

Horses on Parade 13

John Wilkinson Third Presbyterian Church

September 8, 2013 (Rally Day) Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Luke 14:25-33

Happy Rally Day. We are back. I love this day because it contains such anticipation and possibility. Sunday school starts. The choir is here – welcome choir! And who doesn't love a big tent on East Avenue? There is food awaiting, wonderful music from the Meigs Street Ramblers. As you've heard, you can sign up for Meals with a Meaning, or register for the East Avenue Grocery Run, or get a Spiritual Formation or music and arts events schedule. If you are a young adult, you can find some peers and help us think about the future. It is a year of growing, about which I will talk more, but we do hope you will add your signature to the "GROW" sign out front. So welcome back, and if you are a visitor, welcome. I would encourage you to learn more about us. Come back. Get involved. If you are discerning that the Spirit is leading you to a deeper connection, please have that conversation with one of us. We would love to welcome you into this community.

As we gather this morning, we are mindful that violence is eminent on many fronts. In our city, gun deaths seem to be multiplying exponentially, even this past week. A week ago, a group of us watched the documentary "Trigger," which left me feeling discouraged, but not hopeless. On September 19, we will welcome the Chief of Police for a forum on gun violence, followed a week later with a conversation with RIT professor John Klofas. We are called to be peacemakers, and called to witness in this city to God's vision of peace.

As we are with Syria. Like you, like many citizens and politicians, I am struck by how complex this issue feels. I have placed copies of a statement by the Presbyterian Stated Clerk on the welcome table outside. Again, as we believe that God alone is Lord of the conscience, this represents a General Assembly's wisdom, and might serve as guidance for your own thinking. Our church, a year ago, issued a call:

To support a mediated process of the cessation of violence by all perpetrators,

To call for outside parties to cease all forms of intervention in Syria,

To support a necessary and strong role for the United Nations, and

To refrain from military intervention in Syria

As we ponder the issues and consider our response, in the least we might join Christians and other people of faith in this nation and around the world, who this weekend are fasting and praying for peace. Let us pray.

Dear Lord we thank you for the gifts that you give to us, the gifts of grace and of hope and of reconciliation. We pray for the people of Syria. We pray for the President and those who advise him. We

pray for those in Congress, that they may deliberate carefully about the best way forward so that peace may come to that, and every, troubled land. We pray for our own city, for peace in our streets. We remember those who died now 12 years ago in Washington and Pennsylvania and New York City. And we pray for this church, this community of faith, as we enter a new year. Grant us your peace, O God, and call us to be peacemakers, in our hearts and homes and church and city and world. Bless us with vision and every gift, that we may grow in faith and hear your voice and follow your summons. For we pray in Christ's name, and for his sake. Amen.

We have had a year of connecting and a year of feasting. I am taking suggestions already for next year! But this year is a year of growing, and welcome to it. We brainstormed over the spring with staff and church leaders. Growing. It's a terrific theme, and calls us to ponder who we are and where God is calling us. It also calls us to action.

What does it mean? What will a year of growing look like? In my mind, the word "growing" is an invitation – an active invitation rather than a passive one – to all of us. And a mandate.

Before I suggest what a year of growing might look like from my vantage point, let me ask you a question. Answer it to yourself, and maybe send me an email or Facebook message. Finish this sentence: in terms of Third Presbyterian Church, in 2013, growing is..._____.

In June we asked your Session the same question. Here are some of their responses. Growing is... "rewarding, challenging, necessary, exciting, growing pains, bringing in new people, evolution, deepening faith, strengthening connections, sometimes painful, reflective, learning new things, change, daring to do a new thing, reaching out, pruning, strengthening our Third Church community, time consuming, beneficial, not standing still, reusing space, connecting with other churches, more than just numerical growth, increasing resources, and transformative."

Every response is spot-on, and suggests how right this theme might be for us.

Now answer another question. Whisper the response to yourself or write it down on a margin in your bulletin, or text it to yourself, as I often do! In terms of my own life, right now, for me, growing is..._____.

I have a hunch that there are some very fundamental ways that the two clusters of responses overlap. They do for me. That is to say, your personal growth and development is integrally connected to this congregation's growth and development.

As a baseline, growing will be growth in faith, growth in our knowledge of and relationship to God, growth in our sense of being a spiritual community, growth in our ability to serve those in need. Those are true for me, personally, and I believe they are true for us, communally. Growth in our knowledge of ourselves, coupled with a growth in the knowledge of God, that leads us to growth in our knowledge of others and in serving the needs of the world. True for you. True for me. True for this church. A year of growing.

There are programmatic directions, of course, for all of this. Prayer, either here or at home or in the woods or on the beach or by yourself or with others. Prayer leads to spiritual growth. It is not magic. It is like any practice – the more you do it the more proficient you become, which leads to growth, whether running or playing scales or praying.

So pray. And read. Read the Bible. We have convinced ourselves that the Bible is a book for zealots and experts. It is neither. It is God's book for the people of God, you and me. Dare to open it, and by so doing, grow.

And give. And serve. This fall we will offer opportunities to use your gifts in deeper ways, with new and renewed opportunities to get connected and involved. Jump in. Take the leap. You will grow, and those who are on the other end of the ways you share your time will benefit as well.

We are in the midst of a kind of strategic planning process, and it shouldn't surprise you that the focus is growth, with focal points such as growth in communal connection, in our outreach ministry's capacity to serve, growth in membership, in fiscal stability and vitality. Some of this growth implies a bigger reality. Bigger is not necessarily better but in some cases it is. Other growth might be depth or breadth.

Whether broader or deeper or bigger in some way, I would posit the same thing whether it's the church or any one of us. Not to be growing is not standing still, but stagnating, and going backward, and even dying. We are called to grow, that is, never for growth's sake, but for the sake of living into the vision of who God calls us to be, leaning forward, whether with the wind or against it, but always forward, to avoid the atrophy and decay that is the certain sign of death.

One example. Today I will avoid the longer explanation of why this Rally Day sermon is called "Horses on Parade," and why this is the thirteenth version of it. That many years ago, however, in 2001, we participated in Rochester's "Horses on Parade," and I used the occasion to suggest a vision of us as a public church, a creative church, a church connected to community. Were I not growing and evolving and adapting, and were WE not growing and adapting and evolving, I would simply read "Horses on Parade I" year after year after year. It would be simpler for all of us.

But we are never finished products – you or me or the church. Each moment, each day, each year, is an opportunity for growth.

There will be many biblical images upon which to hang this notion of growth in the coming weeks and months. Many of them are agricultural, and that's right. Much of the Bible was conceived with rural and agrarian people in mind, so the images are rural and agrarian. How many times will Jesus talk about seeds and bushes and plants and growth – or pruning – to demonstrate that people are "getting it," getting nearer or growing deeper in their connection to God and God's kingdom.

But here is another; Jeremy shared it just a moment ago. The prophet Jeremiah offers the image of God as a potter, and we as clay on the wheel. If you've ever seen a potter at a wheel in real life, this image has resonance. He or she works and works and works, and just when the observer thinks all is well, the hands smash the clay and it all begins again.

Our life is like that. Life works on us. God works on us. We are never quite ready to be fired in the kiln. We are always being shaped and reshaped by events, experiences, relationships, the ongoing work of the Spirit, calling us to repent and amend and change, calling us to be formed and reformed and transformed.

I've always liked that our particular branch of Christianity is called the *Reformed* tradition. It suggests that while each of us is like clay on the wheel, that the church is as well, evolving, changing, adapting, reforming...actually, *being* reformed. We are the subjects, not the objects, the result, not the cause of formation and reformation. All of this leads to growth, spiritual growth that leads to deeper self-awareness, and also deeper awareness of the world into which we are called and deeper awareness of the presence of God among us and beyond us.

James Newsome writes that "...the power of the allegory of the potter and the clay lies in the fact that, although the form of the vessel on the potter's wheel may be 'spoiled,' its substance, its clayness...is undisturbed. And so the potter simply begins again and refashions the vessel, this time to the proper shape and size. So it is with (God)...The sin of the people may distort the 'shape' of their relationship to (God), but they remain (God's) people still, to be remolded and repatterned according to the divine will." (*Texts for Preaching, Year C, page 498*)

This is risky stuff, I know. Growth is never easy, which is why, I believe, the phrase "*growing pains*" is so true. But risk has reward, and so we trust. Ruth Benedict wrote that "We grow in time to trust the future for our answers." John Powell wrote that "A person can grow only as much as their horizon allows."

How will we trust? How will our horizons grow, as we welcome a year of growing? Let the growth begin, or, rather, continue. Let us grow, for the sake of your soul and mine, for the health and vitality of this congregation, but even more so, for the goodness of this broken and fearful world into which God the potter and gardener plants us and calls and shapes us and forms us and sends us. Amen.