

## Arriving at the Edge

(Romans 12:9-21)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 3, 2017

In the name of one God – creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

I don't know many people who at some point in their lives haven't experienced growing pains. In fact, I think growing pains of some sort of very much a part – at one time or another – of everyone's lives. There are, of course, the physical pains associated with growth, those aches in the bones and muscles that are the sign of a body trying to increase itself (and which my mother-in-law says – quite accurately – can be cured with a spoonful of mustard). There are the emotional pains, those moments of uncertainty when faced with a new situation – a new job or home or, in the case of my daughters over the past few weeks, the fears of beginning life in a brand new school.

But experiencing growing pains can be, rather than being an uncomfortable situation, a sign of excitement and joy. A child whose dream it is to play basketball may take growing pains as a sign that they at long last may be able to dunk. Someone in a new corporate job who has a seemingly overwhelming number of reports to prepare may see that instead as an opportunity to prove their continued value to their bosses and a chance to build their résumé.

Throughout the Bible we see instances of men and women experiencing growing pains in their walk with God and along the way finding they have been drawn to great things. Abram was faced with the difficult call of leaving his home and life to follow what was a somewhat vague promise from God to start life anew as Abraham, the root of three religions and the source of a people as numerous as the stars. Moses was taken from his life in the royal court of the pharaoh to one of exile, only to be called back to free the entire Jewish nation from bondage and lead them to their promised land. The disciples certainly experienced growing pains in their walk with Jesus, being called out of their familiar lives, their comfort zones, as fishermen and tax collectors and into new roles as messengers of the coming kingdom.

Throughout my seminary career as a student, parish intern and hospital chaplain, I was exposed often to a new way of looking at growing pains. Rather than being pains, we were encouraged to look at them as growing edges, those times when we reach the boundaries of what is known and familiar and are challenged to move beyond them. When we arrive at the edge, we have the opportunity to journey in new, exciting and admittedly unknown directions. At those edges, we avail ourselves of the chance to pause and listen to the voice of God, looking for signs of the direction in which the Holy Spirit is gently guiding us.

So what are the growing edges that we're facing here at Christ Church? Well, you're all learning to adapt to a new deacon – one who has a big vision and big dreams for what we can do together, but who has made some mistakes along the way (and will undoubtedly make some more in the future). We're at the moment when we're exploring ways to take our food pantry, one of the most significant ways we share this church with the community, to the next level of service. We're looking at how to get our youth more involved in the life of the church – through a revitalized Sunday school program, participation in our worship, and in providing a nursery that starts our youngest family members on their journey. We're welcoming visitors and new members almost weekly, looking for ways to integrate them into life here and to draw them more deeply into this family.

We're on the growing edge of a lot, both exciting and frightening. So how do we adapt to these opportunities? What do we use as a roadmap to guide all of our decisions? Paul gives us a pretty good idea in today's reading from Romans – a handy to-do list of things to keep in mind as we grow in our role as disciples. I could do an entire series of sermons on this one passage, but today I'll focus on some of the important things that have resonated in various ways with me this week.

Express genuine love – love for our families and one another, love for those who come here for solace and for support, and even love for all that we do. We should find the things we love most in our lives here and at home – in our labor and our leisure – and find ways of expressing it by diving in fully and deeply to nurture that love.

Rejoice in hope – the hope that we have for our programs and for this parish, the hope that we will soon see a glimpse of the big things to which God is calling us. Rejoice in all that you already have accomplished and in the opportunities that are just in front of us. Allow your hope to be the very thing that opens up the space for God to go to work.

Contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to the strangers. Everyone who comes to this place, to work or worship or find help, is a saint of God. Contributing to their needs and being hospitable is something you all do very well. But it's always good to have a reminder to keep doing it.

Live in harmony with one another – the harmony that comes from being open enough to share our hopes and joys, but also from being willing to let others into those places of vulnerability from which arise our fears, frustrations and pain. Harmony requires honesty and the willingness to not only support one another, but listen – deeply – to what we are saying to one another.

If we do these things – if we live in harmony; if we rejoice; if we contribute; and above all, if we love – then the growing edges confronting us will be eliminated. The path ahead will become clear. And if we open ourselves to what God is offering - to what God is calling us to – then there is no limit to what we can accomplish as his disciples.

Amen.