Sunday, June 2, 1974
LEARN TO GROW OLD
Proverbs 3:13-18; Luke 2:52

There are a number of turning points in all of our lives and among these are two especially crucial ones - the passage from childhood to adulthood, and that from adult-hood to old age. Both have to do with growing older.

As Jesus was going from childhood to adulthood, it was said of him as reported by Luke, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” This is something we hope can be said of us throughout our lives.

So, we begin with a plain fact about ourselves, and the fact is this: that we all grow older, but we do not all grow in other ways. Physically, we grow almost automatically the way plants and trees grow. Given the right amount of food and drink and a reasonable protection against the elements, we grow from a creature 15 to 20 inches long at birth and 5 to 8 pounds of weight, or more or less, to an adult five or six feet tall or more, weighing anything from one hundred to two hundred pounds or more. The growth of our bodies is almost automatic. We grow whether we want to or not, while we are awake or while we sleep. We grow from stage to stage, from babyhood to childhood and on to adulthood and then we grow old.

But increasing in wisdom and maturity, growing up in mind and spirit, how we grow old is not automatic. And the sad fact is that we don’t all do it. There is nothing more pitiful than a grown person who has never grown up, an adult-size body with a child-size soul. For example, a person thirty years old can’t have his own way. He doesn’t sit on the floor and kick and scream the way a child does. He just sits and sulks; or leaves home and says not a word to anyone about where he is going and two or three days later comes back much the worse for wear.

There are two things to remember about this business of learning to grow old. There are some who can’t help not growing up. They are retarded mentally or emotionally; or they may be handicapped by an environment that stunts their growth. They can’t help that, and they should not be blamed for it. If they look for help, there are many ready to

The other thing to remember is that none of us grows up completely. No one of us grows up into the fulness of the stature of which we are capable. Thus, no one of us is in a position to make dogmatic judgments on others who seem to us so underdeveloped. But we can take some part in the mysterious process of growth so that we do learn to grow old and in so doing increase in wisdom and maturity and in favor with God and others.

Our Christian Faith gives us several clues toward learning to grow old.

1. The first clue is that there are some things we need to outgrow, some things that need to be left behind, if we are going to increase in wisdom and maturity and live each stage of life in its fulness.

Some things are easy to outgrow. When you are a child, you outgrow your clothes for the simple reason that you grow and then don’t, and they have to be left behind. We outgrow various toys and other items as our interests shift.

But it is not so easy to outgrow some of our childish ways, or our middle-aged ways. Most children, not all, like to be the center of attention. Some are at the center because of their personality, or their talents, or their looks, or because they have misguided parents who encourage them to be the center of attention.

This is something to outgrow, but it's not easy. We all like attention, and we all, let's face it, need a certain amount of attention and appreciation. But unless we outgrow that thirst for attention, that insistence of being the center of every circle we happen to be in, we will never grow up, no matter how old we happen to be. We will never increase in wisdom. The secret is to be so attached to something great that claims our attention, absorbs our energies, so that we don't need to be always thinking about the attention we may or may not be getting.

It's still more difficult to outgrow some of our childish thoughts, or even our middle-aged thoughts. For example, one of the thoughts that is most difficult for some adults to outgrow is that people who are different are in some way peculiar or inferior. We want to standardize everything.

Another of the thoughts we have to outgrow is that my family is better than yours, my school is not only better, but the best there is, and my country is the best country in the world. It is interesting to see that today it is the inversion of that that many of the young generation must outgrow. Some of them are saying — my family is worse than yours, my country is worse than your country, and my church is worse than your church. We have to learn to outgrow the lesser loyalties and grow up into the larger ones. We need the intimacy of the small group, but when the intimate becomes the ultimate, we are lost.

It may help us once in a while to remember that there are roughly three and a half billion other people in the world besides ourselves, speaking 2,796 languages different from our own, and who follow ten of the great religions. We have to learn to say somewhere along the line, something like this: "I'm not the only pebble on the beach; my generation is neither the first nor the last to have a hard or easy time of it: I'm not the only person who has a right to think or the right to speak his mind; and above all, I'm not the only person who knows the truth and the truth I know is at best only a partial truth."

So, this business of learning to grow up and learning to grow old really means that we accept the necessity of continuing to be open and learning persons throughout our lives. We need to keep ourselves open to new experiences, new wisdoms and this involves leaving some old wisdoms behind as well.

2. The second clue to learning to grow old which comes from our Christian Faith seems like a contradiction to what we have just said — Jesus put it this way — "Unless you become like little children, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Jesus was saying that we also sometimes lose some things in the process of growing that we should hang onto, or re- gain in a new way. As a small child, living in a normal family, we trust our fathers and mothers as naturally as we go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning. But as we go along through life a great many people let us down, and we get a lot of rough treatment, shocks, blows and pretty soon we don't trust people the way we did as a child. We lose our natural trustfulness. A recent Peanuts cartoon strip put it very well. (hold up strip and explain)

Charlie Brown is right. We can never sleep in that same back seat in the same way again. But what Jesus is asking us to do as we continue to grow older is to grow into a new kind of trustfulness and security — a much larger trust that has its basis in God. We are to move onto a trust that is not childish, but childlike.

3. The third clue to learning to grow old and in so doing to increase in wisdom and maturity and in favor with God and others, is to practice “acceptance.”

There are some things in life we can change and should change and there are others that cannot be changed. Niebuhr’s famous prayer put it succinctly, “O God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what should be changed, and the wisdom to dis-tinguish one from the other.”

So often we spend much of our time and energy trying to change the things that cannot be changed and thus have no time or energy left for those that can be changed. I am now 43 years old. That cannot be changed. Oh, to be sure I can work on my outward appearance and with much work can maybe make myself look somewhat younger, but have I really changed anything?

I need to accept my life, my age, my body, my sex, my background as they are. Also, I need to accept my parents, my children, the afflictions that come my way, the infirmities, the bereavements and then go on from there. I need to accept the fact that at my age there are some things I cannot do that I could do years ago.

Does this mean that we are to accept everything? No, of course not. But there are some things we can change and some things we cannot change. So, by acceptance we’re not talking about fatalism, passivity, or resignation. To “accept” in the Christian sense of the word, is to say “yes” to life in its entirety. I’m 43 and I enjoy being 43 years old. I could waste most of my time wishing I was still 33. Acceptance means also saying “yes” to yourself. It doesn’t mean that you don’t try to improve yourself or change yourself for the better.

The point is we can accept our present age grudgingly or openly. We can agree to learn to grow old, or we can try to stop time.

We prepare for and enjoy each stage in life by having a kind of positive attitude throughout one’s life, that is by living each stage fully. Look at the disgruntled people who cannot accept their failing strength. Many of them have been no better at accepting their active lives before retirement. They grumbled then about their work and the responsibilities they had to shoulder, and they regretted their childhood which also they had frequently not accepted either.

To increase in wisdom and maturity and in favor with God and all people, is to say “yes” to childhood, to youth, to adult life, to old age, and finally “yes” to death. It is easier to turn over a page of life when we have it right up.

A large part of the secret in learning to grow old is to realize that there’s another kind of growth in addition to physical growth in life. And this other kind of growth can continue even when our physical growth stops or declines.

We can continue to grow until we die in wisdom and maturity. Let’s put it this way. Many of the things we can no longer do in older age are in the field of action, not in that of spirit and mind. We live differently as we grow older, but it is still fully life, perhaps even fuller if that is possible.

Our interest and participation in the world need not diminish, they can increase, but it may be a different kind of interest and participation.

There are things to discover as we grow older, aspects of life which could not be known before. Often the older person freed from professional and social competition can open his or her mind to wider horizons.

Look at it this way. Imagine two football players. They are both outstanding. Their names are in all the papers. They have countless admirers. Their successes make them keen. Football occupies all their thoughts. But a day will come as they grow older when they will no longer be able to play because of their age. Then they will begin to sink back into anonymity. Their personal reactions to this change can be very different.

The one player's interest in football is such that he still goes to watch all the games and often visits the club. He gives a warm welcome to the young members, lavishes advice and encouragement and is enthusiastic about their progress. His passion for the sport is now freer, more disinterested, shorn of the feelings of jealousy which are inevitable so long as one is still engaged in competition. Naturally, he is well-liked, appreciated by his new champions who tell each other stories about his triumphs in the past. He remains a leader. He may become a trainer, a referee, perhaps a coach. Or he may do something else.

The other player, however, is so upset by his removal from the big championships that he never sets foot again either on the football field or anything remotely connected with it. It hurts too much, he says, to go to a game and not be able to play. Obviously, he goes on to say, I was too fond of football and I'm still too fond of it to be able to accept the fact that I'm too old to play the game anymore. So, he sinks into bitterness. He talks cynically of the vanity of life and the ingratitude. of people who forget so quickly. Nothing interests him anymore. His golden age is over. He is convinced that football isn't what it used to be. They young people today don't play it any more like it was played in his time. This man has not learned how to grow old.

What is your response to growing older? Will it be like the first player or the second? Will you try vainly to save your youth and live only in the past? Or will you increase in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people?

For the Christian, life can always be beginning again. Even death is a new beginning. So today as the honor the long living among us, we celebrate also the process of growing older. Amen.