

"THE MATURE KEEP GROWING"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

It's been said that you're only young once, but you can remain immature all of your life. And I believe it. Sometimes I suspect it of myself. As I think about it, the earliest and the most frequent admonition that I received was that I should grow up - spoken to me mostly by women.

I don't recall my mother ever telling me that. Mother was patient. But I can still hear my older sister saying to her adolescent brother, "Why don't you grow up?" It was a rhetorical question, of course, uttered about once a week before she went off to college.

And later as a freshmen in college I heard it occasionally from an attractive junior I was trying to impress. Observing my efforts, she asked me on occasion, "When are you going to grow up?"

As late as Seminary, a professor offered another variation on the same theme. She said, "Don't you think it's time that you grew up and took on some responsibility?"

So, dear friends, it was impressed upon me early on that I had not attained the goal of my life, which goal was never clearly defined but had something to do with being mature. What is maturity? And when does one achieve it?

FURTHER REFLECTION ON IT

At first I thought it must come at the age of twenty-one. Twenty-one was, after all, the age of maturity. But at twenty-one nothing really happened or changed. Maybe thirty. At thirty, you have responsibilities in vocation, marriage and parenthood. But at thirty, I learned that life is just more difficult than it used to be, and I knew less about it than I thought that I did. Well, maybe at forty, then, when you are supposed to be in command of all your powers, at the top of your game, as they say. But I just learned at forty that life doesn't get easier, it just seems to speed up.

Now I'm well into my fifties, so I thought it was time that I looked up "maturity" in the dictionary. What is maturity? I discovered there that maturity is defined as "developing fully; to come to perfection mentally and physically". I wondered if there was any hope, at least for myself.

TURNING TO PAUL

I turned to Paul. Paul doesn't say that maturity is reaching a goal. Nor is it developing your capacities fully or attaining perfection. Paul says maturity is accepting the fact that you won't do any of those, but reaching for them anyway.

Listen to him, from that wonderful Letter to the Philippians:

"Not that I have already attained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own".

Evidently Paul really wants to emphasize this because he virtually repeats it:

"Brothers (and sisters), I do not consider what I have

made my own. This one thing that I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus".

And then the punchline:

"Let those of us who are mature be thus minded."

A DEFINITION OF MATURITY

So we have a definition of maturity. There it is. Paul is suggesting to us that maturity is not reaching a goal, but realizing that life is a journey toward it, all of life.

"I have not obtained it. I am not perfect, but I press on!"

You find this everywhere in the Bible. The model life in the Bible is not "having arrived", but "being in transit". Everyone is in transit. Abraham and Sarah on a journey to The Promised Land that they would never find. Moses and the Israelites on an Exodus through the wilderness to the land that their children would enter, but not them. Jacob, the young hustler, the trickster, accumulating wealth, but all his life looking for something else that he couldn't grab, but only be given to him. Jesus, heading for Jerusalem, with "no place to lay His head".

The Twenty-Third Psalm, the Psalter selection for this morning, says that life is a pilgrimage through valleys green and valleys shadowed by the spectre of death. It's a pilgrim's song. And the pilgrim's goal is to dwell in the House of the Lord. But now, she or he, is on a journey toward the House of the Lord. "Here on earth we have no continuing place."

And in the Letter to the Hebrews, that famous chapter on faith, faith is defined as if it were for pilgrims, for those who have not yet arrived. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." And then in that same chapter, it names the heroes and heroines of the Old Testament, all of them travelers toward a goal, and concludes that all of them, though faithful, did not receive what was promised.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

You find it everywhere in the Bible. Maturity is not reaching a goal, but the realization that life is a life-long journey toward a goal that you never reach.

And that coincided with an awful lot of wisdom of this life, secular wisdom, especially in the literature of heroism, from The Odyssey to Huckleberry Finn. And in the testimony of those who have put themselves to the test.

AN ILLUSTRATION

William Broyles, the former editor of Newsweek magazine did that. He told about it in a commencement address to the graduates of Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia last May. His subject was

success. He had their attention and concluded his speech by telling of his own experience climbing a mountain in the Andes, 23,000 feet high, named Aconcagua, the tallest mountain in the Western hemisphere.

He had never climbed a mountain before. He was afraid of heights, and that's one reason, he said, he did it. He also did it because climbing a mountain like that is an enormous challenge to whomever attempts it. In a marvelous phrase he said, "You can't show a mountain your resume". It won't be impressed.

They started climbing at 9,000 feet. They built a camp at 14,000 feet, another camp at 18,000 feet, and then moved on to 19,000 feet. To this point he was trying to keep up with the other climbers who were in their twenties and who ran marathons on their weekends. He was a competitive man so he tried to keep up with them. But the problem was, he said, "he wanted to be young - they were young". And that's when he realized that the battle, the struggle, "was not between them and me, but between the mountain and me".

And so he picked up some wisdom about competition early on in the hike up the mountain. There would be more.

From 19,000 feet they tried for the summit. Up at 5 am one morning, they prepared to make the ascent. It was 20 degrees below zero. At 20,000 feet, he said he was taking 8 breaths for every step. He wanted to stop, but something inside of him kept saying, "Up, up, up!" He kept going.

The last 1,000 feet toward the summit took three hours, but he made it and stood at the top of a 23,000 foot mountain. It's an amazing accomplishment for anybody.

He said that up there he had expected some profound thoughts, some revelations about the meaning of life that he would be able to take down from the mountain, some secret about the mystery of life that he could share with others. But, he said, "Up there on the top, I had only one thought, 'Get me down from here!'" . He was up there only five minutes. Whereas all day long he had been saying to himself, "Up, up, up!" - now he was saying, "down, down, down!"

He said,

"I realized that making it really didn't mean what I thought it would. The important thing was not the summit, but the journey".

And then he quoted Mallory, you remember, the man who climbed Everest, who, when asked why he did it, responded, "Because it ~~is~~ there". But Broyles said,

"That is not the way I would answer that question. I didn't climb it because it was there, I climbed it because I was there".

AN INSIGHT

And that's a tremendous insight. What it says is that mountains don't challenge us, something inside of us challenges mountains. There is something inside of us that is discontent with life as it

is. There is something in us that is never completely satisfied. There is something in us that won't let us settle down, but prods us always to take on new adventures, new mountains. There is something that tells you when you have done something well, you could do it better...something in you that tells you when you are smugly self-satisfied with your life, that you could be better.

And that's what we are seeing in Paul. "I have not obtained this, but I press on." I can just imagine the Philippians reading that line in the letter and saying to themselves, "If Paul hasn't reached perfection, then who can?" Paul was touched with genius. His accomplishments were the stuff out of which legends are made, and legends were made about Paul. He was venerated in the Philippian Church and many other churches.

HIS GOAL: THE KINGDOM OF GOD

But Paul never said, "I've done enough now. I'll just sit back for a while now and enjoy my accomplishments...keep a low profile". And the reason he didn't do that was because Paul made his goal the Kingdom of God, an impossible goal in this world, so grand a goal that it couldn't be contained in this world, and would be realizable only in the next world. Or, as Paul believed, at some time in the future in this world, at God's initiative. The point is that Paul started a journey toward the Kingdom of God in this life. Paul became the citizen of that Kingdom and began to live like it, and began to make the world look like it.

It was an impossible goal. It was doomed to failure. And I can just hear somebody saying to Paul, "These teachings of Jesus about the kingdom are... well, they're really impractical...they will never work in this world...you're chasing a pipe dream". You know what Paul would say to that. He'd say,

"Then you have something now worthy of all of your energies as a child of God. It will not only make a difference in your life...you striving for that kingdom...it just might make a difference in the world".

If you are waiting for some mountain to challenge you, then you've got it all wrong. The way the Bible sees it, there is something in you that is waiting to challenge a mountain. And you're not really going to be your full self, you're not really going to be the person that God created you to be until you put away all of those manageable goals, all of those five year plans that you have outlined for being a success in this world, and give yourself to something that is greater than yourself, like "the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus".

That's what Paul did. He took on an impossible goal in his life. He admits it. He says, "I have not obtained it". And he believed, furthermore, that he never would, not in this life. But he "pressed on to make it his own because Christ Jesus had made him his own". That's the secret, that's the clue. That's what empowered Paul. "Christ made me His own". That's what enabled him to live with the imperfections in his life, to find the strength to keep going after failure, to have honesty about who he really was, the knowledge that in Christ God has already forgiven us. Which means that I don't need to be perfect, but I can do my best and know that that's all that is expected of me.

And the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that that's what Paul means by maturity. The realization that I am not perfect, the grace to accept that fact about myself, and the courage to keep on going in spite of it.

MATURITY IN HUMAN BEINGS

Maturity in human beings is not the way the dictionary defines it...reaching some state of full development or perfection. Maybe that's what maturity means in animals, but not in human beings. Some of you own a cat. Someone once said that when fully developed, cats think only about two things: sex and food. And if you have them fixed, that leaves only one. Your cat may be mature...existing in the blissful state of altered maturity, which means that he eats and sleeps and doesn't worry about anything else.

But - you and I can't do that. There's something inside of us that won't let us do that. There's something inside of us that wants to challenge mountains and the gifts of maturity, I believe, will come as the "by-products" of that adventure.

And when I stop to think of what those would be, what it would look like, I think of those things that I want most in my life. I want to be myself and to like myself. I want patience with the mistakes of others. And I want humility - genuine humility - that rejoices in the victories of others. And I want courage always to do the right thing, no matter what the cost. And I want perspective in my life that leads me to number my days, lest I miss the joy of living and it passes me by.

ON WITH THE LIST

I could probably go on with the list, and so could you, listing those qualities of life that characterize the mature. And I bet they would probably be those things that you want most in your life. And I'll wager this...that every one of them will come as a by-product of your taking on a challenging experience in your life. Self-knowledge. Patience. Humility. Courage. Wisdom. No self-help book in this world is going to give you those. Those are the gifts that come only from the journey. Yes, life's a journey - not a destination. "And let those of us who are mature" said Paul, "be thus minded."

Pascal once said that human beings are a mixture of misery and of grandeur. There is so much evidence in this world of human misery. Paul is telling the Philippians here,

"Why don't you provide the evidence for the grandeur?
You're not perfect, and you never will be, but press on....press on to make it your own, because Christ Jesus has made you His own".

SHALL WE PRAY

O God, we thank you for those people like Paul, mature in their faith and commitment to Christ, who by their example make us feel better about the entire human race. Help us now to forget what lies behind and to strain forward to what lies ahead...in the days of this coming week, in the Lenten season in to which we enter...pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ. Whatever is true, honorable, pure, lovely, gracious...let us grow in grace and in knowledge of your will. As did your servant, Paul. Amen.