

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 3, June 17, 2012, dedicated to Tyler Scott Cave and Xavier Mitchell Dean on their baptismal day, to our youth and adult leaders returning from their mission adventure in Chicago, to James E. Bobb in grateful celebration of his three years as our Music Minister, to all fathers, especially my father Dr. Herman C. Ahrens, Jr., and always to the glory of God!

“Growing in Christ”

**II Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17;
Mark 4: 26-34**

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock & our salvation. Amen.

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Dear Xavier and Tyler,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ! Today is your baptismal day! Today, through the promises made by your parents, your godparents, your family and your church family, you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of Christ through the sacramental water of baptism. Welcome to our family of faith!

Like the mustard seed, you will grow from the tiny baby boys you are into strong and capable men. Perhaps one day, you will stand before us on a Father’s Day far into the future and hold your infant sons and daughters in this same place, on this same stone, to be consecrated for service in the name of Christ our Lord! What a magnificent blessing that will be!

You should know, this is not the first time your mothers and fathers stood here. Here, on the same stone that holds the baptismal font and the water of baptism from the River Jordan where Jesus was baptized, your mothers and fathers held each others' hands, looked lovingly and deeply into each other's eyes, and spoke their marriage vows committing themselves before God and the gathered congregation to live and love in Christ. You are the beautiful creation born of their love. Now they have made promises again - this time committing themselves to raise you in a household of love - which includes all of us!

So, how will you grow in Christ? How will you prosper in his love? How will you be different in this world as a result of baptism into Jesus and his church?

Each week in church, we are given passages from the Bible that speak to our relationships with God and one another. This week, we hear from Paul. He was an interesting man. He came to faith in Jesus by the back door - first hating Jesus, and then getting turned around to love him.

Paul tells us that nothing is the way it seems to be. Just when you think you have all the right answers and you've figured something out, someone or something comes into your life and you learn an even better way. So, don't make your decisions based on outward appearances. Christians see things differently - or at least we are supposed to. The reason for this is the cross of Christ.

Today, I made the sign of the cross on your forehead three times - in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I kissed your "cross" and sealed - in water - the sign of Christ on you. The cross of Christ is now and forever a part of you.

So what is the cross of Jesus Christ? Jesus was executed on a cross almost 2,000 years ago. When Jesus died on the cross, the course of history was changed. His death was for all people, for all time. Given a lifetime to figure this out, you will hear many ideas of his death and atonement (At-One-Ment with God) for our sins. Most important is for you to understand that we are all bound

together in his death on the cross. His death on the cross was not “out there” and “back then.” It is not just an historical fact. It is real and is forever a part of us. But in the cross we are also not trying to persuade God to forgive all human sin. That is incomplete theology. Rather, we die in the cross every day. Our lives are changed by Christ - in the cross. We are different because of the cross of Christ. And in Christ’s resurrection, we rise in the cross.

Paul says, “We regard no one from a human point of view.” Because of the cross, we see things differently. We do not think, perceive, assess and judge they way we used to do it. Because of the cross of Christ, you will look at the heart of someone rather than just their face. Paul actually says you will be a new creation. In your baptism, everything old has passed away. Everything has become new! You are cosmically connected to the God of the universe today. You are a whole new creation! That is really cool! You are both really cool, too!

We also hear from Jesus himself today in the gospel of Mark. We have four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are the four books that tell us the story of Jesus - in his own words and filled out with the words of others. Mark was the first gospel to be written. Mark is the shortest gospel, too. Mark doesn’t use lots of words. As a result, people love Mark! (One thing you will learn quickly is that most Christians like short things - including books of the Bible, sermons and worship services).

In Mark 4:26-34, Jesus teaches us some important lessons for life. First, we learn about growth in faith and life through the parables of seeds. Seeds that are planted grow because of a power greater than us. We merely plant the seeds. But, God gives the growth. Nature’s growth is often imperceptible. Nature’s growth is constant. It is also inevitable. It calls us to be patient and hopeful. It calls us to be prepared for the seemingly impossible. When seeds are planted and nurtured, God will provide. If you live in patience, you will not be defeated or disappointed. If you live in hope, you will not despair. If you live in preparedness, you will see life in its eternal dimensions. You will not be saddened by loss, but be empowered by the season of change which lies just ahead.

Jesus goes even farther. He says that in the mustard seed - the smallest of all seeds - grows into a great bush which gives shelter to those who need shade and protection. Think about this, Xavier and Tyler. Small ideas, small dreams, small seeds grow into large ideas, dreams, and plants. Never in your life be daunted by small beginnings. Nothing ever comes out full grown. So when you crawl, and pull yourself up, take your first baby steps, tumble, fall and stand again, we all know there will come a day when you run, and jump, and dance and turn a single into a triple; and a triple into a home run. We know your first steps will end with amazing results. From small beginnings, great things come to pass. The challenge of life is not merely the seed planted, but trusting and supporting the seed as it grows into full blossom and bloom. Be the seed that grows and grows other seeds for others to nurture. But remember that God is in it all!

Finally, Mark tells us that through his stories (parables) Jesus taught his followers day by day. Jesus was a great and wise teacher! He was understanding, patient and kind. He did not bring attention to himself when he taught. He brought attention to God. He did not act as one who was superior to all his students. He didn't wave his finger at them. He was all about learning things together. But Mark also teaches us about the "wise learners." A wise learner doesn't sit there, pretend to listen and walk away unchanged. A wise learner listens, takes it in, and then goes away to consider and respond to his teacher's ways. Similarly, a wise learner stays near the teacher and absorbs the lesson after the books are put away.

You both have great teachers in your parents. They have a lot of wisdom to share. You will learn from them when you watch what they do and not just hear what they say. Their actions will speak louder than their words.

Tyler and Xavier, in the water and spirit of baptism, you have been set apart today. You have been given to Christ and Christ has been given to you. May you grow in Christ every day of your lives.

May you learn from God's truth, walk humbly in God's ways, and live lives of love and justice and shine God's love to others.

We all love you!

Your pastor and friend in Christ,

Rev. Tim Ahrens

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