### “Life and Growth” Steve Finlan for The First Church, October 6, 2024

**Hebrews 1:1–4; 2:10–11**

1Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in various ways by the prophets, 2but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. . . 4having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

2:10 It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. 11For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

**Mark 4:26–28**

26 He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.”

Welcome here to First Church. I hope you all had a wonderful summer. Maybe you got to travel to a new place. Sometimes it is helpful to have a tour guide in a new place. For us, spiritually, Jesus can be thought of as our guide as we journey here on earth, growing in understanding as we go. In the school of love, Jesus is our teacher. He lived here as one of us, and knows us well. Today our readings give us deeper insight into Jesus and his guidance of us on our way. Just like us, Jesus grew up and experienced family and community life.

Jesus regularly thanked the Father. I can’t think of anything better for which to give thanks than life itself, the opportunity to meet people and learn things, to see the humor and the joy that is there to be experienced. I also want to recall life’s constant imperative: to grow. I don’t mean to leave love out, when I say this, for love is central to life, and without love there is no spiritual growth.

Verses 10 and 11 of the Hebrews reading picture Jesus as being perfected through what he suffered, through having lived a challenging and sometimes difficult human life, and being thus qualified to lead us to salvation. The bottom line is that Jesus has walked a mile in our shoes. He lived a full life with much joy and much sorrow. And although he is the Savior, he also has God as his Father, just as we do. This is something we have in common with Jesus. And so, it says, he can call us brothers and sisters.

Hebrews also describes a hierarchy: God, Jesus, angels, humanity. He points out that Jesus is superior to the angels. Jesus’ role as co-creator is mentioned here in verse 2: “through whom he also created the worlds.” Through Jesus, God created the worlds, plural! How many worlds? We don’t know. But it says that Jesus and God worked together, in creating. Further, they work together in bringing many children to glory (2:10). The purposes and deeds of Jesus and the Father are perfectly coordinated, working together lovingly and to perfection.

A similar point, but at much greater length, is made in the letter to the Colossians: “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). So Jesus is the co-creator. Creation was not only “through” him, but also “*for*” him. His leadership matters.He created the heavenly powers: the thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers. These probably refer to cosmic powers, heavenly or angelic authorities. So Jesus is the father of both the invisible cosmic powers, and of the human race.

He was the life-giver in the beginning, and he is the life-giver now. When he offers salvation, he is extending the same life-giving power as in creation. And, again, in his healings he demonstrated his life-giving power. Salvation and healing are linked, in his ministry; he often said “your faith has saved you” to people whom he healed. In one of those instances, a woman who was suffering from haemorrhages timidly touched his cloak, seeking healing. He called her forward, and said “Take heart, daughter; your faith has saved you” (Matt 9:22 combining RSV and NABRE), and she was immediately healed. This shows the unity of his kindness, his saving power, and his creative healing power. It is all the same power. And some of that power is available to us now when we approach God with honest minds.

Now let us look at the plant imagery in Mark. It is all about growth, and it is not Israel-specific. It is about how growth happens through stages, whether we are talking about plants or people. “The earth produces of itself,” and it does so through stages: “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (4:28). He is telling us that our spiritual growth also happens through stages, and is not really our own doing. Just as the plant’s growth is out of the farmer’s control, and happens while he sleeps, “he knows not how,” so is our growth out of our control or understanding. We provide favorable conditions by choosing moral behavior, healthy habits, and spiritual decisions. But we don’t actually cause the growth. Rather, we *let* it happen, and with faith, we know that it will come to be. We trust God to guide the growth.

The actual growth happens while we sleep, so to speak, and we are unaware of it. Spiritual growth *will* happen, but we have to be patient. We can’t make it happen faster, and we shouldn’t resent the slowness at which it happens. There’s no hurry. There will always be room for growth, but it doesn’t happen according to *our* timing or our desires.

Jesus often chose images of plant growth, of a mustard seed sprouting, of a vine, of people “bearing fruit,” of digging around and fertilizing a tree which is having some difficulty growing. All of this pictures life itself as a process of growth. The secret of life is growth, and the key to continued personal existence is spiritual growth. Nobody has to pay for our growth, it happens naturally. The power that created life also encourages its growth through stages.

Of course, we differ from plants in that we contribute to our growth through our choices, our movement, and our creativity. Our individual creativity leads us to make expression of our life and growth experiences, which then becomes part of our soul growth. That creativity may come forth in song, in art, or even on the job, and in our social interactions.

Living bodies are not perfect, but they grow and mature, and our souls grow and mature, too. Jesus created this very world, and he has prepared a place for us to continue our living and growing in the next world, “where neither moth nor rust consumes” (Matt 6:20). The apostle Paul pointed out “There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies. . . If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:40, 44). The spiritual body “is imperishable” and “death has been swallowed up in victory” (15:42, 53). Therefore Jesus said “do not let your hearts be troubled. . . I go to prepare a place for you . . . so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1–3).

If you’ve grown the stalk and the head, but not yet the full grain in the head, that will happen in the next life. Each of us will continue growing, through stages. As Ephesians says, we will come “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. . . We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:13, 15). It’s a bit of a mystery, exactly what this means, but growing into Christ seems to mean that we are becoming Christ-like in our character: becoming more wise and loving.

People who were healed and forgiven by Jesus experienced a kind of rebirth, found a second chance in life. Their growth could resume its normal progress, and if they practiced faith, they could start growing up *into* Christ, into his likeness. This is the goal for all of us. We on earth are supposed to reflect his glory, his goodness, his love. What a great opportunity!

In one of his songs, Bob Dylan sings “I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it.” Well, we’re supposed to get on it. We *can* get on that highway of diamonds! What a journey this highway becomes when we walk in faith with Jesus as our guide.