

We are Growing Together

By Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

Now, my sons, they are well past the third grade Bible stage. And if you've talked to me recently, you've probably heard me say something along the lines of parenting young adults is difficult. Now, Tom and I have two amazing kind sons. They are. They're wonderful. Jax lives in Kansas City, Lex lives in Omaha.

And it's a new kind of parenting when your parents are adults or young adult, whether they're out of your home or they're young adults still living in your home, it's this new stage. And then every new stage of parenting comes with new challenges and new opportunities. Because parenting is all about growth and we still need to grow as adults.

I still need to grow. I still need support even from my parents. Now, a simple thing. My dad still texts all of his kids when we approach the winter season, right? The first freeze and he says, Hey kids, don't forget to unhook your hoses and drain your sprinklers, right? I heard somebody recently that their dad does the same thing.

I'm really grateful for my parents support to help me continue on and to grow in. And I'll recognize here that not every family is healthy and functional. Some parents do have done a better job of helping their kids grow and being supportive of them, but it's the point is, is that we need to continue to grow all throughout our lives and finding those people in our lives, the positive people who will walk with us on the journey to help us to support us in life is really necessary.

And that's one of the biggest reasons that we have the church is to help each other grow. Ephesians chapter four, verses 15 and 16 says this. Paul says instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ. Who is the head. The whole body grows from him as it is joined and held together by all the supporting ligaments.

The body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love as each one does its part. This is the church, right? This is what the church is about. It's about growing together. It's about supporting one another with Jesus as the head, as the very foundation of what we do and who we are.

I saw this picture on social media the other day, and I don't know who originally posted it. I don't know. I don't know if this photo is edited, but I love this idea for art. For today's message, there is this tree. It says The thinner tree was cut years ago and the big one has been holding and feeding it since then.

They wake up together in the spring and they go to go to sleep together in the autumn. And I love that. I think that this tree, the tree represents the church and the very roots represent Jesus, who gives us life. And sometimes life just cut us off at the roots, it feels like. But knowing that we are still supported by Jesus through our connection of the church community is just a brilliant image.

So last week we talked about the value that we have here at Horizons of welcoming and including everyone preparing a place for everyone at God's table. And that is really, really important to know that everyone is welcome. But that is not the end of being a Christ follower. Another value that came from our surveys and our from our summit was the value of community.

So here is our third value in this sermon series. Guided by values, fueled by generosity. Would you join me in saying this Together? We are growing together. We connect as a multigenerational community through all phases of life with love and truth. We support each other in our faith. We don't have life figured out. We learn from each other.

And that's why we're better together. Now, I want to tell you a story today of how I came to be standing here before you as your pastor. And I'm going to tell you this story today because it's about growth and growing and it's because of the encouragement and the support that I received from the church community. It's both about personal growth, but more even more so.

It's about growing closer to Jesus and growing closer to the church. Now you have a story to now your story may not include pastoral ministry, but it might. And if you are feeling a calling toward pastoral ministry, please come talk to me. Now, I grew up in the church. I've considered myself a Christian my whole entire life. But it wasn't until well into my twenties that I really started to understand a relationship with Jesus as my Savior as opposed to, Well, I am a follower of Jesus.

So I attend church and I follow these rules and I don't do these things. And more of like this obligation of that. I'm supposed to do things. So even though I grew up in the church, I did not want to be a pastor when I grew up. Now, there was this brief moment in time, maybe two weeks, where I was going through confirmation class and I was asked to share part of something that I wrote with the congregation.

And in this really, really brief sliver of time, I loved the idea of getting up in front of people and sharing something, a story, hearing about my faith and encouraging others. But the day came and I was so nervous and I was so uncomfortable standing behind that pulpit. I knew from that day that I was not called to be a pastor.

I was like, okay, 100%. Nope, not doing that. But I did know I wanted to help people. And so I graduated high school, I went to college and I got a degree in Human and Social Services Administration. I got a job working in a nonprofit. It was a great job. It was a job that I loved. I guess I was using my skills.

There was opportunity for me to advance in that job. I was really, really happy helping people in that way. Then in 2007, I got a phone call from one of the pastors at the church I was attending. I had joined this church about a year earlier when I moved into the neighborhood, and I started immediately volunteering with the youth group because I just had a passion for helping young people.

So my pastor called and she said, Hey, we have this new job and we think you would be really good at it. Are you interested? And I said, Oh, wow, thank you so much for thinking of me, but I have a job that I love. I am not looking for a change, but thanks anyway. And I hung up the phone 2 minutes later.

The other, more persuasive youth pastor called and he said, Come in and talk to us. And so I did. And I remember that day, I remember walking up to the church, building the church, the doors that I enter, there's this big cross above the doors. And I remember looking up at that big cross above the door before I walked in, and I felt something stir inside of me later to be identified as the Holy Spirit.

So I had the conversation with the pastors and I decided to quit the job that I loved for a very, very part time job that paid very little to were working at the church. And I knew I was supposed to be working in

the church. Like, there was something that was stirring inside me, knowing that I was supposed to be doing this kind of work.

But I did not know at the time that I would be a pastor. I would still tell you I am not cut out for that. I do not have those gifts. I do not have those skills that is not for me. So the part time job at the church quickly turned into a full time job, and I was given the opportunity to be the youth director at the church.

And so that's when I really started to grow. I started growing personally, and I also started growing my faith in in Jesus. I started understanding the Scriptures more. I started reading more into it and doing more study and more work to find out more. And I started preaching as the youth director. Every single weekend we have, but we had a separate youth service.

So I preached every weekend at that. And then occasionally at our regular worship service, I would preach. Started doing some pastoral care with families and students. And then I started hearing these encouraging and persisting people from the church saying to me things like, Why are you not a pastor? When are you going to go to seminary? When are you going to realize that God has called you to do this, that you are made for this?

And I said, No, I'm not. For a few years after that. And then one day I heard it again. Somebody else said it to me after I preached, and then I felt this nudge inside of me later to be identified as the Holy Spirit. And even after that, I still said no for a while but then it was this one moment I started feeling it.

I knew that I was called to do something more. I knew I was called to keep growing in the ministry that I was doing. And so I started learning about the process of becoming a pastor, what that looks like, what that means to be pastor. And I started the process and I started I first became a licensed local pastor.

So I completed licensed in school and then I did five years, of course, of steady work at Saint Paul School of Theology. And so upon completion of that five years, I could have been done I could have continued serving as a pastor as I was and just been done with that. But I decided to keep growing and keep going on.

And I went to back to seminary for two years, a full time seminary while serving a church full time and started taking the to become an ordained elder. And I'm not done yet. So all of this to say, is the church not only helped me understand my calling, but the church helped me see my God given gifts that I see myself.

The church helped me raise my children. The church helped me through some really, really difficult times that I had in my life. And in so many ways, the church helped me to discover more of who God is. Now, the journey to ordination that I'm on, it's a lot. Of course, I took a little bit longer route than some others, and I know that my husband and the staff here, they're going to be really excited to not have to hear me say I need to work on my ordination paperwork or I have to go to residency, which I'm heading out here in a few hours to do.

Well, I'm going to be bold here and pause. My ordination paperwork is due December 1st. Please pray for me. But I wanted to share with you. I have been working on my ordination paperwork, and I want to share with you something that I recently wrote my paperwork that kind of stuck with me, and it kind of sums up the value that we have here at Horizons about the importance of growing together.

Now, to become a provisional elder, which is what I am now, I had to write a big paper on my theology, what I believed about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and evil and eternal life and the sacraments and the Kingdom of God and all the other topics. And this round of paperwork is more about what I believe based on my experience of ministry, based on how I've grown in ministry.

And so here is what I wrote in my paperwork. I said this while my provisional paperwork initially expressed a belief in God as the Trinitarian God, the real life experiences with ministry have shown me that God's nature is far wider and more complex than any theological statement can capture. And I think that this excites me more than anything about my faith, because I'm not supposed to feel like I know God fully that finding out more and more about God is all part of the journey of drawing closer to him.

I believe in this value that we have about growing together. I love that we are a multigenerational church with we come in all different phases and stages of our life. We are we're single and we're married, we're divorced. Some of us have experienced the death of a child or death of a spouse or death of a parent. Some of us have a new baby or a new job, or are newly empty nesters or newly retired.

Some of us have had a change in our job or a change in our health. And all throughout these phases of life, we support one another. But I've only experienced some of those phases of life where you may have experienced different phases of life, and that's where we learn from each other and we learn about God from each other, and that's why we're better together.

So Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, the words that we read earlier, he says these words to this church in Ephesus, because Ephesus was full of greed and hate, and he's reminding the church of the foundation of truth of Jesus, that Jesus came to spread peace and love. This new kind of kingdom. And Paul says the way to remain faithful is for the church to keep Jesus at the center.

But also support one another and grow together. Hear this same passage again. It says instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ. Who is the head. The whole body grows from him as it is joined and held together by all the supporting ligaments. The body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love, as each one does its part.

The point of the church is to grow up. The point of being a Christian is to grow up, to grow closer to following to being like Jesus. But growing up is not always easy. We say things like growing pains when we talk about going through difficult things in our life. We say things like no pain, no gain.

When we are trying to build up our muscles. And as Christians, growing is not supposed to be easy. In Luke chapter nine versus 23, Jesus said to everyone, all who want to come after me, all who want to follow me, must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me. Now, that's going to hurt in the morning.

If we think about Christian discipleship or if we think about following Jesus carrying a cross is going to hurt. As we plan for 2024, we think about our value and we think about growing together. We think about what we want to do as a church community based on these foundational values that we have. And part of our mission is that we care about the next generation of the church.

And so we are planning this multigenerational event in January. I'm really excited about it. It's that step into, okay, we need to do more things where we can all learn from one another. And so not only does

your generosity help with providing Bibles for our children, but it helps us navigate all of our programs that we have for our kids in our youth and we all have this responsibility of forming the next generation.

Like we're all part of this work. We care for them. We show them grace. We impart wisdom on them, but we also allow them to find their own ways because their ways might be better than our ways sometimes. And we have to be okay with that. But it matters that we are growing together. If you are not actively seeking ways to grow closer to God and to follow Jesus more this little handout that you probably were handed on your way in, if you don't have it, there's more out there every week of our of the series.

The front side has our value and the back side has a devotional. This was written put together by David O'Neill, and this is a great way to start growing together. We have life groups that are so important to us in these life groups that we have or because of support and because of growth. That's the purpose of our life groups.

We offer something we called Growth Track, and we'll have another in January. And Growth track is about that. It's about growing, it's about creating connections or finding your spiritual gifts. What God has given you, and finding ways for you to use those gifts and connect with others. We will continue to grow together. That is a really important value that this church has this year.

We've spent some time what we've called these difficult conversations. Now, if you know anything about the United Methodist Church, the big church, you know that there's been some disagreement in our denomination and this is not something that's unique to United Methodist. Also, all denominations have gone through something like this in one form or another. But I know this I know that Horizons is a church of many different voices and many different perspectives.

And one of my goals when I came here to Horizons last year was to offer a space that was open and that was safe. And so we did these difficult conversations with our staff and our church leadership. And then we opened these up to everyone because it's important for us to share with one another our own personal experiences.

And people came to these discussions and they shared about how they understood scripture. So they shared a personal story. And in some of the sessions, like we didn't all agree on everything, but we all grew and it didn't mean that we ended the session in my all thinking the exact same way. That wasn't the point, because growing is not about conformity, but it's about unity.

It's about allowing others experiences to grow our empathy for others to shape our understanding of God. Because if I try to understand God only on my own, I'm going to only understand a very small sliver of God. When we learn from one another, we grow our compassion in new ways. Growing is about humbly saying, I don't have it all figured out yet, but I am will learn to learn.

I'm willing to learn from the Holy Scriptures. I'm willing to learn from God in the Holy Spirit. How the Spirit works in us. And I'm willing to work, learn from others to become more like Jesus. That's our purpose. Would you join me in prayer? Gracious God, we know that you've asked us to pick up our cross, to deny ourselves, to say no to ourselves and our own desires, and to pick up the cross before we follow you and God.

This is not easy to do. We are. We are selfish. We want our own ways. We have our own preferences that we wish to express. But, God, you are so much bigger than just our own understanding of you. So help us live into this value of growing together as a community. Give us ways and spaces to share our stories with one another so that we can learn more about you, so that we can be more compassionate toward your children, all of us.

God, it is not easy, but it is good. And we thank you for the ways that you have shined, shown your light on us here in this church, the way that you allow us to shine our light out into the community, help us continue to grow so that others may know you and God. We say this in Jesus name, Amen.

Hello, my name is Matt Braunsroth. My wife and I have been coming to Horizons since the spring of 2021. We have two daughters, Isla, who is three, and Erin, who is three months. I'm here to share my experience about how I got involved with Horizons and how Horizons has saved my faith. Growing up, my parents brought me up as a devout Catholic at a young age.

I went to Catholic school and went through all the sacraments, you know, Holy Communion, reconciliation, baptism, confirmation. I was very active in Catholic youth ministry, as well as being an altar server for mass on Sundays and getting involved in other Catholic programs like the St John Bosco Society Knights of Columbus, TEC, and tectuous , it wasn't until I was in my mid-twenties when I began to question my faith.

I felt as though I was only Catholic because I was brought up in it. You know, it was hammered into my brain that this was the way the only way, for example, I, I only went through the sacraments of communion, reconciliation and confirmation because it was required when going to a Catholic school and being baptized as a baby instead of at an older age.

I didn't have a choice in my faith, you know. And all that occurred to me, you know, that a man convinced against his own will is still a man, unconvinced. You know, this all caused me to question my faith as well as a base of my morals. You know, I felt as though I was faking it. You know, it was you know, I was going through church services half heartedly.

You know, I continue to struggle with it until eventually the fire of my faith just died out in 2021. I was at my wife's brother, Joe and Ashley Myer's house just hanging out. And this is where I met Derek and Emma Steinacher they mentioned that they were looking for someone to help run the sound board at services for Horizons.

You know, that's when Joe said, you know, Matt's in a band. He'll do it. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to think. I'd never been to another church of another denomination other than Catholic. So I was a bit hesitant, but I thought that would be a good opportunity for me to get back into music.

So I went ahead and I obliged. Plus, Joe had already volunteered me for it. My first reaction of Horizons was, This is a church where the pews, where's the altar? The tabernacle, the crucifix, the altar servers like this was not an environment I was used to, but everyone seemed very welcoming and genuine and not fake. You know, it didn't take long for the worship leaders to learn that.

I was a musician who played in bands for over 15 years, and this caused me to take on more roles in the worship team and eventually become a worship leader. I met some, I met some great people and

started building relationships with other individuals. Soon my wife and I got involved with the worship team as well as a vocalist.

My daughter Isla. She fell in love with VBS, Ali, Liz and the rest of the DZ team. She has made some great friends here now and it makes me very happy that she's actually having fun learning about God. And now we can't wait for Erin to experience everything Horizons has to offer. Ten years ago, I thought I may have faith in God again.

I was at a point in life where I didn't care to know him. Horizons helped restore my life, my relationship with God again, and by providing me a platform to worship Him with my musical talent in a community that will support me with anything I'm struggling with in my life. They provided a come as you are type of feel.

I feel as though my family is accepted here without judgment. Pastor Mandy's leadership, as well as the leaders of the rest of the Horizons staff, gives me confidence that we can all grow together in God's love. Being on the worship team got me back in touch with God. It strengthened my faith and gave me comfort knowing that I'm not perfect.

I will never be perfect, but God's love is perfect. I'm now convinced that by accepting God's love again, I am saved. Horizon saved my faith. God never stopped loving me, but Horizons helped me grow my faith again.