

“Growing Pains”
July 26, 2026

Deuteronomy 11:13-15
I Corinthians 3:1-9

On recent Sundays, I’ve been preaching about growth.

I’ve explored some parables of Jesus that speak of the slow and certain growth of the realm of God in this world. These parables are echoes of the Old Testament wisdom that we heard again this morning in Deuteronomy and the Psalm. And they are affirmed by Paul as he tells the early Christians in Corinth: “I planted the seed, and Apollos watered it; but God made it grow.”

All of this is true.

And yet I’m concerned that I might be giving you the wrong picture—or, at least, an incomplete picture. This is one of the dangers both of preaching and of listening to sermons. No sermon can tell the entire story, with every needed nuance.

In all my talking about planting seeds and the miracles that come from seeds, in all my talking about the slow and certain growth of the realm of God, I have left out the reality of the tensions and conflicts that come with growth—growing pains.

These pains have been with congregations from the beginning. The church in Corinth was known for its divisions, for its quarrels among the people and with Paul.

We listened this morning as Paul wrote: “I can’t speak of you as spiritual people but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.” Paul sees a lot of room for growth in this congregation. And if that growth is *certain*, it is *certainly* coming *slowly*.

To get down to specifics, the church in Corinth is splitting into factions. “One says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos.’” The people have divided loyalties. And Paul will have none of it.

He asks: “What is Apollos? What is Paul?” And he answers: “They are but servants.” One plants. One waters. But always keep this in mind: “It is not the gardeners with their planting and watering who count, but God who makes it grow.” Seeking an inclusive unity in the face of division, Paul concludes with that beautiful image: “We are fellow-workers in God’s service; and you are God’s garden.”

I like that image of a congregation as God’s garden, with wonderful things sprouting and growing.

All of that sounds good, until we remember that later in this letter, writing about a member of the congregation caught up in the rampant immorality of the Corinthian church, Paul says: “Drive out the wicked person from among you.” As Paul tends God’s garden, he encourages weeding.

In another letter, Paul tells of a time when he opposed Peter—Peter! A member of the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples—face to face because, as Paul said, Peter stood self-condemned.

It is not that Paul is cranky and judgmental, as some caricatures of him would suggest. There is a much deeper issue here.

The unity of the church is important. It is a gift of God and we need to nurture it. But that unity is not always obvious. And sometimes the quest for visible unity must be set aside.

So, our history is one with growing pains.

We know this. We are, after all, Protestants. We take some pride in being the spiritual heirs of people such as Martin Luther, who, seeing the excesses of the Church, drew a line and said: "Here I stand. I can do no other."

Growth is good. But disagreement and sometimes division is the pain that comes with growth. There are times when a fresh and deeper understanding of the call of God means that we must draw a line and say "Yes" to one side and "No" to the other.

We saw this in colonial America and in the early United States as the churches were growing up in this new land.

Recall our own history as Congregationalists.

When Robin and I teach the confirmation class, we always tell the confirmands that this is our spiritual history: In 1700, a Congregationalist, Samuel Sewall, wrote the first anti-slavery pamphlet in America, laying the foundation for the abolitionist movement in the 19th century. Yes, our own growth was still slow in many respects. But by 1767, Nathan Appleton, another Congregationalist, was the first to describe the horrors of the slave trade and the cruelties inflicted on enslaved people. He urged abolition on the grounds of compassion and denounced the hypocrisy of slavery at a time when White colonists were seeking freedom from England. Congregational clergy joined this cause and by the end of the 18th century slavery was outlawed in New England.

Growth.

Slow, but certain growth.

Growth that said "Yes" to freedom for all; "Yes" to honoring the image of God in all people. And ultimately "No" to all congregations and states that opposed such freedom and such honor.

This is our particular history.

But other churches have found such stands, such divisions vital to their remaining faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 1934, Lutherans, Reformed, and United Christians, who became known as the "Confessing Church," adopted the Barmen Declaration, as part of their opposition to pro-Nazi, so-called "German Christianity." German Christians had corrupted the church, putting it under the control of the state.

The Confessing Church rejected what they identified as "false doctrine," including the idea that churches could abandon their message for "prevailing ideological and political convictions" and that "the State...should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life."

In the ensuing years, through WWII, there was much that the Confessing Church failed to do. Karl Barth, who was the main author of the Barmen Declaration, wrote in 1935: "For the millions that suffer unjustly, the Confessing Church does not yet have a heart." And after the

War, the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany issued its own “Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt” in which it confessed its guilt for its inadequately opposing the Nazis. Nevertheless, our faith is still inspired by the many who were imprisoned or killed because they did take a stand against the Third Reich.

Growing pains.

In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared “Apartheid is a heresy.”

This came 34 years after the National Party came to power in South Africa in 1948. That same year, the Congregational Church in South Africa affirmed that apartheid “has no sanction in New Testament Scriptures.”

Again, none of this came quickly. But in declaring apartheid sinful and its theological justification heresy, Reformed Churches, such as the United Church of Christ, took a stand that resulted in two South African denominations being suspended from the World Alliance. And eventually, because of seeds that were planted and watered, the apartheid government in South Africa fell.

Growing pains.

We seek unity. The motto of the United Church of Christ comes from the words of Jesus: “That all may be one.” At times, however, being those who follow in the ways of Jesus Christ, being the *Church* requires that we say “Yes” to one way and “No” to another.

But you did not come here this morning for a history lesson. And I did not come to this pulpit this morning to give you one.

I bring up our past so that we can both take courage from and be challenged by our history in confronting the rise of Christian nationalism in the United States.

“Christian nationalism is a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian identity with civic life and national identity. It asserts that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and should continue to be governed according to what its proponents see as Christian values or biblical principles.

“‘Nationalism’ emphasizes the importance of a ‘homeland’ with a shared ethnic identity among its citizens.” It seeks to define and delineate who are ‘true Americans’ and ‘true Christians.’ⁱ

Christian Nationalism has received growing attention in recent years, especially as some of its advocates strengthen their ties with the current administration. But as UCC General Minister, the Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, said recently: “The truth is that the conversations around the rise of Christian nationalism in the United States are not new. People have been talking...for over... 15 years about...[what] was happening in many of our communities,” concluding, “So as we think about this moment, I would say the time for courage is upon us.”ⁱⁱ

It is, indeed.

Christian Nationalism is a false doctrine and needs to be called out as such. It is, as one person said, “a modern political project wearing ancient religious clothing. And this distinction matters because it means Christian nationalism can be named, it can be analyzed and it can be resisted. It

is not timeless. It is historically constructed, and if it is historically constructed it means that also we can dismantle it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is a spiritual task. It requires not that we be better at politics, but that we be better at being a faithful church.

Growing pains.

Growing pains mean that we must give a clear and public “Yes,” to who we are as liberal Protestants; we must give a clear and public “Yes” to the way of Jesus Christ that has been made known to us, a way that is inclusive and loving, forming a church that is beyond any national identity. And we must give a clear and public “No” to this twisted understanding of Christianity that threatens our nation and many nations.

After worship a couple of weeks ago, a member asked me: “What is the church going to do about Christian nationalism?”

The coming months will give us some opportunities to consider this more closely in some education events and conversation with each other. But let me suggest two things this morning.

We must proclaim.

And we must persuade.

We must proclaim our faith that is rooted in the love of compassion of God for all people shown in Jesus Christ. It is up to us to tell others what Christianity is and live that out in our common life. This will involve building and strengthening relationships with Christians in other nations as an affirmation of the global nature of the church.

We must announce, as the Presbyterian Church did this month: “The church rejects any ideology that seeks to establish Christianity as a privileged or dominant force through the power of the state, or that conflates religious identity with national, racial, or ethnic supremacy. Such ideologies, in all their forms, are incompatible with the example and teachings of Jesus Christ, constitute a theological error, undermine the church’s faithful witness, and are contrary to the church.”

And in doing this, we must speak more about who we are and what we believe than we speak about the errors of Christian Nationalism.

We must proclaim.

And we must persuade.

As liberal Christians, we have, as it has been said, “a public responsibility to argue in the public square, not just in the church.” It is not enough to think that we are right and expect others to acknowledge that as well. For the past fifty years, at least, the liberal church has failed to make its case to others, being smugly certain of our beliefs rather than helping others come to an understanding of the life-giving faith that we proclaim.

Proclaim.

Persuade.

There is more to say that time does not allow. As I said, no sermon can tell the entire story, with every needed nuance. And that is very true this morning. We will come back to this.

These times call on the church to grow once more, to be about the difficult tasks of seeking the truth and discerning the ways of God that we will never fully know.

These are times when we will face growing pains.

Let us remember, however, if we are faithful enough and courageous enough to take on this work, let us remember that *we* are God's garden.

By God's grace—and God's grace alone—the seeds that are planted will grow and bear a fruitful harvest.

ⁱ PCUSA <https://pres-outlook.org/2026/07/pcusa-labels-white-christian-nationalism-theological-error/>

ⁱⁱ Karen Georgia Thompson, “Rise of Christian Nationalism...” <https://www.ucc.org/the-rise-of-christian-nationalism-was-the-focus-of-a-ucc-event-featuring-the-general-secretary-of-the-world-communion-of-reformed-churches/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Philip Peacock, “Rise of Christian Nationalism...” <https://www.ucc.org/the-rise-of-christian-nationalism-was-the-focus-of-a-ucc-event-featuring-the-general-secretary-of-the-world-communion-of-reformed-churches/>