

## **Better Together**

What can happen when we align ourselves with God's mission and purpose  
Message #3 – "Growing Together"

Titus 3:3-8

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Pastor John Marcott

### ***People in need of help - help people in need of help.***

Something strange was up. As soon as I entered my parents' home I couldn't help but notice what appeared to be brightly colored pantyhose hanging...just about everywhere! My mother had always kept an immaculate house. Everything else seemed to be in place, tidy, and neat; but, tied to the doorknob to the basement was red hose; protruding from the top of the bedroom door was a pair of blue hose; green hosiery dangled from a light fixture in the living room! A few months earlier, my mother had survived a major stroke, but, for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why she might dry her lingerie in such a conspicuous manner!

When I asked my father what was up, he excitedly explained to me that they were 'resistance bands.' He showed me how each band was strategically placed so that my mother could exercise different muscle groups on her debilitated left side. "When she walks into the kitchen, she can do curls," he said as he grabbed a band and went through the motions himself. "This band will help her regain strength and coordination in her quadriceps," he explained as he pulled the blue band with his ankle. I was so impressed by my father's ingenuity; he had turned our childhood home into a virtual rehab center for my mom.

I wasn't familiar with resistance bands and thought that maybe he had invented them for this very purpose. But then he explained to me that he had been introduced to them years ago when he had rehabbed a dislocated shoulder. Okay, so he wasn't as brilliant and inventive as I first thought, but I was still impressed by how he had used what he had learned from his own past injury and rehab to help mom in her present rehab. This is a perfect illustration of what **GROWING TOGETHER** in the church is all about. The principle could be called: ***People in need of help - help people in need of help.***

Good morning, I'm John Marcott, and it's my privilege to serve as one of your pastors here at St Paul's church. It's my joy and responsibility to share God's Word with you. Would you join me in asking God's help in giving us ears to hear...

*Holy God and Father, we come to Your Word open to being changed. Silence our agendas; correct our assumptions; burn away our casual detachment. Clear away the cobwebs from our minds and penetrate the deep recesses of our hearts with Your Word. Gracious God, give us humble, teachable, and obedient hearts, that we may receive what You have revealed and do what You have commanded. **Amen.***

We're engaged in a series entitled, "Better Together" tracing the biblical theme that God designed us for community. And it's through this very community that He accomplishes his purpose and mission. You see, although sin had separated us from God and one another, Jesus reconciles us both to God and to one another. And relationships, either grow, stagnate or drift apart. Today, we'll be looking at my contribution to the series: **GROWING TOGETHER**. We'll look at -

- 1. GROWING:** First, we'll look at God's expectation of growth in our lives, and
- 2. TOGETHER** Then, we'll look at the key role relationships play in that growth

When it comes to growing physically, one of the most helpful things that parents, teachers and physicians use in observing and evaluating growth phases in children is a list of developmental milestones. These 'milestones' are helpful schemes to help you recognize key, threshold moments in your child's life and also enable you gauge where your child is at on the maturity scale. So, for instance, by six months a baby should begin responding to the call of her own name and also, begin sitting up without support. By nine months the same child will start standing while holding on, and also have the fine motor skills to pick up, say, cheerios between her thumb and index finger...and so on and so forth. Such schemes help us recognize appropriate threshold moments and observe where our kids are *or should be* in the maturation process. Well, the apostle Paul provides such a list of 'developmental milestones' for Christian growth in his short letter to his ministry apprentice, Titus. Paul is writing to encourage pastor Titus to be bold and clear in his preaching to his church. And, at one point, he provides a flashback, talking about how God works in people's experience to guide their growth. We find these spiritual 'developmental milestones' in chapter 3 of the letter to Titus, where we begin reading at verse 3:

**<sup>3</sup> At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. (Titus 3:3)** Okay, Paul passed over the cute and cuddly part rather quickly! He starts off with a rather bleak picture of where we started from. John Wesley referred to this common experience as being ASLEEP spiritually. We were totally unaware of God's interest in our life, and of His special claim on our life, of His purpose for our life, and, in turn, our accountability to Him. And because of this we were '*foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved.*' This is the first developmental milestone that Paul lists for all of us.

"Now wait just a second, Pastor John," you might say. I grew up in the church and didn't have a colorful, immoral past. I avoided those '*passions and pleasures.*'" Okay, I get it. I hear you. But let's look again at what Paul said. He begins....

**<sup>3</sup> At one time we too were...(Titus 3:3)** Paul includes himself. That's right, the **Apostle Paul**, that good, moral Jewish boy, educated by the leading rabbinic scholar in Jerusalem; who was zealously devoted to God in his faith and rigid lifestyle....but he looks back at that time before Christ and sees himself as '*foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved.*' **Martin Luther**, the great Protestant Reformer was a guilt-motivated but dedicated Catholic priest, ....even he looks back at that time and sees himself as '*foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved.*' **John Wesley** was a disciplined, self-sacrificing missionary....but even he looks back

at that time and sees himself as 'foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved'; blind to God's intense interest in his life. Each one of these great men of God will talk of that earlier part of their life where they *thought* they were being responsible before God only to realize that they too were 'foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved'.

You see, Paul was not just the greatest spokesman for the gospel, he was first and foremost a customer, too. Do you remember the commercial from the 70s where Sy Sperling about the Hair Club for Men which end with the tag line: "I'm not only the Hair Club president but I'm also a client."? In the same way, Paul was not just preaching the need for God's grace, mercy, forgiveness to pagans and the irreligious - no, he *too*, was a recipient first; *he too* was a target of God's grace before he targeted audiences with that same grace. *He too* was "**foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved.**" This illustrates my point that no matter who you are, we are all **People in need of help.**

Religious or irreligious, moral or immoral, dedicated or despicable - there are two ways to miss God's good news in Jesus: Either rejecting him by disobeying his laws or by keeping his laws and not needing him! Jesus can be missed just as easily by the sin of disobedience as by the pride of self-righteousness. We too were 'foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved' not simply by wrongdoing, but also by pride in one's own moral achievement! <sup>3</sup> **At one time WE TOO were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.**

### **And, it effected our relationships**

....the verse continues....**We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.** We were separated from God: foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved - and as a result, our relationships were messed up too. Both inwardly and outwardly: we harbored ill-will, begrudged others of their gifts and achievements; and we were resentful and judgmental. We were separated from God and from others.

But once ASLEEP they AWOKE. Here's the second 'milestone' in Christian growth; reading in verse 4, <sup>4</sup> **But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, (Titus 3:4)** Let me just stop there first. Did you ever wake up from a deep sleep because a beam of light breaks through a window whose blinds weren't pulled all the way down, or drapes that weren't fully shut? Just as Jesus appeared in reality to those who witnessed His Incarnation, so the love of God appears to our hearts to awaken us from our spiritual stupor, rouses us and startles us awake from our spiritual sleep. We bolt awake to the reality of God and his intense, **unexpected, surprising, and eye-opening** love for us. Paul continues describing this milestone...

<sup>5</sup> **he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. (Titus 3:5)** His saving love is not simply unexpected, surprising and eye-opening; but also **undeserved.** In fact, it's the very OPPOSITE of what we deserved! He continues...

***He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:5-7)*** Okay, this milestone of becoming AWAKE is the work of God. And Paul makes it clear that it's nothing less than the Trinity waking us up to the reality of all that God has done to make us alive to Him. God, the Father loved, planned and sent His Son; Jesus Christ, the Son, came as our Savior appearing in flesh and blood; and then the Holy Spirit applied that work to us washing us and renewing us (from our foolishness, disobedience, deception, and enslavement)

**GOD THE FATHER'S LOVE –  
JESUS CHRIST'S SAVING LIFE AND DEATH –  
HOLY SPIRIT'S CLEANSING AND LIFE-GIVING WORK -**

This second milestone AWAKENS us from our being ASLEEP. And it is not a milestone that we accomplish, it is nothing short of **God breaking through** – appearing, bringing love and mercy, and then washing and renewing us by the Spirit. It is God breaking through.

But his developmental milestones are not done; he goes on in verse 8:  
***<sup>8</sup> This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. (Titus 3:8)*** Here we arrive at the third milestone. New life, awakened to the reality of all that God has done for us, results in a trusting in God and an 'all out' new devotion to doing good. Here is an abbreviated list of developmental milestones for the Christian life -

**ASLEEP  
AWAKE  
ALL IN**

Now that we're awake to God's intense care for us – one that was unexpected and undeserved – one that the Father planned by giving up His own Son, one that involves the Holy Spirit remaking us, and re-animating us – now we're called to trust God and to devote ourselves to doing what is good.

And, here's where the 'together' comes in...as far as our growing. Before we saw that one of the results of our being asleep was that ***We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.*** Now, our devotion to trusting God and doing good is ***excellent and profitable for everyone.*** When God renews a person, He aims to renew others through them.

**Personal blessing is never an end in itself;  
God always has His sights on blessing coming to us  
and spreading through us.**

*In fact, this is the process by which God uses ordinary people to accomplish his extraordinary plans!*

One of the main ways that God spreads his blessing through us is in our fellowship in the church. By 'Fellowship' I don't mean simply a group of Christians in close proximity; fellowship is a COMMITTED PARTNERSHIP. And that partnership, you guessed it, is aimed at three central things -

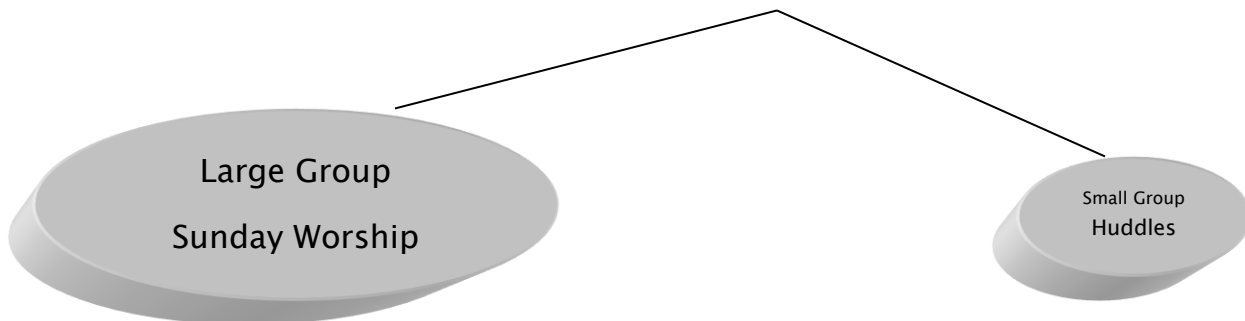
- Keeping each other from falling back **ASLEEP**
- Helping each other stay **AWAKE** and
- Challenging each other to continue being **ALL IN.**

I think we would all agree that that would be very helpful indeed! You see,

**Restored relationships are not only the result of gospel transformation, they are also the means of gospel transformation.**

### **PEOPLE IN NEED OF HELP - HELP PEOPLE IN NEED OF HELP**

Here, at St Paul's our ministries are geared to capitalize on this principle of GROWING TOGETHER. Let me share with you a little of the strategy behind what we do -



### ***Growing Together Strategy***

Our 'growing together strategy' at St Paul's is based on a simple principle. We have large group Sunday Worship services and small group huddles during the week. Does this remind you of anything? Actually, it should ring a bell because this was Jesus' strategy. He preached to large crowds which included the committed, the intrigued and on the periphery those who were interested...but not quite there yet. But then Jesus spent quality time with a small band of twelve. These were those who had left everything, they were 'all in' and He invested in them. With them he shared not only the gospel, but his very life. Our Sunday morning worship is the **heartbeat** of all we do - we praise God together, we are taught from His Word together, and we are encouraged and inspired by the time focused on God Himself through songs, prayers, and the sacraments together. The small group is the **circulation system** by which we grow together.

Okay, so, you're here at worship. Would you like to be part of the two-pronged strategy? Well, the first thing you need to buy into is:

### **PEOPLE IN NEED OF HELP - HELP PEOPLE IN NEED OF HELP**

If you're convinced you need help (like the rest of us) AND that you also have help to offer (like the rest of us) ...well, you qualify. And remember those spiritual development milestones that Paul supplied us with?

### **ASLEEP – AWAKE - ALL IN**

Well, if you're asleep then you are convinced you don't need nobody's help! In actuality, you're not even aware of being asleep....because you're asleep. It's only when you wake up, can you look back and realize you were asleep. However, let me just say that even if you aren't yet sure you're awake – if you're still new to this Jesus stuff but you're willing to be part of a smaller group to discuss the life of faith.....great! Please contact us. But if you're awake and you know that you sometimes fall back asleep and you want encouragement to stay awake and you want to be challenged to be all in – well, this is Jesus' two-pronged strategy and He welcomes you to it.

Please either let me know, or one of the pastors, or go on our website, [www.stpauls.faith](http://www.stpauls.faith), and then on the home page hit the third tab which is ABOUT, and then under the ABOUT tab, you'll see on the dropdown menu, the last option 'connect with us'. Under that section you find our connection card where you can check the option 'huddle groups.' This is a structure we're still building but expressing your interest in such a group is the first step.

### **PEOPLE IN NEED OF HELP - HELP PEOPLE IN NEED OF HELP**

That's Jesus' strategy for growing together and so we're wise to keep it up! Let me remind you once again of the 'developmental milestones' that God provides for us:

#### **ASLEEP**

***<sup>3</sup>At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. (Titus 3:3)***

#### **AWAKE**

***<sup>4</sup>But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup>so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4,5b,7)***

#### **ALL IN**

***those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. (Titus 3:8)***

Where are you in this developmental scheme? Just **a caution**: it is usually malpractice for you to hear a sermon with the thought, 'Oh I wish 'so-and-so was here to hear this!' It's good to want others to hear. However, don't miss what God is saying to you. And, in all humility – Christians should not use these developmental milestones to judge others. These godly men that I mentioned, only looked back to their pasts before Christ to see what bad shape they were in. And, it is the work of God that makes you alive. There is no boasting in that!

Honestly, just between you and God, where do you think you are? Close your eyes as I ask these spiritual diagnostic questions:

- Have you resisted God's advances to you?
- Have you never felt the need for God, you've handled your life on your own without his help?
- Has the love of God, the power of the Spirit dawned on you and made you awake to God's love for you, His claim on your life, His strong sense of calling and purpose in your life?
- Has He broken through recently and you want to share about it?
- Has a once fervent love and devotion grown cold?
- Have you been awakened but since then you've dozed off?
- Are you raring and ready to be all in?
- Are you aware that you can't do it alone?
- Are you encouraged that God never intended you to go it alone?
- Are you ready to join in God's plan which involves your life in a bigger purpose and a community that will help you keep on track?

Talk this over with God. Keep the conversation going...And if you want to discuss your answers with a pastor and talk of the possibility of joining the growing band of believers at St Paul that wish to be all in, and help others do the same....please do so either after today's service, or through a phone call or text or email.....we're in this together

...let's admit **WE'RE PEOPLE IN NEED OF HELP** and let's enlist to **HELP OTHER PEOPLE IN NEED OF HELP**

Let us pray:

*Holy Father, thank You for Your surprising, unexpected, undeserved showing up in our lives – Your love expressed in Jesus' appearing, Your Holy Spirit's renewing work in our lives and Your gift of the church, brothers and sisters of kindred spirit aiming to be devoted and committed to pleasing and serving You, doing good. Help us to wisely join the movement of Your Spirit with those whom You have given us. In Jesus' name and to His glory! Amen.*