

Sermon 10-12-2025
 Growing Spiritually – Rev. Markus Wegenast
 2 Peter 3: 14-18

¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, **strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish**, ¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also, our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist^[e] to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, **beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability**. ¹⁸ But **grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ**. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.^[f]

1)

Today I would like to start my message to you by reflecting about an important part of our congregational life. We have celebrated the lives of three wonderful people in our church within just one week. That is a lot of funerals in a relatively short amount of time. Whether someone has lived for a long life or whether someone died way too early – all funerals have a painful element. They are powerful events in the life of a church. God brings us together in the midst of grief and shares his love and his hope with us when we bid our farewell to beloved family members and friends.

It has been a powerful witness for me to see people from church of the saviour come together these days to comfort each other, to carry burdens with each other, and to celebrate the lives of those gone with each other. It is a beautiful testimony for who we are. In the words of our October message series I want to say: “this - too - is us.”

Funerals are always hard, but I have to tell you: they are also something that I am so deeply grateful for. When we are confronted with the power of death it is such a privilege that within a church family we can gather together and focus on a power that is much greater than the power of death. We gather to remind each other that the power of God that gave us life in the first place will give us new life in the world to come.

That gives hope, that gives perspective, that brings healing.

I have shared with some of you that my 97 year old grandmother in Germany died recently. As I’ve been talking about her with my family and as I’ve been in touch with the families in our church that went through the loss of loved ones I’ve been thinking a lot more than usual about matter of life and death. In particular, I’ve been asking myself the personal question:

“How do I want to be remembered?”

Have you ever wondered that?

As I was thinking about this question I came across an interesting quote. It's not from a pastor or theologian; it's from a basketball coach:

“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.” — John Wooden

Does this make sense to you? Doesn't that make you wonder: Is there anything I can do about my character? Can I shape it or is it something that's just given?

That's actually a really, really important question. I'm not an expert in modern psychology – and I don't think one needs to be an expert on that to realize that in our complex human lives there are many elements that shape our psyche and the way we present ourselves to the world. But I would be a bad pastor if I said we don't have any influence on that.

2)

Take a look at today's scripture passage. See how in this relatively small section from the Bible there are plenty of instructions shape our character. For those of you worshipping with us online :

- Strive to be found at peace and without blemish
- Don't get carried away and lose your stability
- Grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus

You may recognize this Bible passage – we just recently had this very same passage in worship earlier in September. Then we looked at it from the angle of friendship, and I spoke about the relationship between Peter, the author of it, and Paul.

In my preaching it is always my highest goal to honor the Biblical but it's typically not possible to go into every detail. So today I look at this same Bible passage and want to focus these underlined parts

Repeat

This is not about reputation – this is about character. Would you agree that a person's character becomes more beautiful if you do these things?

I cannot control what others think of me, what they will focus on – but I can control, with God's help, what I want to focus on.

I say with God's help because that help is needed. When it comes to being found at peace and without blemish, about not getting carried away and growing in grace – I can't do that without the help of God. No one can.

There is no way to accomplish anything of that without the help of God. If you are interested in developing your character more than your reputation – I can't think of a better way than to work on your spiritual growth.

If you want to develop your character >>> grow spiritually!

It's the second of our 4 vision statements, it is a core aspect of our Bible text from 2 Peter, and it is a desire of the very God who made us, loves us and frees us in Jesus Christ.

Do we really have to be freed by Christ or is that just nice preaching language? I mean it quite literally that we need to be freed by Christ when it comes to our character. It is so easy to get carried away by all sorts of distractions. Some distractions are so clever and come in such unexpected surprises. I often feel that I live in a culture that wants to make me believe that what's right is wrong and what's wrong is right. It can be quite confusing to live in such a world.

And can I tell you something quite embarrassing? Sometimes I do get confused. Sometimes I have trouble identifying clearly what is right and what is wrong. I feel the best thing to help me in this is to grow spiritually. To grow more in touch with the very Spirit who has given guidance to people for 1000s of years.

We are not the first people who live in confusing times – it's not new! Every person on this planet needs the guidance of God's Holy Spirit and the more we grow spiritually, the more in tune we are to this guidance. Spiritual growth means to be more in touch with who God is and what God wants for us.

3)

In your bulletin today you have an insert with an illustration of what spiritual growth looks like. We're also putting it up here on the screen, but you may see it better when you look at the printed version of it and I also want you to be able to take it home with you as an encouragement.

If you worship with us online, I invite you to find a printed copy of this sermon on our website: **www.cos-umc.org** (just for online)

Click on "worship online" and scroll to the bottom of the page and select today's sermon script, it has the diagram I'm talking about now attached.

Ocean Diagram (see below)

The beach represents life without a conscious relationship with God; the ocean represents life with an active relationship with God. By nature, we are 'beach people' – we are not born in the ocean, someone has to tell us about God and help us 'getting our feet wet.' For some of us this happens early on (e.g. growing up in

church) but even then, we always come to stages where we have to make our own decision of whether we want to be ocean people.

The power of this diagram is that it acknowledges that spiritual growth comes in stages. We typically don't change from a person who doesn't know God to a person who wants to become an evangelist in a matter of a day – that may happen, but it's not the norm. Typically, we go through stages in our spiritual growth.

Which stage are you in? This is not rocket science and believe me I do not want to promote a culture here at COS where each of us has to be able to name the stage of spiritual growth you feel you're in and wear a badge. In fact, I know many people who tell me that they feel these stages are not static. Life can have it that you are all the way out in the ocean and fully involved in helping others to grow and then something happens in your life, and you get washed back on the beach. Or you feel like you're going in circles as if a current has caught you and pulls you.

All of this can be true for you but the one thing that never changes is the fact that God always guides you in one and just one direction: Deeper into the ocean! In this visualization the depth of the ocean represents your closest connection with God. Take a look once more at these stages: Do you see how the question from centering on yourself toward God and his ideas for you? Apply these stages of spiritual growth to our Bible text from today and I you'll see: The more you move into the ocean, the more you grow the more stable you become.

Do you think a person out there is easily “carried away with the error of lawlessness”? I don't think so!

Do you think a person that has grown in their discipleship and spirituality has a hard time being at peace with God? I don't think so...

Do you think a person that has grown is worried about being found with blemish? I don't think so

That's why it is so important that we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I look at this diagram, and I believe we find our church family in this illustration. We are not all the same. We have people who are closer to the beach or on the beach, and we have people who are deep out in the ocean, and we have everything in between. And you know what? It is good that way!

Never feel that if you feel you're in one of those close to the beach stages you are not as important as someone who's out there. We are all precious to God, and we all belong together. But one truth remains: God continues to draw us in one direction. Do not be afraid to be drawn – there is no better place for you than to be deep with God.

This week I've been thinking much about how I will be remembered someday. I like the quote of that basketball coach: Don't worry about your reputation, worry about your character.

Friends, it is my prayer that today you feel a nudge from God to grow spiritually, to not be afraid to get too involved with God but to see it as the direction that is best for your life. Amen.

