

*Widen your hearts also...* 2 Corinthians 6:13b

What is growing in your life right now? For some of us it is our gardens – seeds are planted and the crop or the flower grows – ah the beauty of the harvest. For some of us it is our family size as new babies are born, marriages occur, you need one more chair at the dining room table. Some growth of course is not so positive – for some of us we have a growing sense of anxiety about the world around us – morals are changing, the divisions among political parties are widening. Maybe we hoped it would be our savings account that is growing but the markets aren't producing for us and our debts are exceeding our income -so some of our growth is not so healthy, like our waistlines, yikes – I need to do a better job of growth control there.

I can imagine the anxiety that was growing in the boat that night on the Sea of Galilee. The Sea is 700 feet below sea level. Mount Hermon is a 9,200 feet-high peak which is 30 miles NE. When the westerly winds come off this mountain and collide with the warm water over the lake, sudden and violent storms sometimes occur. Why now? Things had been going so well; Jesus was teaching and the crowds were growing, many people came to learn and when they were in private Jesus was giving the disciples extra teaching to help them grow in their understanding. But now something else was growing – the waves were so large they were causing the boat to take on water and so it was fear that was growing. Fear was rising in their hearts. Was this new mission that these men were on going to end so abruptly? And maybe we'd like to yell out – don't panic! We know that it will all end well. And it might be easy for us to fluff off their fears, because we know the full story – we know it all ends, not with a sinking boat but with a triumphant Lord and we could ask of those disciples, those good Jewish boys – didn't they have the words to Psalm 124 running through their minds – *Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth*. Couldn't they have guessed that Jesus was going to save them?

But then we realize that there was some growing that needed to happen in their lives which is the same growing that is necessary for every follower of Jesus. Sure, the seed of faith had been planted. These fishermen had answered the call to become fishers of men. The word of God was stirring in their hearts and yet when push came to shove it was hard for them to apply what they were learning. They had not yet fully internalized the message. Oh my, when we look at it that way it is not hard for us to see ourselves in these fear-filled men. How often have the proverbial waves of life come crashing down on our boats and we have started to quiver? Bad news at the doctor's office, a pink slip at work, an F on a term paper, a ticket from a police officer, an argument with a spouse, a friend who lets you down – you come in last when you thought you were prepared for the race – whatever the crisis, whether large or small, we have all faced those times when we just wonder: how are we getting through this? Does God know what kind of struggle I am facing right now? Does God care? We could be recounting the mighty acts of God that not only have sustained us in the past but have sustained God's people throughout the ages, but instead we are feeling beaten down by the difficulties,

missing a loved one that is no longer with us, frustrated with the choices our children have made. Our boat seems like it might sink.

And then the One to whom wind and sea submit, that One who laid the cornerstone of the earth and set the morning stars in the sky, the One who made the clouds and thick darkness, the ruler of earth and sea and skies – speaks. His word comes calmly and powerfully forth into the chaos of whatever situation we are in and the peace which passes all understanding sets up guard over our hearts and our minds and although we might still be shaking in our boots, wondering how it will all work out, still we are aware that there is a force greater than we can imagine at work in our lives and in our world and that force is at the command of our Lord who is the author of life and salvation. And in that moment we see more clearly and we trust more strongly in the One who has broken the bonds of sin and death and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our faith grows.

There is this very interesting sentence in our second lesson for today where Saint Paul first lists all kinds of calamities (beatings and imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights and hunger) and then without hardly missing a beat he lists the tools of righteousness, the things that God has given us to battle the trials of life (the Holy Spirit, patience and truthful speech). And it is this combination that Paul uses as a witness for those who are perhaps stalled in their faith lives. They just aren't growing, and he wants them to open their hearts, to increase in faith and the knowledge of the love of God. This listing helps us to see not only Saint Paul's faithfulness in the midst of all kinds of suffering and persecution but it helps us to see the necessity of faith in the midst of difficulty and the blessing we can find as God provides for us while we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus calms the storm in ways that helps our faith to mature. And Saint Paul reminds that these tools for living our lives of faith are not just for when things are going wrong but are to be used as a pattern for living in times of honor and dishonor, in slander or in praise – in good times and in bad; our witness and our walk of faith should be the same, always trusting in the Lord, living in kindness and love toward our neighbor – this is what Saint Paul asks that they open their hearts to – to grow in the grace and love of God.

Our gardens will not grow with hard and rocky ground, our lives will not be changed with hearts that are hardened. And so we are told to be dressed and ready for action. What makes a Christian ready to face whatever comes their way in life? Well here are some of the ingredients: A growing relationship with God, a life firmly planted in worship and prayer, a life engaged in scripture and surrounded by the love and encouragement of fellow believers, a life fed at the Lord's table. Yes, life will have its challenges. We will have close calls beyond measure and trials without number, but the goodness of God and the Good News of Jesus Christ risen from the dead will always be working peace in the midst of the storm. And when His calm comes to our lives it is not a deadening force that leaves us lethargic or apathetic, but his calm enables us to stand up to meet each day's challenge and to witness to his love that has been poured into our hearts and is available for all who are caught in the storms of life.

This is the witness that we want to make in our life together at Messiah and in our daily walk so that not only do we not put any obstacle in the way of another person's faith, but quite the opposite – we seek to plant

and water the seeds of faith that God has place in our midst until that one day when the whole world will have the opportunity to say – Yes, I know him who even the wind and the sea obey, and it is this Lord that I want to follow now and unto eternity. Amen.