

Growing

by Miriam Ryan

I'm not sure what the opposite of a green thumb is, but I have one. I have a knack for killing both indoor and outdoor plants. My grandparents always had a beautiful garden, and my mom loved to be outside working in the yard, but somehow the gardening genes were not passed down to me, as I end up killing most plants by forgetting to water them. My daughter Ellie, on the other hand, is really into plants. She even asked for a fiddle leaf fig tree one Christmas (I had never even heard of this plant before). But she has managed to keep her fiddle leaf tree thriving for over an entire year! So, when Ellie asked if we could plant a vegetable garden last summer, I reluctantly agreed to a small vegetable plot if she agreed to water it—and for the first time in my entire life---“we” grew tomato plants that produced an abundant harvest of cherry tomatoes! However, sadly, one night we had a big storm that snapped one of the biggest branches off our plant, killing about 20 tiny tomatoes before they could ripen.

This image of the cut off vine reminds me of the Scripture passage from John 15, which is one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. As we think about the topic of “growing” spiritually, Jesus gives us a recipe for how growth happens:

John 15:4-12

⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

⁹ “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

Did you catch the word that Jesus repeats over and over in this passage? REMAIN. Remaining connected to the vine is the key to spiritual growth. Yet, if you’re anything like me, this seems a bit too simple and far too passive. In other areas of life, growth and progress come from hard work and effort on my part. I’m more comfortable with mottos like, “No pain, no gain” or “If at first you don’t succeed, try try again.” To grow spiritually I feel like I need to do more: find a good bible study, search for the right reading plan, carve out time for daily prayer or spiritual disciplines (which are all good things by the way). However, when more striving and effort

becomes my focus, I often end up living like a cut off branch, thinking I can make growth happen in my own power. I forget that the key to bearing fruit in the spiritual life is staying connected to the Lord and allowing his life to flow through me. Another translation of the word “remain” is “to abide,” which means to “continue in a place.” How might shifting your focus to remaining close and connected to Jesus bring about true transformation in your life?

Questions for Discussion

1. What stood out to you, encouraged you, or challenged you from this past Sunday’s sermon?
2. How does this passage from John 15 expand your understanding of what spiritual growth looks like?
3. Practically speaking, what do you think it means to “remain” connected to the vine? What helps you stay connected to Jesus?
4. What do you think verses 9-10 mean when Jesus says to “remain in my love”?
5. What are some of the “rewards” of remaining according to this passage?
6. Why do you think shifting your focus from “striving” to “remaining” is a better recipe for spiritual growth? How might this shift bring about true transformation in your life?