

Growing Differently

1 Samuel 2:18-21 Luke 2: 41-52

It is reassuring to learn about certain things that remain constant. A team of UF researchers had grown seedlings on the International Space Station to research the relative effects of gravity. Plants continued to orient themselves toward the light source, so that was consistent. But what about the roots; how would they behave without gravity. The roots showed the same behavior, growing away from the light. The roots would go around obstacles and blocking objects just as they would in a gravity environment. The only changes were in more subtle patterns of skewing and waving through the soil. I'm not sure what "more subtle" means, but I could always ask my daughter with the Masters degree in Science Education, and she will reassure me that I am truly a science moron. The bottom line is that gravity is not needed for plants to thrive.

A chronic problem in children is correctly diagnosing a host of possible deficiencies so that any issues can be addressed and perhaps corrected. This is particularly problematic with things like learning disabilities. They don't appear in a child with a label attached so that you know exactly what's going on. Early identification of such issues can help a child learn skills and adapt, achieving successes in their progress.

The other concern is that these issues grow and develop along with the child as the child grows and develops. A strategy for addressing a particular issue at one age needs revision on a regular basis as the child grows and develops. Even now, with all that we know and are capable of accomplishing as far as accurate diagnoses and remediation, problems remain.

A child with a learning disability, like dyslexia, isn't stupid or incapable of learning. Yet a child may still be treated that way. The child with developmental and social disorders can lead to a career in disciplinary experience rather than treatment and a better academic experience. Effectively addressing issues that appear as children grow makes a huge difference in how successful the child will be.

Of course, children aren't the only ones who change as they develop. Old pooppy adults can change and develop as well. Yes, even people like us. What we change and develop *into* is quite within our grasp and control. I've seen people grow into wise, patient, thoughtful, passionate activists. Others have grown into surly, belligerent, angry, reactive cynics. Some grow in different ways rather than developing a total change in themselves. In any case, **we** get to determine the course and direction. As we look to a new year and God's promise for us, how we consciously grow and develop as people of faith is worth our consideration.

Our scriptures have us looking at children this morning. Children are a bit easier to grasp as images of growth and development.

In the first reading, we hear how Hannah fulfilled her pledge to God by having her son Samuel dedicated to sacred service in the Temple at Shiloh run by Eli. You may know the story, following a familiar biblical theme of barrenness. Hannah wasn't bearing any children and pledged her first born to God in order to be blessed with producing babies. She played 'let's make a deal' with God, and it worked. Good to her word, Samuel is dedicated as a *Nazir* and grows up in the Temple of Shiloh under the tutelage of its priest Eli. The more well-known *Nazir* was Samson since the Nazirite vow prohibits the cutting of one's hair. Presumably as a

gesture to the Jewish establishment, the apostle Paul pays for a Nazirite vow on his last trip to Jerusalem in the book of Acts.

The Shiloh Temple under Eli isn't the greatest environment, however. In the passage before our selection, there's an expose about the two sons of Eli who are cheating, greedy, and generally wicked. Since they were actively running amok in the temple, apparently Eli didn't make ethical discipline one of his emphases. If Samuel was looking for role models, there were slim pickings at the temple where Eli was priest.

Yet Samuel was ministering, learning more and growing more, possibly getting more examples of what **not** to do than anything else. Perhaps from seeing the disconnect between the lessons of righteousness that Samuel found in the Torah-Law versus the conduct of the sons of Eli caused Samuel to keep asking questions of himself and his God. Lacking the role models, but having at hand the resources which would make him a servant of God's promise, Samuel grows into his calling.

As an adult, taking the role of judge, he becomes a leader of God's people. Samuel negotiates the difficult times in initiating the monarchy, seeing the first king – Saul – fall from favor, and then promoting the leadership of David amid a divided nation. Samuel is one of the most prominent figures in the history of God's people. Samuel's path is a peculiar one, but it shows that this young man was asking faith questions and not settling for just any answers. That's a strategy we should all use. His enduring value as God's servant amid a host of tumultuous events may have come from his childhood experience in the Shiloh Temple as he learned new ways of faithfulness.

One final point is concerns the rather bankrupt character of Temple priest Eli. Despite his characterization as a weak, useless priest, unable or unwilling to constrain his wicked sons, old Eli had journeyed a long way with the Lord. He may not have had much worthy reputation by the time Samuel was maturing and learning, but Eli still had plenty of wisdom and insight to impart. Samuel probably learned early that lessons of faith can emerge from unlikely sources, even corrupt and useless old Eli.

Like a plant growing in a zero-gravity environment, God is ready to grow the one who seeks the way of his promise regardless of the conditions or circumstances. God invites the faithful to look with fresh, childlike eyes, ask big questions with Samuel and grow ourselves "in the presence of the Lord." And we are encouraged to do this visioning at every age.

The gospel of Luke has the only biblical reference to Jesus between his birth and his appearance to John the Baptist. Children don't count for much in these times, so lacking details about Jesus' childhood is not surprising.

This curious account tells about Jesus at age 12, coming into the age of manhood. Departing Jerusalem following Passover, his parents travel homeward *for a full day* before suddenly realizing that their son is missing. I suppose parents in this circumstance make some assumptions, that 'the kid is with so-and-so and they're watching him.' Or 'the kid is around here somewhere; I thought I saw him a little while ago.' So, it turned out the kid wasn't anywhere that the parents assumed he was. In fact, he's nowhere to be found. Panicked, the parents make a day's trip back to Jerusalem. I know what my mood would be if I had hiked for day, and then had to hike back the next day, only to have to hike back out for another day. I'm getting steamed just thinking about it.

Eventually, they find their kid in the great Temple. He's hanging out with the Temple scribes and teachers, listening and asking questions, and apparently impressing these teachers with his keen knowledge and insights.

As his parents find him, they're rather upset. Actually, I know that I wouldn't be so patient and generous. Of course, the parents may have been unsure how to handle this situation in front of the Temple's scribes and teachers who seemed to have enjoyed their exchanges with the kid. It wouldn't look too good to cuff him upside the head *right away*, but they didn't want to look like derelict parents indifferent to their child's whereabouts, particularly since they **had** been derelict parents indifferent to their child's whereabouts. Awkward.

However, the boy Jesus doesn't understand his parents' anxiety. "Why were you searching for me?" he says. I can feel my teeth clenching already, and I'm holding back. Then he says: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" Twelve years old or not, I'd pop that weenie's little fanny! The text says 'they didn't understand what he was saying,' which I can also understand. They were in parental mode, and his remark sure sounds like a wisecrack, deserving the appropriate administration of discipline, particularly after a full day's hike *back* to Jerusalem.

But if we back off the parental thing, we can also hear a young man who is growing into his destiny, who even now is seeking and gaining greater clarity about his identity, and probing the direction of his pathway in life. He is a year or so shy of becoming a "man," of professing his faith and taking his place among the men of his faith tradition. He was asking faith questions, impressing the elder teachers. It isn't that he was brilliant. He was a kid, and was asking kid questions, the kinds of simple, basic questions that the adults had long since taken for granted, having answered them in their own minds and never returning to check their worth and validity. In effect, kid Jesus was already departing from his birth parents, accepting a more mature faithfulness in a relationship that now was forming – as he said – to perceive God as Father and himself as Son.

In the closing paragraph, we're assured that Jesus remained obedient to his parents – no juvenile delinquency – and his mother cherished these occasions in his life. You'll recall the same language (suggesting the same source of these accounts) about Mary 'treasuring these things in her heart' in the Nativity story when the shepherds return.

Finally, it says, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." This is quite close to the ending of the other reading about Samuel. It's a noteworthy remark. Both sought the presence of God in their lives: Samuel in his ministering at the Temple of Shiloh under Eli's tutelage, and Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem with the wise teachers and elders. They were both asking questions about their lives, their faith, their spirituality, and their God. They were both growing in faith, seeking to understand God's will, pursuing new directions amid new insights, already training and preparing for greater roles in later life.

With a new year ahead, we're reminded to ask questions once again, just like those of youthful age. God, what do you want from me? God, what path would you have me take? God, how can I best use my gifts to serve you? God, how can I fulfill your promise in me? God, how can I grow in my faithfulness and commitment to the way of my Lord? How can I be the blessing you desire? How can I reflect and give witness to Jesus, his love, and his grace?

In our maturity, we may stop asking questions like these. It's when we stop asking questions, and start spouting pat answers that we become something along the scale between boring and boorish. The crank with a cynical comment for everything is the perfect example of someone who stopped asking questions. It's no mistake that the child-like reverence for discovery and exploration was smothered. Left with their fixed beliefs, their spirit has gone dark and their outlook on most everything is dismal. For them, faith has become a static creed, and the notion that God holds out the promise for more has vanished or gone extinct, having become a useless relic of the past.

One of the many blessings of this congregation is that so few are so plagued. This congregation remains cheerful, good humored, both welcoming of the childlike spirit and witnessing to that spirit.

May we always seek to discover and explore what new things God would do with us, and be ready to receive new insights and learning that grow us, even in our maturity, receiving our blessed gift to cherish, share, and grow in every season.