing for the rest of our lives? How can we hope to be filled with all the fullness of God? Because it’s not dependent on us. For strength, for faith, for knowledge, and for love, we depend on God. Without God it would be impossible to stay on the growth track. But with God, nothing is impossible. So Paul closes this prayer for his people with a magnificent doxology—an outburst of praise for the One who makes this all possible: “*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*”¹¹

It has been a hard week. The tragedy of Charlottesville, Virginia, has not been far from my thoughts ever since it happened. It’s not the first time we have seen racially hateful and violent demonstrations. It’s not the

first time someone like Heather Heyer has lost her life doing what she thought was right. But this event has broken my heart like nothing in recent memory. Maybe it's just everything together—the hatred, the violence, the bigotry, the political firestorm in the aftermath of the tragedy. It's almost been too much.

But this whole tragic situation is a perfect example of why we pray for growth. We are not there yet. We have so much growing to do—as Christians, as churches, as a nation, as a world. I had one time hoped we were almost done with racism; we are not. I had hopes we could be civil and work out our differences with respect—not happening. I wonder sometimes if we can ever get the ship righted again.

So we pray for strength, so that we might have the courage to proclaim the truth that hatred, racism, bigotry, and violence are wrong, unequivocally wrong, and the groups that promote this evil—fascists, neo-Nazis, the KKK—are un-American and un-Christian.

We pray for faith, so that we can stand fast in our convictions and believe in the day when God's Kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray for knowledge, that we can be advocates for peace and justice, that we can reach out to know our brothers and sisters who are not like us—racially, religiously, economically, or politically—that we can know how to work together to build up our communities instead of tearing each other down.

But most of all, we pray for love to reign supreme. Love is the only answer. Love is the only power that can drive out hatred. Love won the war with evil on the cross, and now love is the ultimate weapon in the battles we face today.

How can we ever hope to be victorious? Because our God is able. Our God is able to take a tragedy like Charlottesville and work to bring about good. Maybe this horrible event will be a turning point toward peace and reconciliation. Our God is able to hold us fast, to lift us up, to grow his children until we are filled with the fullness of God. Our God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. To God

be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever! Our God is able! Amen!

Eternal God, we feel so foolish sometimes, like children learning the same lessons over and over again. Give us strength today, that we can make real progress on our journey. Give us faith, to see beyond the problems of today into the glory of tomorrow. Help us to know enough that we can refuse the evil and always choose the good. Above all, wrap us in your love, and help us love one another.

We pray to you because you are able to do more than we can ask or think. Keep us growing, until we are filled with all the fullness of your Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

¹ John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 28-31.

² Ephesians 3:16.

³ Mark Mitchell, "Ready or Not, Here I Come!" *PreachingToday.com*.

⁴ Ephesians 3:17.

⁵ Anne Lamott, quoted by Chris Holmes, *holmescoaching.com*.

⁶ Ephesians 3:18.

⁷ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 122f.

⁸ Ephesians 3:17.

⁹ Ephesians 3:19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Ephesians 3:20-21.