

Who We Are: Grow

Earlier this week, I started reading Stephen King's book *The Green Mile*. Now I know I'm very, very late to the game on this, but better late than never, right. In fact, much to the dismay of my Stephen King loving wife, I've never read any Stephen King novel before. But I have read his book, *On Writing*.

On Writing is not a horror story or fiction but is rather part memoir, part reflection on what makes for a good writer. And there's one thing that King said in that book that I keep thinking about because I think it applies to far more than just writing.

King wrote, "To be a good writer, you must read or write six hours a day. If you cannot find the time to do that, you can't expect to become a good writer." I found it fascinating that the only way to become a writer is to write. I think that's probably true about most anything – the only way to become something is to start doing it.

Today we're continuing our sermon series about our mission statement: "We are an open Christian community for all to belong, grow, and engage the world in acts of service and justice." And this week, we're focusing on the second of our core priorities – grow. What does it mean for us to be a community where we can grow in our faith?

When we hear the phrase, "growing in our faith," I think it's easy to equate faith with our beliefs. Having faith in God, means we believe in God. Or having faith in Jesus, means we believe in Jesus and certain things about him – you know, like the resurrection, the virgin birth, and so forth. But today, I want to invite you to think of faith not so much as a belief, but rather as a practice and a discipline. I want to invite you to think about faith the way Stephen King talks about writing.

We may or may not have belief, but we can choose to try to practice our faith. We may or may not think prayer does anything, but we can choose to pray. We may or may not think we will connect with God in worship, but we can choose to show up in worship.

This idea of beginning to live into faith even when we may not feel like we have it is nothing new. 18th century British theologian John Wesley spent many years overwhelmed with doubts. Several times in his journal, he wondered if he even had any faith at all. And in one of those times, one of his mentors told him to keep preaching. "Preach faith until you have it," he said, and then, "Preach faith because you have it." I think like so many things in life, the way we grow in our faith is to start practicing faith. The life of faith is a life of persistence.

Our Scripture reading today is a story about persistence. In the story, someone was hungry, so he went to his friend's house in the middle of the night and kept begging for bread until the friend got up and gave it to him. Jesus said that it was more because of the person's persistence than anything else that he actually got what he wanted and then Jesus concluded by saying, "*Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for*

you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

I think this has been one of the most mis-used verses in all of Scripture. TV evangelists and others have told countless people that God will give us anything we want if we just ask for it and have faith, which usually includes, sending them some money. But the context of this statement is not about people asking God for some sort of new possession or material thing. Rather, the context is that the disciples are trying to figure out how in the world they can live into this whole following of Jesus thing. Jesus is basically saying, "Ask for help to follow me. Ask for help to be a person of faith, and seek it. Just start somewhere. And don't give up."

A number of years ago, I was part of a group that protested the death penalty in Alabama. I participated in that because at the time, I, along with another clergy friend, taught a weekly Bible study on death row. Often when someone was being executed, it was someone I knew personally.

Every time someone was set to be executed, a group of us would gather in front of the downtown courthouse to protest and to hold vigil. There was probably a group of about 25 of us, but most of us looked to two people as our mentors – Shelley and Jim Douglas. Shelly and Jim were a part of the Catholic worker movement, meaning that at any given time, they would have one or two homeless families living with them. They are deeply committed to being followers of Jesus and part of that, for them anyway, means that they believe all violence is against the will of God. They have protested war and any form of violence for the better part of 40 years, sometimes being willing to go to jail for their civil disobedience.

Now, at one point, someone joined our group who had recently changed his mind about the death penalty. He had always supported capital punishment. He was a doctor and respected in his community and the last thing anyone would have expected of him would be to standing on a street corner protesting. But he did. He came to believe that the death penalty went against everything his faith told him, and so he started protesting. And one day, he, like many people in justice work, he was feeling frustrated that things weren't seeming to get better. Alabama was still executing people at a fast pace. And so he simply said out of frustration, I'm sure, "I've been working on this for six months and things haven't got any better. What are we doing?"

And I will always remember, Jim gently saying to him, "And you may end up working on this 60 more years and things may not get better. But the point is to keep showing up."

Friends, Jim's words are not just true about justice work – which we'll talk about next week, justice along with service.

But rather I think his words are profoundly true about growing in faith. To grow in our faith, I think we could have a lot worse advice than to keep showing up. Keep showing up to worship. Keep reading Scripture and praying. Keep showing up to work for justice and peace. Keep showing up to share with those in need. Keep risking the vulnerability that comes with forgiving others and trusting God to see you through. Just keep showing up week after week, year after year because it is only by practicing faith that we become people of faith.

And yet that is so much easier said than done because we have a personal stake in this. We want to know that if I show up at church, I'm going to be loved. We want to know that if we pray, our prayers will be heard. We want to know that if we choose to worship, that we will find a connection with God. We want to know that if work for justice, things will get better. And in virtually every one of these cases, we don't get any proof that we will ever find what we seek. You see, having proof is certainty, not faith. And yet, if we don't seek it, if we don't start somewhere and begin showing up, we know we will never find it. That kind of seeking takes courage and a willingness to risk. In fact, you might say that the seeking itself is what faith really is.

But here's the thing, none of us have to do this work alone. Here at First Congregational, we have two book study groups, we have a mid-week men's group, we have a men's breakfast group, we have a knitting circle, we have our spiritual journeying group, we have Nourish with different small group options. Now I know not all of these groups are explicitly about growing in faith. They're not all Bible studies or prayer groups. But faith is not just about reading the Bible or praying, though that's certainly a part of it. But more than that, faith is about having a community of people who will show up for us when we need them, it's about having people where we can share what's going on in our lives or in our faith journey without fear of being judged, it's about trusting that when you can't find the words to pray that there are people who are praying for you. The journey of faith is about my relationship with God but it's also about being a part of a community that is striving to seek God together while loving and supporting each other to grow not only in our faith but in every area of our lives.

That's why we have "grow" as our second priority. We hope that every person who connects with our church will experience ways to grow in our faith and to grow as people. We hope that we can share the places in our lives that are not what we would hope they are and trust that we will experience love and support rather than condemnation and judgment. And we trust that if we can live into this priority and keep showing up, keep seeking a deeper faith, keep seeking meaningful relationships, that God's Spirit will work in each of our lives and faith will take root in and among us.

Friends, the life of faith is filled with joy, but that doesn't mean it's easy. In fact, it's profoundly hard. And yet, I truly believe that it all begins by just taking one step forward and another and another. So my prayer for us is that together we will become people of deeper and deeper faith. We will become people who boldly work for justice and peace, who persevere in prayer and cling to trust. My prayer is that we will seek to live into our faith even when we have trouble believing our faith. And my prayer is we will do all this together – that we will love and support and uphold each other so that no one has to take this risk alone. Amen.

