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SERMON TOPIC: ARE YOU READY TO GROW?

SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE: ISAIAH 54, 1-8  
2CHRONICLES 7, 14  
JAMES 5, 14  
MATTHEW 28, 19  
GALATIANS 2, 20

GIVEN BY: REVEREND DR. BRUCE N. ALICK

**ARE YOU READY TO GROW?**

Gracious and eternal **God** we have come now to hear a word from you. And we ask as always oh, **God** that you would speak to us and speak through us. Teach us to love you more that we may learn to love each other and **Lord** help us to serve you better that we may be willing to serve each other. For it is in thy son's name that we pray, Amen.

**SERMON**

From the Scripture that was read, Isaiah, chapter 54 we want to begin reading at verse 1 from the New International Version of the Bible and there we find these words:

“Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband, says the Lord. Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities. Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is His name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young only to be rejected, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer.”

I want to focus our attention on verse 2 which simply says, “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.” On this Unity Sunday I want to pose this question, are you ready to grow? Are you ready to grow?

This book is familiar to all of us written by the prophet Isaiah. There are discussions about whether or not he wrote all of it because much of what takes place in the book happened some 200 years after his time. But you see God isn't circumscribed by time. God can speak to His prophet right now and tell him what's going to happen tomorrow, next month, next year, 200, 300, or 1,000 years from now.

The prophet Isaiah is the one identified as the author of the book and that's good enough for me. Isaiah, son of Amoz who lived in the land of Judah which was the

southern portion of the kingdom of Israel that had been divided. He lived from about 740 BC to 681 BC and he preached a message of repentance and salvation to the whole nation.

Isaiah's challenge to the nation was to shape up and to love God sincerely. Isaiah pointed out the hypocrisy of the nation. But then he reminded them that God is a God of love, a God with a heart of compassion who is moved for His people. The nation had compromised its faith and so Isaiah was calling them back to faith in the only true God.

As one looks at the book of Isaiah up to about chapter 40, it seems that Isaiah is emphasizing hard-hitting words of judgment on the nation and letting them know what will happen. But then after captivity has taken place, Isaiah wants them to know God still has a remnant and God will bless them if they are faithful to His word. So the message seems to change. It's still the same God but you see God is moved with compassion.

So now by the time we get to this 54<sup>th</sup> chapter, Isaiah says to the nation, "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband, says the Lord." What a strange message coming from the Lord.

But you see, to understand the culture of that day, you have to realize that for women to be barren and have no children, it was looked upon as a shameful thing. So a woman's value was determined by the number of children she could produce. So it was a shame to them to not have any children. So the Lord is saying to the nation you are like this barren woman, you haven't really produced anything yet. But He says to them don't worry about it, I'm here now, you can shout for joy because you will have more children than even the woman who has a husband.

Then He says to them in what seems even stranger, "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes." How does one understand a text like that? Well you have to understand something about the nomadic life of the children of Israel prior to their getting into the Promised Land. You see a typical nomadic tent would have about 9 poles in 3 rows and they were divided into 2 rooms. One for the women and one for the men and there was a curtain that separated them. Well such a tent could be enlarged by adding another row of poles to make another room. But what seems to be indicated in here in the text is that they are to strengthen the poles that they have and stretch the fabric tight. Even though the people of Isaiah's time lived in houses, they saw this as a metaphor for the coming time of God's blessing.

Now let's look at that today. Mt. Zion, the question before us is are you ready to grow. Too often we spend time looking back at what was, looking back at what we used to do, looking back at how somebody thought it ought to be done. But the day has come because many of our poles are not as strong as they ought to be, many of the poles have weakened over the years, the time has come for us to strengthen the poles. The time has come for us to stretch the fabric tight.

You know if you let a tent just sit there after a while it begins to sag in and eventually it will fall in on itself. But every now and then you've got to walk around the tent and take a look at the tent. You've got to inspect those stakes and you've got to look at those cords. You've got to look at the material and see if everything is in place as it ought to be.

Are we ready to grow? If God is going to bless us, do we have the things in order for the blessing to occur? It's getting warm up here. I've got to do this every now and then. The ingredients, if you will, for church growth, see folk out here now got these church growth specials walking around talking about marketing your church and advertising and how you got to do this and how you got to do that to grow your church. Let me tell you God told us how to grow the church.

First of all, let's understand the church isn't built by the pastor. I'm very clear about that. With all that we've done through the Building Fund, I do not try to say look at what I did. The church is not built by deacons or trustees. The church is not built by deaconesses, ushers or choirs. The church is built by Jesus Christ. Jesus said on this rock, meaning himself. He said I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

If the church is going through hell then maybe it wasn't built the way Jesus intended it to be built. We've got to take a look at the book and find out the blue print for building the church if we are going to grow. First of all, there has to be prayer. My brothers and sisters, you can't have a church at least one that intends to grow and do anything that doesn't have prayer at the root of what it's doing.

Many of us take prayer meeting for granted. We show up when we want to show up. Some of us never show up at all. Some of us have officer's titles and don't show up. How can you serve in the church of the Lord, Jesus Christ and not gather for prayer with His people? Prayer is important for the church.

When we get mad with each other in big meetings and things folk stand up let's pray, let's pray, let's pray. But the church prays every week rain or shine, good or bad we gather here on Thursday night. Why don't you resolve to join us in prayer meeting? Oh, I know some of us work. But if you got the time and if you can just give us that one hour to come out and join hands and let us pray together one for each other.

A church can't grow without prayer. My brothers and sisters, it's that simple. There's nothing magical about it. There's nothing that's formulaic. It simply means if we are to grow, we've got to have prayer. But not only must we pray as a church, we must have prayer in our lives. How do we grow as individual Christians if we don't pray? I often joke that sometimes the only time we pray is when we sit down at the table you know "good bread, good meat, dear Lord let's eat" and that's about it.

But what about when we get together as a family? What about at night before you go to bed? See I'm not in your houses, I don't know what your prayer life is like. But I'm trying to encourage us to pray if we're going to grow as Christians because growth, the kind of growth I'm talking about here has to do with maturity. See there are some kinds of growth that are nothing but tumors. That's not the kind of growth that you need. I'm talking about growth that signifies maturity. Somebody said 7 days without prayer makes one weak, W-E-A-K. We've got to pray.

I used to hear my mother sing if you pray you've got the keys to the kingdom and your faith will unlock the door. When you fall on your knees God will give your heart ease. He's always near and He'll hear if you pray. 2Chronicles 7, 14 "if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves" and what? "pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven." James, chapter 5, verse 14 "Is any one of you sick?" Then we ought to get the church together and pray because the Bible says effectual prayer of the righteous will avail much.

If you've got God on the inside and you know that you've been born again, how can you forsake the assembling of ourselves together? It means that if you don't want to gather to pray with your brothers and sisters in Christ you are living in disobedience to the word of God. Too many of us we call ourselves Christians but we ought to put an adjective in front of it, the word carnal. Carnal Christians are Christians who are living out of the flesh and not by the spirit. Oh, it's quiet again in here. I'm going to be in trouble.

But we've got to live by the spirit and not the flesh. We're living out of what we think and what we want and what our ego has told us rather than going back to the book and say what thus sayeth the Lord. If God has told us what we ought to be about then there it is. And if you don't know that maybe it's because you ain't been reading like you should. So my brothers and sisters, to grow the church we've got to pray. To strengthen our stakes, to lengthen our cords, to tighten up what we've got, we've got to pray.

But secondly, we need the Holy Spirit. Oh, yes, we do. We need the Holy Spirit. Read Acts, chapter 2 and see what God has done. See the disciples didn't have the power yet to do anything. That's why they were scared. Jesus was now gone from them, they saw what He had done, they saw the resurrection. But they didn't know what to do next.

So they all gathered in the upper room but they were hiding out. They weren't looking to go do anything, they were "what we going to do now?" Brother Peter what you think. Well I don't know, He forgave me but I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to do. What do you think Brother John. I don't know.

But then the Holy Spirit descended upon them and when the Holy Spirit came in like a rushing wind, they were filled with tongues of fire. Now I'm not talking about you know we've got to go out here and speak in unknown tongues. If God moves on your heart to do that, God bless you. But make sure there's an interpreter present. For once again, you are in violation of the teaching of Scripture. That's all, that's all I'm saying. You see everybody walking around oh, shocka, locka, locka. Watch that stuff. You better watch that. This ain't nothing to play with here. Don't you play with God like that. It doesn't make you look any holier. Some of us cuss each other out in the tongue we do know and I don't know what you might be saying in that other tongue.

But what I do know is that the Holy Spirit must be infusing us to do His work. The Holy Spirit comes in to empower us. If we're going to step out, it's not by might nor by our own strength but by His spirit says the Lord of hopes. He gives us the power to break the strongholds that would stand against us. I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me. The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear. The Lord is the strength of my life of whom shall I be afraid. When the wicked, even my enemies came upon me to beat up my flesh they stumbled and fell. The Holy Spirit my brothers and sisters.

And when we accept Christ as Lord and savior of our lives, the Holy Spirit comes to take up residence in us. Yes, we still have that sinful nature in us but the Holy Spirit is there. Every now and then we grieve the Holy Spirit. Oh, yes, we do by the things we do, by the way we talk to each other, by the disrespect we show each other, by our quick temperedness, by our impatience, by our unwillingness even to ask for forgiveness or to forgive someone else, we grieve the Holy Spirit. So once again my brothers and sisters, if a church is to grow it must pray but it must also have the Holy Spirit to empower us in what God has asked us and told us to do.

But thirdly, if the church is to grow there must be involvement of every one of us, every single one of us. I've got to thank Brother Charles Stanley for this, I'm not a thief, I don't steal stuff, I like to give credit to where I get my little insights from. But there must be involvement of every member.

As I often say there's no such thing as a good pew member. That's an oxymoron, that doesn't fit. So everybody ought to be engaged in something. If it's no more than your birthday circle. See because that's why we have them so that everybody can be touched by the ministry of this church in some way. That's why when someone joins, we ask the birthday circle member to come stand with you and they're going to be your prayer partner and they're going to walk with you through this Christian journey because you can't make it by yourself. But it requires the involvement of all of us.

Jesus told us in Matthew, chapter 28, verse 19 "go ye into this world and make disciples." He said teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. He said teaching and preaching is how we are supposed to go. That means all of us have a responsibility. My brothers and sisters, if our growth is to be purposeful, lasting, focused, intentional, there must be unity in the church. The Bible says that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Even satan doesn't have the power to stand if satan is divided against himself.

You ever notice how folk can get together to do the wrong thing? I mean folk you didn't think liked each other. But when it comes to doing the wrong thing there they go and they're all unified. Even the brothers out there on the corner can share a bottle. But many of us in the church can't even share a pew. We see somebody coming to sit down next to us and we start looking at them like they're funny because they're trying to take our seat. Or if they sit there before we get there then we really get upset and we stand there like we expect them to get up and move.

Let me tell you something, if you ain't here when the program starts just sit where you find a seat. If there are no seats, you can come up here and sit next to me or we can sit right along here. The point is you're in the house of God and we are here to worship the Lord. We are here to be about His business.

Our Lord's last prayer before He went to Calvary as He was in the garden of Gethsemane was that the church would be unified. Lord let them be as one, I pray they will be as one. When there is no unity in the church there is no power. When there is no unity, there is no substance to what we do. When there's no unity, there's no joy. How can you have joy when all you're doing is fussing and fighting? When there's no unity, there's no understanding.

How can we take time to sit down and understand what the other person is saying if we're too busy fussing to get our point across? If while they're talking, we are listening not so we can respond in time. But so that we can hear what they are saying so we can formulate our argument to come right back at them instead of maybe just sitting there considering the possibility that maybe what they have to say is valid. Maybe they're telling me what I need to hear and I need to stop being so ready to jump up and get my hair standing up on the back of my neck and I'm ready to lay down my religion. Y'all know what I think about that. If you lay it down, you better leave it there because it ain't worth picking up because there's no such thing as a religion you can lay down at least not in Christ.

Without unity in the church my brothers and sisters, there's no commitment. How can you be committed to something that's disorganized nothing but chaotic and confused? How can you be into that? Without unity in the church, there's no peace because everybody is too busy battling and arguing over their agenda, their point of view. You know how we get...everybody is entitled to my opinion. There's something wrong with that. When there is no unity, there is no sacrifice. How can we sacrifice for something we don't care about? Because you see here's why there could be no sacrifice if there's no unity, if I'm truly interested in the good of the other, I'm willing to step down and let go of some things. Now you know some principles of scripture, if it's scriptural you don't back down from, you don't compromise that. But you see my interest in a disagreement is not to win an argument but it's to win the person.

We've got to do ministry as though people really matter. We've got to do ministry in a way that says to people you are valued here. That in spite of what goes on out there, in here we recognize that you're a child of God and that God doesn't make any junk. God did not make a mistake when He made you you and when He made me me. We have differences, we have differences of personality and there will be times when we won't agree. But you know what, things may fall out but we don't have to fall apart.

So again, if there is no unity there's no sacrifice. The Bible says greater love has no one than this that a person would lay down his life or substitute ego for another. See because some of us, our lives are caught up in who we really think we are. If I love you as much as I'm supposed to love you with the kind of love Christ has given to me then I've got to be willing to sacrifice myself. Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No. There's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me.

My brothers and sisters, sacrifice means you've got to be willing to be nailed to the cross. Understand what I'm saying here. It means you've got to be willing to be nailed to the cross and you've got to be willing to say Lord if it's your will, let your will be done. Jesus thought about it, at first the human side spoke out and He cried father let this cup pass from me, I can't do this. But almost without hesitation He turned right around and said nevertheless.

Do you realize that we owe our salvation to that nevertheless? If He had not said nevertheless because He could have called down 12 legions of angels and they would have wiped this planet clean. But He said nevertheless not my will but thy will be done.

Without unity in the church, there's no enthusiasm. Who gets excited to come to church and start a fight? If somebody gets excited, you've got a pathological problem and you need a whole lot of prayer and maybe we need to go visit the pool again. If all you want to do is come to church and fight, create confusion, division, tear things up, that's an abnormal personality, there's something wrong there.

But my brothers and sisters, I get joy out of serving the Lord. Oh, it hurts sometimes and you will shed tears sometimes. But thanks be unto God weeping may endure for a night but joy will come in the morning. Without unity in the church, there is no real love. Oh, I know we walk around and say I love you and then we turn around and stab you in the back. I love you, we say that to you and then we go over here and we start talking about you. Look at what she got on, who said he's qualified to be a deacon, what's he doing on the trustee board, she's a deaconess what's that all about, whoever said he could be an usher, I remember when.

You see when there's no unity in the church, there's no love. If there's no love that means God is not there because the Bible says God is love and if love is absent, God is gone. Oh, my God you mean to tell me I'm coming to this building and this is a place where God is not. My brothers and sisters, Dr. Charles G. Adams said without the power of God in the church all we are left with is custom draped misery, fresh frozen trouble, wall to wall confusion, untelevised color catastrophe and air conditioned hell. Now that's if there's no unity in the church.

But when we are unified and let's be clear unity does not mean uniformity. See we're not saying you can't think for yourself. No, love does not make us as robots who cannot think and process and read and study and consider His word. No, we're not talking about uniformity. But we're talking about unity in the spirit of God. When we are unified, we can walk in the light, the beautiful light. We'll be where the dew drops of mercy shine bright and they'll shine all around us by day and by night because Jesus is the light of the world and He will be the center of what we do.

As a church we are to be Bible based, Christ centered, Holy Spirit led and mission minded. The mission of the church is to seek and to save those who are lost and bring them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. If we don't feed another hungry person, if we don't put clothes on anybody else's back, if we don't make another donation to anybody who's in need, if we fail to save souls, if we fail to evangelize, then we forfeit our mission and we might as well close the doors and go home.

My brothers and sisters, are you ready to grow? You see God is waiting on us. God has already said we're going to grow, we're going to expand, He's told us what to do to get ready. But are we ready for it? And I don't know about you but I'm ready, I want to be blessed, I want to be found in His will, I want to be doing what God has told me to do. I'm going to love you whether you love me back or not. I'm going to pray for you whether you pray for me or not. I'm going to walk in the spirit because the spirit bears fruit and the fruit of the spirit is love and joy and peace and patience and endurance and happiness. All of these things are the fruits of the spirit. I want to enjoy the good things of God. I want to live so God can use me.

Mt. Zion, are you ready to grow? This is Unity Day. This is Unity Day 2000. The first Unity Day of a new millennium. The first Unity Day of this new century we're going in to and the question is, are we really ready to grow? Are we ready to move down and through the corridors of time and let God have His way? We can do that by laying the right foundation right now. Right now because you see our children and our children's children will inherit the legacy of what we do today.

Either it will be the sins of the fathers and mothers that will be visited upon the children through the third and fourth generation or we will teach them as the Lord has said. We will speak up as we walk down the street, we will speak of the goodness of God when we're in the car. Now what I'm talking about, well it means we're going to determine that we're going to get off the grapevine and lift up the true vine. Too many of us live our lives by what we hear on the grapevine instead of taking time to read about the true vine and what He had to say.

So again my brothers and sisters, are you ready to grow? If you're ready to grow, keep on praying. If you're ready to grow then allow the Holy Spirit to continue to work with you and infuse you and empower you and move you forward in doing His will and His work and doing it His way. Then if you're ready to grow, get involved. God doesn't

give you the Holy Spirit to just keep it to yourself. Every believer in Jesus Christ has the Holy Spirit in them and God did not give it to you to just shut it up and keep those gifts all to yourself.

So therefore, we've got to move out in His name. Oh, I know it's not easy. I know it's difficult. I know that you'll be misunderstood and talked about even by those closest to you. Sometimes they won't even agree with you but you stay on in His name. You see that's why my favorite text, my life verse has been Galatians 2, 20 "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

If I'm outside of the arc of safety, if I don't have Jesus Christ, what am I to do? Well the Bible says if you call on the name of the Lord you shall be saved. We are all sinners but those who are in Christ are sinners saved by grace. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that who so ever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Oh, we can get happy and we can sing and shout on the song. But do you understand the message? Are you listening to what God is saying to you? Are you listening to what God is saying we must do if we are to be His church? Are you doing what God has said we've got to do if we're going to be unified in His name? It's good to walk in together but don't just walk in together and then go out and start tearing each other apart. It's good that we can sit together. But don't just sit together and then when we get in the meetings, we can't get along.

We are God's children. We are His people. And this is for all of us that we must live so God can use us. Isaiah said he prophesized at the time he got his call to ministry in the year that King Uzziah died, he saw the Lord high and lifted up in the temple. He said he saw these angels, these seraphs flying around. But one of them touched his lips with a coal and he realized he himself was unclean and he dwelt in the midst of unclean people. The Lord needed someone to go speak His message and Isaiah stood up and said Lord here am I, send me. Are you willing to be an Isaiah? Are you willing to go out and spread the message? Are you willing to go out and teach the gospel that God loved this world, that He loved it so much, He died on the cross, that He rose again from the dead for our sins and that He's now seated at the right hand of the father and that He's waiting to come back? And when He comes back, He will be coming for a church without spot or wrinkle.

Will you be ready when Jesus returns? Only you can answer that question. This is serious business. We live our lives from day to day as if sometimes we don't believe in Jesus. But you see that's all right to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? My brothers and sisters, it's all right you see because they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. It's time for us to strengthen what we have, to bind together that which God has given us that we may prosper in His name. It's not about us but it is about Him. We are on His mission. Somebody said I'm on the battlefield for my Lord. Make sure that's the battlefield you're on and not the devil's battlefield. I'm on the battlefield for my Lord and I promised him that I will serve him until I die. I'm on the battlefield for my Lord. The doors of the church are open. The invitation for Christian discipleship is now extended.