

## **Room to Grow**

Psalm 119: 33-40

Romans 13: 8-14

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

### *Psalm 119: 33-40*

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end.

Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.

Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.

Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain.

Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways.

Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you.

Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good.

See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life.

### *Romans 13:8-14*

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

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My brother David went through a huge growth spurt when he was 12. He seemed to go from 5’4” to over 6’ in just a few weeks. It was definitely a hard, difficult and painful time for him as he had to keep adjusting to a seemingly new body as it changed so quickly. The hardest part for him though were the leg cramps. These were debilitating enough that the star hockey player by day was in tears at night. Laying down in his bed when his muscles and ligaments should have relaxed for him to go to sleep, they were instead stretched and stretching, aching and throbbing. Each of these many nights our mom would stand over his bed slowly and gently massaging his legs, kneading the pain and the tension out of his thighs, knees, calves and feet. It took awhile each night but eventually he could be comfortable and fall asleep.

Growing pains are aptly named. It is hard work on our bodies to grow. Although growth is usually not physically painful, there are times when we are reminded just how much effort and change is needed for our bodies to develop, to mature.

The growing pains we experience though are not just limited to our physical growth, our physical maturity. As we grow in our spiritual lives, our faith and faith practices, our insights, our ways of understanding and acting on God’s call on us to live out the gospel, it takes a

tremendous amount of stretching of our spiritual muscles. We are clumsy and awkward at first as we learn and develop and practice and fumble and stumble each time there is room to grow. We make adjustments again and again as we grow into who we are becoming. It takes time to be comfortable in who we have become. And we do not do this alone. We have someone –and hopefully many someones- by our side to knead and work and encourage those stretching spiritual muscles.

The psalmist gave us an action plan, a prayer to live into the ways and delight of God, a prayer to live well and finish well, to awaken us from passive faith, from faith that is immature as growing into spiritual maturity requires intent and persistence.

*Teach me*, O Lord, the way of your statutes

Teach us O God, to love you with our heart, soul and mind, to listen for your voice in the clamor and the stillness, to focus on what is right and just come what may.

*Give me* understanding

Give us the grace to act from a place of understanding the other with peace and compassion, and not only thinking of our own wants and needs.

*Lead me* in the path of your commandments

Lead us to live in the path and the ways you set before us

*Turn my heart* to your decrees

Turn our hearts to your values and priorities

*Turn my eyes* from looking at vanities

Turn our eyes to see how you see

*Confirm* to your servant your promise

Confirm to us your promises of love, presence, blessing, new life, and boundless more gifts

*Turn away* the disgrace that I dread

Turn away the ways we ache from falling and struggling and failing and repenting and relapsing.

To live into these words is a lifetime of growing and stretching, of knowing that no matter how much we have grown, we always have room to grow even more.

For Paul, our growing and stretching and learning are to become grown and mature enough to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ,’ to be clothed with Christ, to imitate his character and example, to follow his way and commandments, to live fully in each present moment as Jesus did, to never outgrow the garment of Christ.

This was a lesson Paul needed to learn, to stretch and grow through, long before he taught this same message. As a former Pharisee, he had spent much of his life focused on his own personal piety, but his dramatic conversion opened his eyes to how easily the form of religious rules could replace real heart-based faith, where love is the foundation of all laws of ethical behavior, where love is the fulfilling of the law.

He calls us to be rooted in relationship with a loving God and then, in response, to go out into the world as living embodiments of God’s love. Paul invites us to prepare well and dress for the job by putting on the “armor of light” that is the gracious spirit of the living and risen Christ. That takes a tremendous growth spurt, some tension and some awkwardness, before we can feel ready, sincere and capable to be clothed with Christ. We might even be afraid to “put on Christ Jesus,” for fear of losing our real selves.

As UCC pastor Bryn Smallwood-Garcia<sup>1</sup> wrote.” If we put on Christ, we get the gift of compassion and peace when we need it the most. We remember Paul’s words that “we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” And so, the garment of Christ is a beautiful thing that we get to wear – it is graceful and lovely, like that beautiful dress-up bridal gown I wore as a child. This garment of Christ was never meant to be a spiritual straight jacket imposed upon us, like a dark 19th-century clergyman’s jacket with a tight collar. Wearing that would definitely not allow us to embody the grace of God or carry the Good News of the Gospel. Instead, Jesus proclaims release to the captives. He sets free those all who are oppressed – his love sets us free even from the bondage of religious obligation and guilt. The truth is that the Good News of the love of Jesus sets us free to be more fully ourselves than ever before – the Christ garment we get to put on is the bright glory of God’s extravagant love for us.”

Growing into the garment of Jesus Christ stretches and matures us to love one another in the fulfilling of the law one sore and tired spiritual muscle after another, one tenderly and grace filled encouragement after another where there is always yet more room to grow. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://uccb.org/sermons/2011/September/Rm13PutOnChrist.htm>