

Room to Grow

Text: Ephesians 4: 14-16; 25-32

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Martin tells a story of going clothes shopping with his mother.¹ It can be an awkward assignment for any elementary aged schoolboy to navigate. And even more, when a part of the mission is to keep the purchases within the limits of a tight family budget by stretching the dollars as far as possible.

"I think he'll need a size 4," the clerk would say. To which Martin's mother would respond as if she'd been scripted, "then bring us a 5 and a 6 to try on." She was insistent, in fact, that whether shopping for shoes or jackets or shirts or pants "it's always best to leave ample room to grow."

Reflecting years later Martin tells this truth: "Wearing clothes that didn't fit perfectly can make you feel foolish at times. But it also makes a statement that you intend and expect to continue growing. So it's not really a fashion statement so much as it is an aspirational one."

I want to assign that thought to each of us for this first Sunday in Lent. I want us to conjure some statement, some measure, some aspiration that would send the signal that we intend and expect to keep growing. And of course, for those of us who have reached adult stature, the growth I am thinking of is of the heart and mind and soul.

Paul was abundantly clear about something very similar as he wrote to the early church community gathered at Ephesus: "We must no longer be as children . . . but speaking the truth in love we must grow up in every way into Christ." O my goodness! What would it look like if we all took on that aspiration as our own, "that we would grow up in every way toward Jesus"?

It's important to know that Paul was speaking in a comparative way, urging the people of his day to choose one way as over another. "Not as they do," you might imagine him pointing, "but as you might become." "Put away your former way, that other self, and clothe yourselves with the new self."

Or, in another equally demanding admonition: "Put on the garments of Christ!" "What's that," you muse, "a 4? Better go *really* big on this one. Bring me an 8, because for darn certain and sure, I have an awful lot of growing to do to come anywhere close to fitting his size!"

And then he goes on even more to wrap not only clothing and growing together but adds attributes of how we are to be in the world as we grow up in Christ: "Speak the truth in love. Be angry but do not sin. Hold fast to what is good. Render no one evil for

evil. Let no talk of evil talk come out of your mouths. Build one another up. Be kind to one another; be tenderhearted; be forgiving.”

Let me pause with those last three. Because quite honestly it’s so important in the face of these divided times in which we live. “Be kind to one another. Be tenderhearted. Be forgiving.” On those measures, I suspect we all might have some growing to do.

The Christian Century recently ran an article particular to the divisiveness of our current culture. It’s called “Recovering Kindness: An Urgent Virtue in a Ruthless World.”² The author suggests that as our times become increasingly harsh in so many ways our capacity for genuine kindness needs to reemerge. We need to try it on. Or try it out. Or grow up a size or two in our capacity.

Please: kindness here is not meant as a soft blanket that denies important clashes of difference. “It’s a way of life characterized by moral attentiveness that is both respectful of and helpful to others. Such kindness involves a recognition of our common humanity and frailty that leads us to care about each person’s particular well-being and to treat him or her as deserving of generous response and respect.” Be kind.

And tenderhearted, an attribute that the Bible presents as one word. Ten days ago the Hartford Courant ran a tribute to Fred Rogers.³ What an amazing man! He was surely a standard-bearer of being tenderhearted. His cardigan sweater became trademark in teaching about universal values.

We might imagine in error that his were easier days in which kindness and being tenderhearted was possible. But his show, *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, debuted in 1962 out of the Cuban Missile Crisis. And so the tribute names Mr. Rogers as a quiet revolutionary of faith – embodying the values of radical commitment to the holy business in which we all become bearers of the world we now only dream of.

Be kind. Be tenderhearted. Be forgiving. Now we get to the real hard stuff. Real. Hard. Stuff. Forgiveness is one of the steepest challenges of growing up in Christ. And paradoxical, powerfully paradoxical. Lewis Smedes once said “to forgive is to set a prisoner free, only to discover that the prisoner was none other than you.”⁴

“What’s that you say, a size 6? Bring me the largest one you have. Because I really need to grow here. And I need all the space and margins to do it.”

One last step with all of this. Remember I told you about Martin? I want to finish his story for you. He is now the President of Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School and, last I saw him, his clothes fit just right these days; well-tailored and appropriate for the stature of his position. Still an early lesson planted, such as it was, has given him a metaphor that fits for all kinds of growing into other things, too.

These are his words. “When I clothe myself with Jesus, he leaves me room to grow – which is a good thing because, God knows, I am still growing. I put on Jesus as I would

a new an ill-fitting outfit – in order that someday it might fit and be a fitting expression of who I have become.”

May our aspirations lead us each and all, to lives that grow up to the stature of Christ. Or at least to make our best efforts to do so. Not only in Lent. But certainly beginning there. Amen.

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¹ Martin Copenhaver. Room to Grow: Meditations on Trying to Live as a Christian. Eerdman's Publishing, 2015, pp. xii-xiii.

² Christine Pohl. "Recovering Kindness: An Urgent Virtue in a Ruthless World." Christian Century, October 31, 2012, pp. 10-11.

³ Tyler Huckabee. "The Quiet, Radical Faith of Beloved Neighbor Mister Rogers." Hartford Courant, February 7, 2018; pp. D-1 and 3.

⁴ Anne Lamott. Hallelujah Anyway. Riverhead Books, 2017, p. 49.