My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Bodies, Hearts, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

It only seems fitting that our reading today is about growing. I love the planning and the anticipation of how well this year’s crop is going to be, and carefully planning when to drop the seeds in the ground so that we’re not on vacation when the fruits of the earth start to roll in. Let me tell you, there’s nothing worse than coming home to a whole bunch of rotten tomatoes that have dropped off the vine due to just plain inattention. And you have to have the right fertilizer to get them off to a good start. And a good supply of “Deer Off”, this animal repellant spray that will keep the bunnies from eating the plants right down to the nub when they’re young. And let me tell you, there’s no stopping the chipmunks or birds. They are famous for taking a bite out of your best efforts and just leaving the rest. Gardening, just as was promised in the Garden of Eden when God told us we’d have to raise our own food, is tough work.

But there we go again, talking about how if we just do this and that and in the right way, we can not just predict, but create our own reality, if only we’re careful enough. We do that a lot, right? Over-plan, then over-worry, then over-compensate, and then, well, do we get what we thought we would?

Our Gospel tells us otherwise, doesn’t it? Gardeners need the seed to do it’s thing alllll by itself, and it’s going to do what it’s going to do in its own time, won’t it? And maybe that seed may be really tiny so that we can’t think it will produce very much. Unless it’s a mustard seed, and then what? Man, you better look OUT, because that little dude can take over the whole garden by itself.

Jesus talks about these things in this way because faith is like the seed. We don’t know how it starts, where it ends, and the middle may be full of adventure. Faith, like the seed, is an evolution. As time and the universe unfolds, we understand God differently, deeper, and we gain more perspective of ethics and morals. We set aside our childish perceptions of God the Magician, God the Cosmic Gumball machine.

My friend Richard Rohr describes four stages of spiritual and moral development through his book called “Transformations”: Cleaning up, growing up, waking up, and showing up.

Pastors are pre-occupied with cleaning up the most, and it’s what we talk and preach about a lot. But what actually happens is we can get caught up in the culture wars around us so tightly that we get caught up in various “purity codes” of this behavior or that being the one to watch for. This makes for bad religion and it’s no wonder folks don’t want to come to church when they hear that the President can’t receive communion because he supports reproductive freedom and covering contraception for poor families that want it. Jesus would be so disappointed in this, wouldn’t he?

Because Jesus doesn’t talk about culture wars or political schemes. Jesus talks about getting our inner attitude aligned first, and that change in consciousness is what will guide us. ‘Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God, and it’s Righteousness….’ Right? C’mon, sing the second stanza. Yeah, that’s right. We start with having some deep encounters with God that leads us to changing our ways of privilege, thinking, and upbringing. When we keep our pre-occupation with our own being right or wrong, we’re not thinking about God or grace or love. Cleaning up is mostly about the need for impulse control and creating boundaries for the “I want” or “Me, first” mentality that we see now with Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. We need to have these boundaries so we can actually get out into a real, and larger world…remember how we talked about transforming our kids so that they could transcend the family? We have to give them enough self-concept to be caring but not conceited.

Growing up is that process of maturing that folks do both withing themselves and also within the places they hang out—work, friends, social interactions, travel, love relations. We all grow up, even if it’s in a bubble. But the social structures that surround us highly influence how much we can grow up. And also how much of the demons within us we can face and integrate into our lives. We all have the capacity to build and destroy, and until we face both in our lives, we’ll be stuck in this stage.

Waking up refers to transcendence that we all wish for and talk about so fondly when it comes to Eastern religions, right? There’s this spiritual experience which overcomes our experience of the self, and it’s separate from being in general. You may have had this in your life, when a feeling of peace washed over you and you felt pulled from your body as if you didn’t have a body.

Weird, huh? But we want to do it again, don’t we? I’m not talking a drug trip here, trust me. All that we do here in worship helps prepare us for these moments—prayer, sacraments, bible study, Sunday worship, visits to the sick, hugging the grieving, they all contribute. The purpose of getting woke is not private perfection or personal salvation, but surrender, love, and union with God. THIS is the Christian meaning of salvation, or enlightenment.

Finally, showing up means bringing our heart and mind into the actual suffering and problems of the world. It means engagement. It means social purpose. It means moral presence. It means a concern for justice and peace for others beyond ourselves. If we don’t have a lot of folks showing up in the suffering trenches of the world, it’s because those of us who preach the word focus too much on cleaning up, growing up, or waking up. Showing up is the final act, the fullness of realization of the prior three stages. God has fully transformed us.

Now back to our little garden seed, and I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

There’s lots of unknowns in how a plant grows. But two things are needed. First, water that washes over it, nourishes it, and keeps it able to withstand the treacheries of coming out of the ground and face whatever comes. Without the water of baptism it is hard to join the world in any way, and we cannot sustain ourselves with the world starts to get dark and stormy.

Second, there is light, that thing which the seed knows will transform the water into sugar and food and goodness and sweetness that will make it not just grow, but thrive. Without God’s light in our hearts, it is not just hard for us to thrive but we cannot therefore help others who need our light when their’s has gone dormant. The light of God may come and go, but it’s never gone for good in the life of those who have taken the journey of faith formation and are showing up.

So Jesus challenges us to transform. The question is, will we hear one more sermon, pray one more time, look for one more pithy Facebook saying to get started?

The choice, thanks be to God, is ours. Amen.