

There was a line on the wall. Now this is not unusual in many homes with children but usually there are several lines, often with dates after them marking growth's progress. This was only one line with no writing, dates, etc. following it. Finally someone had the courage to ask the question on all of our minds, "What is the line for?" Our host chuckled and said, "Oh, that is how tall one has to be to ride the "big" rides at Disneyland." This, they went on to say, often softened the blow of young guests who had come to visit and go to Disneyland—they would have to grow a little more or were already tall enough.

The word to the Church at Thyatira from the living Christ is: I know your growth (paraphrase). The Church is known for its love, faith, service and patient endurance. It has been a congregation that has grown in the faith. They are stronger today than they were when they first began their faith journey. Their love has not grown cold. They continue to serve in the midst of difficult circumstances. They are growing, "*...you are now doing more than you did at first.*"

Thyatira was probably the least of the seven cities mentioned in Revelation. It was not a city of great political influence nor was it a strong center of Emperor or cultic worship. It probably only had a small Jewish population that was not large enough to bring any difficulty on the church. However, it was a city strong on trade guilds. Almost everything in the city was tied to these trade guilds (one being the dealers of purple cloth). It would have been hard to find work in the city and not be connected to one of these guilds. Membership would include participation in parties or banquets that would often include eating of food offered to the various idols and may end in sexual immorality. One would have to be a part of such guilds to work, to support their family.

Faith is never easy and perhaps the congregation in Thyatira, in order to make life a little easier, had accepted some of these practices in association with membership in the trade guilds as a part of life. After all you have to feed your family. There are those who say this is okay, you just go along not really believing in what you are doing – membership in the guilds. Meat offered to idols means nothing so just eat it and go about your work.

There is always a danger in accepting things. Not that this is the best example but most of us grew up in a day when stores were closed on Sundays. It was not that you didn't shop on Sundays – you couldn't shop on Sundays. Gradually, though, store after store began to remain open, so called "blue" laws were repealed. There were some who stood and fought this but the power of money won. Now today most of us don't think twice about shopping on Sunday – there may be a slight twinge of guilt now and then but it has become the norm rather than the exception. Our sons do not know what it is like to live

in a world where stores are closed on Sundays. Whether this is good or bad is for another discussion but it does highlight how some once forbidden practices have now become the norm of society.

Have you noticed how well the 139th Psalm fits in with the letters in Revelation? The Psalmist asks that God search the heart and discern how growth is happening. How do we determine how we are growing in the faith? I mean, there are not lines on the wall that tell us we have reached our goal or when we have reached the point where we can go on the big rides. We all think we are growing, hope we are growing but... Martha Leypoldt wrote a book back in the 1960's entitled, Learning is Change, in which she gives guidelines for adult education classes in congregations. One of the premises is that we change as we grow. We are not the same today as we were yesterday, hopefully. We have learned new things, new ways and have incorporated them into our faith practices. Faith is not something that is stagnant but something that is vital and growing.

The Apostle Paul writes to the congregation in Ephesus the reason for the various gifts of the Spirit are: “...to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we reach the full unity in faith, knowledge and love of the Son of God becoming mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...we will in all thing grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ” (4:12-13,15). Paul does not say we have grown or that the project is finished. He says we are in the process of growth. We are continually growing in the faith – being built up. We use the gifts given to grow ourselves and to build up the community of faith.

Growth is not an option, it is a process. I believe growth is best done in community. It is in community that we are able to dialogue and reflect on issues and ideas. It is hard to grow alone where we have no one to give us feed back or to push us to deeper levels of understanding. What if we are wrong? What if 2 + 2 doesn’t equal 4? How would we know if there is no one to gives us feed back on our thinking or thoughts? We learn best in dialogue with others.

We have a friend who served on the translation committee for the Old Testament portion for the New International Version. He shared how some of their meetings were filled with some “rather warm” discussions of how to translate certain Hebrew words and phrases. He says he cherishes those moments because he would often gain a new or deeper insight as other possibilities were introduced. He became stronger in his faith because of the rich interchange in these sessions.

When we were in the Philippines we met one of the translators of the CEV. He said that one reason why there are so many footnotes in this translation is because the translators could not agree and compromised with footnotes! This

allows the reader to work through what he/she feels is the best translation. New insights give us the opportunity to grow.

The Church in Thyatira is growing. Things are not all bad. Their love, strength, service and patient endurance is growing. They are moving forward. They are working out their faith in a lively, loving community of believers. They need to make some adjustments but they are growing. They are learning a living, growing faith.

Growth is vital to the church today. Would you want to go to an MD who was still using medical textbooks from the early 1900's? Would you want your auto mechanic to have only worked on Model T's? No! At least I hope not. It was interesting listening to people following the recent airline crash in the Hudson. Most said that the next time they flew they wanted that pilot in the cockpit. When we stop and look at why this was so successful we realize it was because this pilot had years of history as a pilot. He had spent hours in flight simulators going through situations just like this until they became second nature to him. He had spent hours discussing with other pilots such situations and how things might be done. This was not just natural talent it was natural talent combined with hours (years) of preparation for moments like the one he encountered on that fateful day which such wonderful results. The result was that it worked (some say for the first time).

The same is needed for those of us who call ourselves Christians. We need to keep growing, learning, developing, discovering how we can better serve the one we call our Lord and Master. We need to grow in the faith through Bible Studies and prayer groups that help us to discern the Word of the Lord for our day and time. Growth is not an option; it essential for us and for the Church.

Amid all the problems in Thyatira the congregation there has grown in love, faith, service and faithful endurance. They are no longer as they once were. How is our faith growing?