

## LIFTING THE LEVEL OF LIFE

INTRODUCTION The sermon this morning begins with a fact about ourselves, and the fact is simply this that while all of us grow up physically, not all of us grow up emotionally. The reason for this is fairly obvious. We grow up physically whether we want to or not. As long as we fee our bodies and take reasonably good care of them, they continue to grow. But on the other hand, we do not grow up emotionally unless we want to. Emotional growth involves a deliberate effort on our own part. A great deal of this type of growth lies within the realm of our own personal growth.

Let me say right at the beginning of this sermon that I can think of nothing worse in our own daily experience than to encounter a grown person who has not really grown up. A man, for instance, in his thirties who cannot have his own way. He doesn't sit down on the floor and kick and scream and carry on like a little child, but he may do some things that are just as childish. He may sulk if he can't have his own way. He may walk out of the room slamming the door without telling anyone where he's going. This is an adult, fully grown, but not grown up. Or take a woman of fifty trying to act and look like a woman of twenty four. This brings to mind an actual experience that I had last October. I was interviewing a woman for membership in a national social organization for which I serve as a field counsellor. On the application form which she had made out her age was stated as twenty-four. I think I know enough about a person's age to be able to teãl within a few years what the actual age of a person is. In this case the woman appeared to be closer to thirty five than twenty-five. I didn't say anything to her (after all you can't say anything to a wemannabout such things), but I did attach a footnote to the application form which I sent on to the National Office in Chicago suggesting that I thought she was closer to 35 than 25. Time proved that I was wrong. Several weeks later I heard from the National Office. Somehow they found out that she wasn't in her thirties, nor was she in her twenties, nor was she in her forties. Her actual age was fifty-two.

Growing up - emotionally. It's a problem that faces all of us because none of us would dare to claim that he has completely grown up. Some people do better than others. Some are more mature than others, but this is a problem which involves all of us as long as we live.

FIRST CLUE Turning now to the Bible, I think that there are two clues that will help us in this entire matter. Both are to be found in the New Testament. The first clue comes from the Apostle Paul and is to be found in his thrilling letter to the people of Corinth. Pauls says:

"When I was a child I spoke as a child,  
I understood as a child, but when I  
became a man, I put away childish things."

Paul's simply suggesting that there are some things that we need to outgrow. And I'm sure that all of you would agree with him that there are some things that are appropriate to one period of life but not appropriate to another. As children, we outgrew our childish clothes; We put away our childish toys; our interests change and the toys no longer fascinate us. We want other things to play with. But it's not

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quite as easy for us to put away childish ways. At least not some of them. We can't mention them all in a few minutes here this morning, but I would like to suggest to you one or two of them and perhaps as I do you'll see someone you know fitting into the picture.. Who knows, we might even see ourselves reflected in the situation.

Piano

A characteristic, or a trait, that we often see in a child at a certain age is a desire to show off. When they're in the center of a group and every eye is on them, they're extremely happy. There's nothing wrong with this at a certain period in the life of a child. It's part of their normal development, but when the child becomes an adult then that childish desire to show off should be put away. It should grow into something larger and more significant, the desire not to show yourself off, but to show something else that is good to other people.

On one occasion I clipped an article from the New Yorker magazine which I thought someday might help to illustrate ansermon. The article is about a woman whom I know nothing about and whose occupation I know even less about. The woman's name is Jean Rosenthal. Her life is spent arranging the lighting for some of the great plays of the Broadway Stage. She is one of the few persons that can be called an expert in the art of lighting. She goes about each play with the greatest care and skill. There was one line in the article that I would like to share with you. This was the line: WHEN PEOPLE NOTICE MISS ROSENTHAL'S LIGHTING, SHE IS OVERCOME BY A SENSE OF FAILURE. In other words, she isn't there to call attention to herself. Her object in life is not to show herself off, or her skill. Her object in life is to show off the stage and what's happening on it. And anything she can do by means of lights to create the right atmosphere so that people will not be at all conscious of the lighting she has done, that is success.

A mature person always has something of that quality. It always impresses me when I read the Gospels to see that there was some of that quality in Jesus. Dominating the scene as he did, never for one minute belittling himself or his ministry, never minimizing the thing that he had come into the world to do, yet always pointing to the Father who had sent him. Remember how when he healed the lame man at the pool, the man was so excited about being made well that he didn't think too much about the person who had healed him, and when people began to ask him who it was that had done it and where they could find him, he couldn't answer them because Jesus had slipped away into the dense crowd. He had done the thing he had wanted to do. He wanted no recognition. He didn't want to stand in the middle of the crowd and have every eye upon him saying, "Oh...look what he has done", and saying secretly to himself like the little child that hasn't grown up "Look at me. Look what I can do".

Yes, it's hard for us to outgrow some of our childish ways. It's hard for us to outgrow some of our childish thoughts too. For instance, we often think that people who are different are peculiar. This is childish thinking. If we see someone who fails to conform to an established pattern, right away we label him as odd and peculiar. The boy who isn't the athletic type, the student in college who refuses to join a fraternity or a sorcity, the person who doesn't always go along with the crowd - peculiar, odd and different. Our society insists on conformity, and the person who doesn't conform, the person who has the strength to be an

individualist, is labeled peculiar.

And right along with this thoughts goes the thought that my family is better than yours. Not only is my family better than yours, but my town is the best in the country. My college is the only one worth attending. My country is the only country worth mentioning, and in any kind of dispute, the other countries are always wrong. My church has something that no other church has. My church is the only church. When we find this kind of loyalty in a child, we consider it good, but when we find this kind of limited loyalty in an adult, then we're up against something that's not only unpleasant, but dangerous and unChristian.

I think we need to outgrow the lesser loyalties of childhood and grow up into the larger loyalties of maturity. We need to be reminded that we live in a world of two and a half billion people. All are different. These peoples speak 2,796 different languages. They are followers of ten great religions. And certainly a person has not grown up unless he has put away his childish thoughts about his own circle, his own family, his own town, his own church, and his own country and realizes that that loyalty, real as it is, and kept as it must be kept, must ultimately be lost in the larger loyalty to greater things.

Perhaps the hardest thing of all is to outgrow our childish religion. As children, we prayed to a God who was incredibly near to us. Sometimes we wish that we could recover it later on. As we grow up, we also grow in our realization that the religion of childhood just isn't adequate for us as adults. A child's religion, you see, always centers around himself. He and his world are the center and God exists to make the world bright, to bless his father and mother, to make it a good day for the picnic, to make his team victorious. And then comes that revolution which all of us ought to go through, but so many people fail to go through, the revolution through which we come to see that God is the center of things. We exist to glorify him, to do his will, to be used by him. God is no longer the heavenly Santa Claus receiving our letters and answering all of our personal requests. Only as we make this transition, making God the center, not ourselves, are we beginning to show signs of spiritual maturity.

THE SECOND CLUE In the beginning of this sermon, I suggested that there were two clues to this problem of growing up. The first one came from the Apostle Paul. The second one comes from Jesus. When you first hear it it may seem to you to be the exact opposite of what Paul was suggesting. Jesus said:

"Except you become like little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Paul suggest we outgrow our childish ways. Jesus suggests we become like little children and unless we become like little children, we'll never grow up. What's behind it all?

I think that Jesus is simply suggesting that all of us, in varying degrees, tend to lose something in the process of growing up. As we grow up and take our chances in the world of competition and rivalry, people let us down. We're disappointed more than once, not only by people, but by life. The dreams of life fade. We become hardened. We lose the trust that we had so naturally as a child.

We lose our capacity for growth, our freshness of outlook, our responsiveness to truth. As we go along through life, looking at the same things day after day, the same people day after day, living within the same four walls, we lose something. Life becomes dull.

By his words, Jesus is suggesting that we need to recover certain things, things that we lost in the process of growing up. He suggests that we need to recover our sense of trust and wonder. Of course these things won't be exactly the way that they were when we were children. They will be translated into terms of maturity. I've often thought of it in this fashion. Imagine a small boy, six or seven years of age, going off to camp for the first time. He's never been near the water before, but he takes to it, shall we say, the way a duck takes to water. He has no fear of it. He can't swim, but he goes right in anyway. He accepts it and enjoys it. But in the course of horseplay, the type which always takes place under such circumstances, an older boy, not realizing how small the younger boy is, pushes him under and for a few terrible moments he is in panic. He's drowning. He's rescued however. But he says, "Never again".... "I know too much about the water to risk it again" He's lost something. The summers go by and his parents try to do something to help him overcome his fear, but they're unable to find a solution. He goes off to camp again. An older boy, with his imagination, senses the situation and takes the small boy off by himself and says to him, "Here let me show you. There's nothing to fear about the water. You think you're afraid of the water because you know too much about it. The trouble is you don't know enough about it. There's something about the water that you don't know. Let me hold my arms under you and you relax your body. Let me show you how the water will hold you up". He does this. And the boy recovers his trust. It's a stronger trust, more durable than it was before because it's based on a greater understanding of the water.

You and I are like that little boy with his fear of the water. To be sure, we have different experiences. I'd go so far as to say that Jesus is something like that older boy. He's helped more people recover their trust and their wonder than anyone else in the pages of history. He comes to us when we think that life has treated us badly, and that we know so much about it that we'll never feel the same, and that we know too much about people to ever trust them again. He comes to us and he says something like this: "You think that goodness doesn't pay? Here let me show you. You don't know enough about life. Give yourself to something great. Let yourself go and you'll find that life will hold you in its arms to the very end. You've been hurt. You've suffered. You've been through some hard times. Remember I suffered. I was hurt. I went through some hard times, but somehow I found the measure of strength that I needed, and through it I found an entrance into the hearts of men everywhere. You think you've seen it all. You think there's nothing in life that can bring back your sense of trust and wonder that you had as a child. Look for me in every human face. Remember that every person you meet is a child of **Our** Father in Heaven. Life will never be dull if you do that. Look at every situation and see if you can find an opportunity to manifest something of my spirit. No situation will be dull if you do that.

Just a word briefly at the end. No one can grow up for you. Every person has to do it for himself. Certainly no sermon can do it. About all a sermon can do is to make you ~~aware~~ think about it and perhaps increase your awareness of where you stand at the moment.

The more we know about ourselves, the more we can then help ourselves. And perhaps then, in the long run, it may lead us to him who can draw us all out of our selfish, childish ways and thoughts and lift us up to the full stature of Christian maturity.

PRAYER: Help us, O God, as we grow physically, also to grow up emotionally and spiritually. Give us the grace to put away childish things, childish ways and thoughts so that we may attain unto the fullness and likeness of thy son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

NOT WHAT WE CAN GET OUT.  
" " " DO FOR IT.

One of the most difficult things for us to outgrow is our childish religion. God was incredibly near to us as children, wasn't he. He never seems to be as close to us in our adult years as he was back when we were little children. Most all of us wish we could recover something of that nearness. As we grow into adult manhood and womanhood, we sometimes grow in our realization that the religion of our childhood isn't capable to cope with the experiences of adulthood. If I were to offer some kind of a reason for this, I suppose it might be that in childhood everything centers around the child. He and his world are the center of everything and that God exists to make his world bright, to bless his father and mother, to make his team victorious, to make the following day a good day for the picnic. It brings to mind a personal experience. I remember when I was in fourth grade just how much I hated fractions. I couldn't seem to understand fractions, and whenever the teacher called on me to answer, I would turn red and wish I had never been sent to school. One occasion my mother and father were going out of town the next day. I thought how wonderful it would be if I could go along with them and avoid having to face the fraction experience at school. I stayed up all that night saying my prayers, asking God to somehow speak to my parents and persuade them to let me go with them. Next morning nothing happened. I got dressed and went off to school. The school doors were to open at nine. About ten of nine, I saw my father come walking into the play area along side of the school. They had decided to take me along with them. I thought at the time that God was running it pretty close, leaving it until ten to nine to make things happen. But my prayers were answered, and I didn't have to face the fractions. This simply points up that so much of our childhood religion centers around ourselves, and God simply exists to make things bright and happy for us. There comes a time when we need to go through a revolution, when we need to see that God is the center of things and that we exist to do his will, to glorify him, to be used by him. God is no longer the heavenly Santa Claus..... As we go through this revolution, we are taking important steps towards greater spiritual maturity.

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