

Hello Everyone!

So for those of you who don't know me, my name's Emma and I'm one of the pastors here on staff, and this is my first time preaching here at Harbor where I haven't been pregnant. The first time I preached was last December right after Christmas, and I had just found out that my husband and I were having a baby, and now we are the parents of a 2 month old. It's pretty crazy.

And something I knew going into this was that becoming a parent basically means your life is going to be consumed by this little needy bundle of joy that you and your partner created, but I didn't know what that felt like – and it's because the real reason that you get consumed is because if you're a breastfeeding mom, you are literally being consumed basically whenever your child demands it. You might be on the phone, shopping, trying to eat dinner, and for me, trying to get a sermon written, and when that baby wants to eat, that means you have to drop everything and just do it.

But because she's a baby, Clementine gets what she wants because that's just how it is. At this stage, all she can do is cry and fuss to let me know she's hungry, and then I feed her and my life is basically based around these three and four hour blocks right now. She can't eat anything else for a few more months, so it's fine. I don't tell her to chill out and wait a while, or order out because I have other things to do. I feed her, that's the way it is. Babies are kind of self-centered and don't care about what you might be trying to do; they are hungry and they want to be fed NOW.

Sometimes I find myself saying: "I just want this to last forever. I don't want her to grow up, I wish she could stay little" because she's growing so fast – she's already grown about four inches and gained four pounds, it's so crazy, and it's kind of sad. But it isn't true that I **really** want her to stay a baby breastfeeding forever, because it's not really good for anyone. Hopefully, in a couple months she'll be eating her first bites of solid, albeit pureed food, and then later, cheerios and cut up fruits and cooked veggies, and on to larger bites of food, to "real" food using utensils and cups and plates. So that when Clementine is a teenager, and she gets hungry, she can go into the kitchen and make herself a sandwich as opposed to coming to me at work, plopping herself on the floor and crying. If she did that, we'd all agree that she is being self-centered and childish, and she probably wouldn't be as adorable and sweet like she is now, so she won't get away with it. That's why God made babies so cute and sweet, because they're basically little nonverbal dictators.

It's normal and good for babies to grow up. That's obvious. But there's different kinds of growth, and I promise I'm not just going to stand up here and talk about my baby this whole time; there's a reason why I'm bringing this up. And the reason I'm bringing it up is I want to talk about spiritual growth in the church.

In 1 Corinthians 3, we see a problem in the early church, and Paul writes: Dear brothers and sisters,[a] when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people.[b] I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. 2 I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready, 3 for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't

that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren't you living like people of the world like people of the world?"

So here, we see an image not of cute little babies, but of immaturity, something that is causing a lot of problems in this church community of Corinth, this city in ancient Greece – and it's not good. These are baby Christians who thought they were grown up Christians. These are people who are still mired in sin, and Paul is calling them out. He is obviously expecting more of them, the same way I expect my daughter to grow from being a little baby to a well-adjusted adult.

Transition: But HOW? How does this happen? How do we go from being spiritual infants drinking nothing but milk and basically just crying and being self-centered, thinking it's all about us and our wants and needs now to becoming spiritual adults who can take care of these spiritual babies? Does this even exist?

We're in a sermon series we're calling: Ephesians, the mystery unraveled, and like the other messages we've already talked about, spiritual growth is another one of those things that's a mystery. Now maybe you're a scientist or just cognizant of basic biology, but I still don't really get how physical growth happens exactly – it's crazy to me that a little bundle of cells can turn into a baby in nine months – it's crazy. But I do know that there are factors that influence and help growth along. For Clementine to grow and thrive, she needs food, clothes, comfort, love, and interaction.

Similarly, a lot of spiritual growth is hard to pinpoint or understand: it happens over a long period of time, it happens in conjunction with life experience, it happens through prayer and meditation on Scripture. You know, it happens through God's mysterious work in our lives in different ways, and we don't always know how it happened.

On the other hand, there are also some very obvious things, like eating and getting nutrition, that will make spiritual growth happen.

So let's take a look at Scripture. We're still in Ephesians, this time in chapter four. Please grab a Bible or you can read on the screens.

Eph. 4: 11-16

11 Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. 12 Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. 13 This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. 15 Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.

16 He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

Okay, so God tells us that He has sent gifts of Christ to the church to unify and help us to become mature, to go from being spiritual infants to becoming spiritual adults. And those things are: apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors, evangelists.

The gifts of Christ help us grow.

These are all pretty esoteric words to most of us. You might be asking: “Who the heck are the apostles of Harbor... or the prophets...?” You might know that we have pastors here, like Kelly and John and me, and we had pastors who have come and gone, but besides that... Kind of some question marks.

So it may not be very clear who the apostles and prophets are, maybe, but I’d say that we definitely have teachers, pastors and evangelists here: To a certain degree, you all are. If you’ve invited someone here, if you’ve talked about your faith with someone else, if you’ve led a journey group, if you’ve prayed over someone and helped them in their struggles of faith – you are one of God’s gifts to the church.

Transition: So we could basically sum up all of those “gifts” of Christ to the church as being leaders of the church, mentors. We’ll unpack that in a minute, but first we’re going to tackle the “why” part of all this. Why these people are so important, and why growth is so important. You might be thinking: “Being a kid is awesome! And Jesus said having faith like a child is a good thing!”

Well, yes and no, kind of. It’s true that we are adopted as children into the family of God through Jesus when we decide that he’s going to be who we live for. Yes. And yes, Jesus did say that we should have faith like a child. However, what Paul was chastising the Corinthian church for is very different from what Jesus was talking about. He was telling them that they were acting childish vs. child-like.

So here’s a hypothetical: let’s say we have this guy, Bob Smith, who walks in the door of Harbor, and that first week decides to follow Jesus. Awesome, this is what the church likes to see. We want to see people find their way back to God. A growing church is a healthy church.

And Bob’s pretty happy he made this decision. He loves it here, thinks the worship is great, he likes that he feels appreciated and loved, he likes the coffee, he thinks the sermons are good. He comes here semi-regularly on Sundays, and keeps doing this for a year or so.

But then, something happens in Bob’s life: A divorce. Or he loses his job. Or some guy at work makes a compelling argument for why Christianity can’t be true. Or he has some major disagreements with what the pastor said during her message the week before. And he starts to have questions: He thought this Christian thing was cut and dry and made you feel pretty good, but now he’s starting to feel bad, and he didn’t think he was supposed to be feeling bad.

Bob’s problem is that he’s a baby Christian. Baby Bob. And like human babies, there isn’t anything inherently WRONG with being a baby Christian. It’s okay to have questions, it’s okay to have doubts, it’s okay to struggle, it’s okay to disagree. The problems happen if these things stop growth, if he’s stunted

because it's possible Bob might not only just stay a baby – he might regress and leave the church for good.

Some of you might know someone like Bob – people who've left the church because they just didn't grow. They were vulnerable babies and couldn't pull through. Because the truth is, children are ignorant and vulnerable and can't withstand that kind of pressure.

They're also a little crazy: kids do stuff that's just plain not smart. They run into the street without looking both ways, they jump from the top of the stairs to the bottom of the stairs, they would eat leftover Halloween candy for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if they could.

But that's why they have parents. And the gifts of Christ to the Church are like spiritual parents. In this passage, in verse sixteen, it says that when these apostles, pastors, evangelists, etc., equip God's people and build them up, they're "no longer immature like children... and won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teacher. [they] won't be influenced when people try to trick them with lies so clever they sound like the truth."

In the same way babies aren't bad, spiritual babies aren't bad; they just *are*. But healthy babies grow, and healthy spiritual babies also grow and need to be cared for and nurtured and protected so that they.

Transition: So we want to become adults so we don't walk from the faith or give credence to people who claim to speak truth but aren't. And those lies are out there. There are people who claim to be speaking for Christ but are more likely to be speaking for the "other side". And there are people who might say things that make you think believing in the truth of Christianity is crazy.

I'm well acquainted with the world of academia, and there are a lot of people who think that if you have half a brain, you would have stopped believing in Jesus a long time ago. That is you were a logical, rational, intelligent person, there's no way you can also believe that God became man and was killed for our sins and rose again. They'd said it's incompatible with science, with the knowledge we have now.

And I'm also well acquainted with false teachers who like to add to scripture to manipulate people or control them: if you give me money, God will heal you. If you wish for good things, they'll come your way. If you obey and never sin, you will become more acceptable to God, but if you sin, then God doesn't really love you.

It's not enough to have teachers and leaders – we need good teachers and leaders. In 1 Timothy, we get guidelines for leaders that say they need to be "above reproach." Jesus said that it's better that someone have a millstone put around their necks and get thrown in the ocean than to lead a little child astray. Helping baby Christians grow is a big responsibility. It's a gift of Christ, it helps us grow, but it's a big deal – it's raising spiritual kids, which is no joke.

John Emery says something that's smart, and he's actually quoting someone else, so don't give him too much credit ;-) but they're wise words: "When kids have kids, things get messy." If you're in a place where you aren't ready to feed into someone, if you can barely feed yourself... that's not going to work.

I'm not going to let a five year old babysit my infant because chances are, something's going to go wrong.

And yet, that doesn't mean we throw the baby out with the bathwater (wow, lots of baby analogies and sayings going on – can you tell what a lot of my life is centered around???)

Transition: All these things could make a baby Christian fall apart: false teaching, new teaching, immaturity. So what do these baby Christians need? They need a safe place to grow, they need to be nurtured, fed, so they can be healthy. And if human babies are a decent parallel, and human babies need human parents, then spiritual babies need spiritual parents.

So who are the spiritual parents for us now? Who are going to be the ones to provide the spiritual food, clothes, shelter, guidance, protection for baby Christians? The Gifts of Christ to the Church, what we see here.

So first all babies need shelter, a safe place where they are taken care of and provided for. And that place is the church, a healthy growing church. And it's sad, but it's true that sometimes there are over-controlling churches, or churches that only give their spiritual babies junk food, like soda in their bottles or something. Finding a healthy church is key. And I think that's what Harbor is. No church is perfect, but we mean it when we call ourselves "harbor of Hope." This is a safe place where people can experience love and acceptance and worship, and Christ is at the center. A lot of spiritual healing has happened at Harbor – I know many people who came through the doors feeling broken, burned out, or skeptical about the church and about God, and who found their way back to God.

That's the church. A healthy church is like a home, shelter, a safe place for babies to become children, children to become adults.

So we have shelter, and we also have love: The only gospel we preach here is that Jesus loves you, that he accepts you as you are, that it's not about what you do to earn that love; you get it without having to be "good" or live up to a standard you just can't reach.

And we love because Jesus first loved us. We offer forgiveness and grace to one another because we were forgiven and shown grace. We say we're not good enough because that's what the gospel tells us: we're not good enough, we need God, and Jesus makes that possible, because he became one of us; he came to us and showed us another way.

We become God's adopted children, beloved children that can go to Him and call him "Abba!" which means "Father!" Nobody in the OT called God Father – Jesus was the first one, and He gives us that gift.

And through that gift – we GROW. And we produce MORE gifts to the church because more people become pastors, teachers, evangelists, prophets with vision and encouragement; it's a system that continues forward and doesn't atrophy or die. It lives and grows as people grow.

In the NT times, there were so many farmers, it was a more agrarian culture than ours, so this idea about growth was such a big deal, and Jesus used it to explain these big concepts about growth, but this

idea that Jesus' effect on our lives is growth is still kind of hard to "get" – But Jesus explained it this way in the book of Mark chapter 4 verse 26, one of the gospels (I'm going to paraphrase/expand on it): We don't know how plants grow and we don't control that growth; it can happen overnight, with a plant just coming out of the ground.

How many of you like to garden? When you plant that seed or that plant, have you ever planted it and said: OK, on this date, this is going to grow a tomato because I'm going to sit next to this plant and just exert my will over it, like a superhero with telekinetic powers.

No, because we don't make things grow. That's the mystery: God makes things grow. Plants and people.

But you'd be pretty foolish if you put that tomato plant in the ground and then kind of say: "All right, good luck! I don't understand this mystery of growth, so I'm just going to come back here in three weeks and hope for the best."

No, you don't do that either, because you want to HELP this plant grow. So you water it, you spray it to keep bugs off, put beer in little cups to drown the slugs, put hair clippings and lint down to keep the mice away – it's kind of weird, but it all helps make that plant grow. And people help people grow, by living in community, through love and care for one another, through instruction and prayer.

You might be sitting there thinking: "Jeez, church is a weird place. You come in and get coffee and then sit in a chair and sing songs but it's not a concert, and you go to people's houses and pray together sometimes, and you listen to someone go on and on for like half an hour about something that was written thousands of years ago. It's weird." And it IS weird, but it's how we grow. God's the mysterious part – I can't explain how God changes people. I'm not God. But I can help people who are growing. And so can you.

Transition: It's all for the sake of community. It's all for the sake of a peaceful and loving community that keeps growing – you know what makes the church grow? If it's a loving, safe, God-centered church, then people will want to be a part of that church. You don't need a fancy place, you don't need gimmicks, you need to be a place where people grow.

But you might be thinking: Yeah, this all sounds great... but what do I do now?

I have a few suggestions:

One: you can join Starting Point. Starting Point is awesome: it's great if you're new to Harbor, actually, no matter if you're a brand new baby Christian or you've been going to church all your life (and here's the thing – I think I was a baby Christian into my twenties even though I grew up in the church, so it's possible to be a baby Christian and not really know it). At Starting Point, you can meet other people at Harbor, and you can learn more about what we at Harbor believe about the Bible, some of those bigger questions about Jesus and God. I'm doing it this season, and I'd love to invite you to be a part. Just mark that on your connection card – they had their first meeting today, but it's not too late to sign up. Join Starting Point, start that season of growth.

So step one: Join Starting Point. It happens during the service, so there's childcare, and I also happen to know there are treats, too, so there's another incentive. Your spirit will grow, and maybe your waistline.

Something else that can be your next step: Help someone else grow.

When the Bible was written, I don't think this had to be explained, but in America, here in the United States in the 21st century, we live independent lives – we do our own thing, we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, stuff like that. And we think church is that place you go to on Sunday mornings (or maybe Saturday nights) for a couple hours. But that's not what church is.

Church is community. And healthy churches are growing communities. Not just like in numbers, but in spirit.

So maybe you're someone who's grown in the faith and you could be the gift of Christ to the church by investing in someone else. It's not that tough and you don't need to be an expert. You just need to meet for coffee now and then with someone and talk about God's work in your life and in their life. Pray for this person. Make space for growth and help this person experience the mystery of growth in God with your help. And in doing that, you truly are a gift of Christ to that person. I know that the people who invested in me when I needed it were gifts.

Even if you're not "perfect," you can be a gift, because first, that idea of perfection is a lie – we can't do it, that's why we need Jesus, and even with Jesus' help and work in us, we're still going to wrestle with sin and brokenness.

I was reminded of that just getting this sermon together. Something I struggle with is a sense of self-worth, and I often think that I can make myself more acceptable or interesting or better by proving myself – and it extends into work SO OFTEN – even church work. And this time I was like: "I have to prove that I can do it all – I can be a mom, and still be fun and interesting and write a super insightful sermon, that holds people's attention, and everyone will be like, 'yeah! She can be a pastor! I like her because she does good sermons!'" or whatever. But big surprise: it didn't work out so great.

I couldn't put the same kind of time in that I was hoping. Funny how having a person who's only source of food and comfort during working hours might make those working hours look a little different right? I ran through my sermon with our teaching team and staff, and it wasn't great. My sermon was fragmented, uncentered, all over the place, kind of weird in spots, even. The team gave me good feedback to help it get better, but I left the meeting with the same bad feelings I thought I was done with:

I'm not good enough.

God doesn't want me teaching others.

God can't use me because I'm boring and stupid and uninsightful.

And the cherry on top: that little voice that said: “You’re going to fail, and it’s going to be awful, awful, awful.”

But here’s what happened, and here’s why we need the church, we need people feeding into us – The other people on the team could see this happening. John Emery noticed and spoke truth and encouragement to me. Kelly Tibbitts invited me over for lunch and also spoke words of encouragement and life to me. And Monday Ally stopped by the office and asked how things were going and was so encouraging to me. I’m one of the pastors on staff, but I need people who can help me grow – it’s not going to stop until this life is over.

It’s so important to have people who can feed into you, and it’s so important to feed into others, too. You just don’t always know the impact you have on others, even if it’s an hour long conversation over coffee. And guess what – chances are if you ask someone if they want to meet for coffee (you’re buying) and you can talk about life and God and stuff, they’re going to probably say “yes.” So reach out, be the evangelist, preacher, teacher, the gifts of Christ to the church, to someone else.

So two steps: Sign up for Starting Point, and/or Help someone else grow. Write that down somewhere, on your connection card, in your journal. Let’s be the gifts of Christ to one another. And let’s help each other grow in unity and in love. Let’s pray.