We Grow When We Gather

Scripture: Hebrews 10:19-25
September 13, 2026 - Week 2 of Sermon Series: "Alive Together"
Theme: "I AM GROWING." - We need one another.
Key Sentence: God does not call us to grow alone. God forms us as we draw near to him, hold fast to hope, and encourage one another in Christian community.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, before we move forward into today's message, I want to take a brief moment to say thank you from my heart for the beautiful pastoral installation service last Sunday.

I am deeply grateful to everyone who helped prepare, organize, serve, sing, pray, welcome guests, provide food, participate in worship, and support my family and me during that meaningful celebration. Thank you to the members and leaders of both Community Presbyterian Church of Plainview and Community Presbyterian Church of Rochester, to our Presbytery leaders and clergy colleagues, to our musicians and worship leaders, and to all the friends and family who came to encourage us.

For me, the installation was not simply a ceremony for a pastor. It was a visible reminder that ministry is something we share together. I was deeply encouraged by your presence, your prayers, your words, and your love.

So, thank you for showing up. Thank you for standing with us. Thank you for reminding my family and me that we are not walking this journey alone. And perhaps that makes today's sermon especially appropriate.

Today we take the next step in our journey. Last week: "I AM PRESENT." Today: "I AM GROWING." Presence is the beginning, but presence is not the final goal. God gathers us so that God may form us. God wants our faith to deepen, our love to expand, our character to mature, and our lives to become more like Jesus Christ.

So let me ask a question that is more important than, "How long have I been a Christian?" The question is: "Am I growing?" Am I growing in love? Am I growing in patience? Am I growing in forgiveness? Am I growing in prayer? Am I growing in generosity? Am I growing in my understanding of Scripture? Am I becoming more willing to serve? Am I becoming more compassionate toward people who are different from me?

There is a difference between being around Christianity for many years and actually growing in Christ. A person can sit in the same pew for thirty years and still resist spiritual growth. A person can know many Bible verses and still refuse to forgive. A person can attend many church meetings and still never learn to serve humbly. Christian maturity is not measured simply by the number of years we have belonged to a church. Christian maturity asks, "Is Christ continuing to form me?"

Hebrews 10 gives us a beautiful picture of how that growth happens. Listen to the repeated invitation in verses 22 through 25: "Let us draw near." "Let us hold fast." "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." "Let us not neglect meeting together, but encourage one another."

Notice the language. The writer does not say, "Let me." Again and again he says, "Let us." Christian faith is personal, but it was never meant to be private. We come to Christ as individuals, but Christ joins us to a people. We belong to a body. We need one another.

So today I would like us to reflect on three movements:

First, Growth Begins by Drawing Near to God
Second, Growth Requires Holding Fast to Hope
Third, We Grow by Encouraging and Gathering with One Another

The key sentence for today is this:

> *"God does not call us to grow alone. God forms us as we draw near to him, hold fast to hope, and encourage one another in Christian community."*

First, Growth Begins by Drawing Near to God

Hebrews says, "Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith." Before the writer speaks about encouraging one another or gathering together, he begins with God. That is important. Christian growth begins by drawing near to the One who gives life.

Church activities by themselves cannot produce spiritual growth. Committee meetings cannot produce spiritual growth. Programs cannot produce spiritual growth. Even attending worship cannot automatically produce spiritual growth. We can be physically present while our hearts remain far away. Growth begins when we come honestly and intentionally into the presence of God.

And Hebrews tells us why we are able to draw near. The passage begins, "Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus... let us approach." Our confidence is not that we have finally become good enough for God. Our confidence is Jesus Christ. Jesus has opened the way.

Through Christ, we are welcomed. Through Christ, we are forgiven. Through Christ, we are reconciled to God. Through Christ, we can pray. Through Christ, we can worship. Through Christ, we can come before God with our gratitude, our questions, our failures, our wounds, and our hopes.

> *"Spiritual growth begins not with proving ourselves to God, but with drawing near through the grace of Jesus Christ."*

Think about any important relationship. If you want a relationship to deepen, there must be time together. A marriage cannot grow strong if two people never speak. Friendship cannot deepen when there is no shared time, listening, or trust. A child cannot develop a close relationship with a parent who is always distant. Relationship requires presence.

Our relationship with God is no different. We grow as we pray. We grow as we listen to Scripture. We grow through worship. We grow through confession. We grow when we come to the Lord's Table. We grow through silence. We grow as we learn to notice God in ordinary life. We grow when faith moves from information in our minds to trust and obedience in our daily lives.

Sometimes Christians say, "I wish my faith were stronger." That is a good desire. But then we must ask, "Am I drawing near to God?" A plant cannot say, "I want to grow," while refusing water and sunlight. Growth requires connection to the source of life.

Jesus said in John 15, "Abide in me." Hebrews says, "Let us draw near." Both are invitations to remain connected to Christ. The first sign of Christian growth is not that I become busier. It is that I am learning to live nearer to Jesus.

So our first question today is not, "How active am I?" It is, "Am I drawing nearer to Christ?" Because healthy service, healthy leadership, healthy generosity, and healthy participation all grow from a living relationship with Jesus.

"I AM GROWING means that God is still forming me as I continue to draw near to Christ."

Second, Growth Requires Holding Fast to Hope

Then Hebrews says, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." Christian growth does not happen only when life is easy. In fact, some of our deepest growth happens in difficult seasons.

The Christians who first heard Hebrews knew pressure, weariness, uncertainty, and discouragement. Some were tempted to turn back. Some were tired of the struggle. The writer does not tell them, "Try harder to feel strong." He tells them, "Hold fast."

And notice the reason: "for he who has promised is faithful." Our hope rests finally not in the strength of our own faith, but in the faithfulness of God. There are days when our faith feels strong. There are other days when our hands tremble while we hold on. But the One to whom we hold is faithful.

Some Sundays we come to worship full of joy. Other Sundays we arrive exhausted. Sometimes our prayers flow easily. Sometimes prayer feels difficult. Sometimes we sing with confidence. Other times we sing because we need the person beside us to carry the song for us.

Perhaps you came today carrying something heavy: a health concern, grief, family tension, financial pressure, loneliness, uncertainty, or a decision you do not know how to make. Perhaps you came with questions about God. Hebrews does not tell you to pretend everything is fine. It says, "Hold fast to hope."

> *"I AM GROWING does not mean that I never struggle. It means that I am learning to trust God even through the struggle."*

Sometimes growth looks like moving forward with confidence. Sometimes growth looks like getting up one more morning. Sometimes growth is praying one more prayer. Sometimes growth is asking another Christian to pray when you have no words. Sometimes growth is simply refusing to let go because you remember that God has not let go of you.

Our circumstances change. Our bodies change. Our jobs change. Families change. Communities change. Churches change. Pastors change. But the character of God does not change. Spiritual maturity includes learning to say, "I do not understand everything that is happening, but I know something about the One who holds me. God is faithful."

This is one reason Christian community matters so deeply. There will be seasons when your faith is strong enough to encourage another person. There will also be seasons when you need someone else to remind you of hope. We do not always hold fast alone. Sometimes the Body of Christ helps us hold on.

> *"Sometimes I carry hope for you, and sometimes you carry hope for me. That is part of what it means to be alive together."*

Third, We Grow by Encouraging and Gathering with One Another

Now we come to the heart of today's passage for our life together. Hebrews says, "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another."

The writer does not simply say, "Work on your own spiritual life." He says, "Consider one another." Think about one another. Pay attention to one another. Ask, "How can I help another Christian become more

loving? How can I encourage someone toward faithfulness? How can my life help another person take one step closer to Christ?"

That means spiritual growth is not only about asking, "How am I doing?" It also asks a more challenging question: "Who is growing because I am part of their life?"

"Who is becoming stronger in Christ because I am part of their life?"

Who is growing because you encourage them? Who is growing because you pray for them? Who is growing because you invite them? Who is growing because you serve beside them? Who is growing because you share wisdom from the years God has given you? Who is growing because your example quietly shows that Jesus Christ matters?

Maybe it is a child. Maybe a teenager. Maybe another church member. Maybe a newcomer. Maybe someone who has followed Christ for many years but is walking through a difficult season. Every one of us has the capacity to strengthen someone else.

This is why the church needs generations together. Young Christians need older Christians, and older Christians need younger Christians. New members need longtime members, and longtime members need the questions, energy, and fresh perspective of newcomers. Children need adults who know their names. Teenagers need Christians beyond their parents who listen to them and take them seriously. Young adults need mature believers who will walk beside them without being afraid of their questions. Older adults need meaningful ways to share the faith, wisdom, and perspective that God has formed through decades of life.

Church is one of the few places where all these generations are meant to belong to one another. And when that happens, something beautiful occurs: we help one another grow.

This is especially important for those of us who lead. An elder should be able to ask, "Whom am I encouraging toward love and good deeds?" A deacon can ask, "Whose faith is being strengthened through my care?" A teacher can ask, "Who is learning to follow Jesus through what I teach and model?" A pastor must ask, "Are people becoming more mature disciples, or are they simply hearing more sermons?"

And every Christian can ask, "Is my presence helping somebody else become more like Christ?" That is a very different way of thinking about church. Instead of coming only with the question, "What am I going to receive today?" we also come asking, "Whom might God want me to encourage today?"

Maybe before worship you notice someone sitting alone. Maybe after worship you speak with someone you normally pass by. Maybe during the week you call a person who has been absent. Maybe you invite someone to serve beside you. Maybe you tell a younger person, "I see gifts in you." Maybe you listen without trying to fix everything. One sincere sentence of encouragement can remain in a person's heart for years.

"We are not simply growing beside one another. God uses us to help one another grow."

And that is why Hebrews immediately connects encouragement with gathering: "not neglecting to meet together." Sometimes this verse is used only to say, "You are supposed to go to church." Yes, gathering matters. But Hebrews tells us why gathering matters. We gather so that we can encourage one another and be formed together.

We hear Scripture together. We pray together. We sing together. We bring joys and concerns. We celebrate together. We mourn together. We receive Communion together. We serve together. We watch children

grow. We welcome newcomers. We carry one another through illness. We learn to forgive. We practice patience with people who are not exactly like us. All of this becomes part of our spiritual formation.

That is why we can say, "We grow when we gather." Not because merely entering a church building magically makes us mature, but because life together gives the Holy Spirit opportunities to shape us.

You can read a book about patience, but eventually you need an actual person who tests your patience. You can study forgiveness, but eventually there must be someone you actually need to forgive. You can learn about generosity, but eventually you need an opportunity to share. You can study service, but eventually somebody needs your help. You can learn about Christian love, but eventually Christ places a real person in front of you and says, "Love this person."

> *"Christian community turns Christian ideas into Christian practices, and Christian practices shape Christian character."*

This is why isolation can become spiritually dangerous. If I separate myself long enough from Christian community, nobody challenges me. Nobody encourages me. Nobody asks difficult questions. Nobody calls forth my gifts. Nobody notices when my hope is weakening. I can begin to assume that my own preferences are always correct.

But in community, God uses other people. Sometimes they comfort us. Sometimes they challenge us. Sometimes they teach us. Sometimes they disappoint us and give us an opportunity to practice forgiveness. Sometimes they even frustrate us enough that we have to learn patience. God can use all of it to make us more like Jesus.

So today I am not simply asking, "Are you attending church?" Our theme is not, "I am attending." Our theme is, "I AM GROWING." It is possible to attend without growing. We can hear Scripture without obeying it. We can sing hymns without opening our hearts. We can sit beside people for years without really knowing them.

So perhaps every Sunday we should come with two prayers. The first is: "Lord, grow me today. Grow me through your Word, through prayer, through another person, through something that challenges me, through an opportunity to serve." And the second is: "Lord, use me to help somebody else grow today."

Conclusion - I Am Growing

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, last Sunday we declared, "I AM PRESENT." Today we add the second declaration: "I AM GROWING." These two belong together. Presence creates the opportunity for formation.

When I am present, I can listen. When I am present, I can learn. When I am present, I can encourage. When I am present, someone can encourage me. When I am present, I can serve. When I am present, someone can challenge me. When I am present, relationships can deepen. And through those relationships, by the grace of God, I grow.

Hebrews gives us three invitations today. First: draw near. Stay close to Christ. Second: hold fast. Trust the faithfulness of God. Third: encourage and gather. Help one another grow.

So the question is not merely, "Did I go to church this week?" The deeper question is, "How is God using this community to make me more like Jesus?" And then another question: "How is God using me to help someone else grow?"

Christian maturity is not measured simply by how many years we have been Christians. It is measured by whether Christ is still changing us. Am I becoming more loving? More patient? More forgiving? More generous? More willing to serve? More attentive to others? More faithful in prayer? More like Christ?

If the answer is yes, even slowly, then by God's grace we can say, "I AM GROWING." I am not finished. God is still teaching me. God is still correcting me. God is still healing me. God is still stretching me. God is still forming me into the image of Jesus Christ.

> *"I am not finished. God is still at work in me - and God is using you as part of that work."*

So let us draw near together. Let us hold fast together. Let us consider one another. Let us encourage one another toward love and good deeds. Let us keep gathering, because we need one another.

Last week: I AM PRESENT. Today: I AM GROWING. Next week we will move to: I AM INFLUENCING. And finally: I AM PARTICIPATING. Step by step, God is teaching us what it means to be the Body of Christ, alive together.

Church, let us not merely occupy the same room. Let us become a community in which people are formed, encouraged, challenged, healed, and sent. Let us be a congregation where children can grow, where young people can grow, where adults can grow, where elders can continue to grow, and where every generation helps another generation follow Jesus.

Let us say together today: "I AM GROWING." Not because I have arrived, but because Christ has opened the way. Not because life is always easy, but because God is faithful. Not because I can grow by myself, but because God has given me brothers and sisters to walk with me.

We need one another. And together, we are the Body of Christ - ***ALIVE TOGETHER.***

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reference Notes

1. The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, Hebrews 10:19-25; John 15:1-11.

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3. Craig R. Koester, Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Yale Bible 36. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, commentary on Hebrews 10.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together. New York: Harper & Row, 1954, reflections on Christian community and mutual encouragement.

5. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Order 2025-2027, F-1.0301-F-1.0304, on the church as the Body of Christ and the marks and ends of the church.