

"THIS MATTER OF GROWTH"

INTRODUCTION This morning, I want to talk to you for a few minutes about growth - not in broad, general terms, but in specifically human terms. Growth - as that mysterious and often painful process by which we human beings gradually change and mature. I feel it's a very important subject, because it is so close to the very heart and center of life, and because so many of us are apt to forget that growth is implicit in life and if we can't forget about growth, we try to resist it.

WE TAKE GROWTH FOR GRANTED... To begin with, when we're young, I think, we take growth for granted. We look forward to what's ahead. There's anticipation. There's excitement. We're on the rise. We're going places. It really doesn't matter what age you are when you're young - four, eight, twelve, sixteen, twenty, twenty-five - the next stage of life is what being grown up really is, and we look forward to the wonder, the thrill, and the freedom of that particular stage in life. And I think this too, that from the beginning, we seem to know that growth is not always easy. Take for instance a little child first learning how to walk. He's thrilled the first time he takes a step on his own. But probably, before he becomes solid and steady on his own feet, he'll have crashed and tumbled to the floor many times.

Or take a teen-age girl going to her first dance. Panic is in the air, but so is thrill and expectancy. Somehow she manages to pull herself together, she goes to the dance, and she makes the grade. Or take a young man who has travelled a thousand miles from home to attend a university in a large city. Perhaps he's away from home for the first time, from his parents, from his boyhood friends. He lives in a large strange building called a dormitory with hundreds of strange faces. He has many adjustments to make and he's confronted with many fears. Sometimes in the process he goes through that heart-breaking period of homesickness, but usually in the long run, his eagerness and his desire to make good far outweigh any doubts and discouragements. And so, shall we say, he comes to New York City, and somehow struggles and makes the grade.

GROWING IS NOT ALWAYS EASY... And so we begin to see that growing is not always easy, but when we're young, we want to grow. Great dreams of the future keep us going. The fact that others have made it, and that we've come this far, keeps us eager and willing to take what comes along. In the midst of difficulty, we respond and we grow! But on the other hand, it really is amazing how very soon in life we lose this sense of adventure, and this spirit of eagerness. All too soon, we reach that point where we feel that we've done all the growing that's necessary. We've done all the stretching that we can. Perhaps we're still aware of growth, but like so many other things in life, it's for children and young people, and not for us. We begin to resist growth. We feel we're too old to change our ways. We become lazy. Spiritually, socially, physically, mentally. We want to consolidate ourselves. We want to settle down into some snug and secure spot, and avoid change.

Now I don't know what your experiences tell you, but mine tell me this, that we human beings do not grow unless circumstances force us to do so. And when change confronts us, we either respond and grow in the experience, or we resist and begin to disintegrate. And if we resist growth, we usually end up being unhappy, and end up making others unhappy.

WHY DO WE RESIST
GROWTH.....

I wonder if you've ever stopped to consider why a person stops growing. Why do we adults resist growth? I suppose there are many reasons involved, and I don't pretend to know all of the reasons, but I would like to suggest one reason why so many of us resist growth, and as I do, perhaps you'll see yourself, to an extent, fitting into the picture.

To begin with, I think that all of us are SELF CENTERED. What I mean by this is that all of us want to get out of life, just what we want. I think that all of us want to control life, to manipulate our own careers, to manipulate the people around us. All of us have the desire to fix things so that we can get just what we want and perhaps feel we need. In a sense, we become the center of our own universe, and sometimes when reality presses in on us and makes us change, we resist. Take for example, a successful person, let us say, in business. He does well. After a great deal of hard work and struggle, he gets to just where he wants to be. He has financial security. He has a fine family. He has a pleasant life. He has all of those things which today are the earmarks of success. He has everything, and maybe he really has. He may have been growing steadily in all of this. Certainly success and happiness can be a great stimuli to growth. But they can also be terribly dangerous. They can lull him into thinking that what he has he deserves, and what he has he will have forever. He may become self-indulgent and soft. He may become cautious and conservative. "Keep the status quo at all costs" becomes his motto. I suppose it is to this side of you and me that Jesus said:

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume, and thieves break in and steal."

I think Jesus would say that the corruption is not so much in the treasure, but rather in ourselves. And he would caution us to be careful that success and wealth and security do not lull us into a comfortable sleep destroying our capacity and our need to grow, and stretch and serve. In our own way, all of are are like this!

MANY WAYS IN WHICH
WE RESIST CHANGE

I think that there are many ways in which all of us resist change and growth. And I feel that sometimes all of us resist change because we fear that we may have to grow a little, and underlying this is an element of fear. Several years ago I knew a young man, who having done well in his first three years of college, began to fail miserably in his senior year. He couldn't get his papers in on time. He couldn't pass his exams. He just couldn't settle down and produce. When he was finally able to talk about it, it came out that he was afraid to graduate. He was afraid to go out into the world and have to make his own living. He was afraid, and so in part, either consciously or unconsciously, he was failing on purpose. Perhaps you've known people who feared graduation from college. They fear the lack of security which college has given them. They fear the

responsibility of having to make their own way, and the loneliness of being away from close friends.

For some there's the fear of getting married. The risks are just too great. The thing they want the most they dare not accept. For others there's the fear of simply moving from place to another. And so we begin to see that growth and change are hard and difficult and that resistance - giving in, running away - is much easier.

One could go on and mention other examples. There's the man who turns down a new job offer, not because he really wants to stay where he is, but because he's afraid of new responsibilities and new demands that might be made upon him. Or there's the woman who is unhappy in her present job, and yet can't muster up the courage to go out and find a new one. There's the person who has experienced failure in life, and vows never to risk it again, and so begins to decay. There are parents, possessive parents, who fear losing their children, who smother their children with selfish love, who cannot bear to have them grow up and leave them, who are hurt and bitter when the children revolt and leave them alone, who cannot grow themselves enough to allow their children to grow. And there are many aspects of the fear of growing old, not only of no longer being the center of a family, but let us say simply the fear of losing one's physical strength and one's creative touch. There's the fear of retiring, of no longer being necessary and useful, of becoming a has-been.

And then of course there is the fear of death. Not only the fear of our own death, but also the fear of losing loved ones upon whom we depend. I think that every one of these situations is the same in this respect that the very fear of them often leads us to resist them, and when we're confronted with them instead of growing and stretching and reaching out to take in these experiences, we resist - we fight them, we try not to accept them, and in the process we become bitter, and unhappy. Life will not let us alone. All of us have to grow, or else we decay. All of us have to lose what we have. All of us lose those who are closest to us. All of us have to die. We do not like to think about these things because they're very hard to accept. Life is not easy.

And so perhaps we begin to see a little more clearly that every bit of growing and stretching that a person does in life involves some pain and struggle. It's a law of life. Nothing of value comes in life without some sacrifice. But it's also true that God has created us to grow and to mature. He has created us free men and women. He doesn't protect us or shield us from life, but he gives us the necessary equipment to handle life. Rather than resisting life, he wants us to go out and meet it, to accept it, and to grow through it.

What a wonderful Gospel we have! It filled with the good news that we need not be afraid to grow, no matter how hard, no matter what we have to go through. It's filled with the good news that we need not fear even death itself, because God goes with us all the way. It's the self centered person in all of us that's afraid to grow, and so loses life by trying to save it. But it's the God centered person that's in all of us that wants to grow. At times it's difficult, but if we trust him, I think we shall find greater life by being willing to lose it!

I'd like to close with a story by Ernest Hemingway. It's entitled "Indian Camp", and some of you are probably familiar with the story. It's about a doctor who is called late one night to cross a lake to a camp where an Indian woman is in the agony of childbirth. She's been this way for some time, and is very sick. The doctor decides to take his eleven year old son, Nickie, along with him on this case. And so the two of them row across the lake to the camp late at night.

In the cabin, the Indian woman is still screaming. Two women are there with her trying to help, and her husband is on the top bunk over her. As the doctor and his son, Nickie, enter the cabin, the woman lets out a terrible scream, and her husband rolls over in agony and faces the wall. The doctor takes a minute to explain the situation and the screaming to his son, and then proceeds to perform a Caesarean operation. A little while later a baby boy is born safely, and there's peace in the cabin at last.

The doctor, elated with the success of the hard operation, reaches up to congratulate the new father. He pokes him once or twice and getting no response, rolls him over. As he does, he discovers that the Indian has cut his throat from ear to ear with a razor. "Take Nickie out of the cabin" he says quickly to one of the Indian women present. But there was no need to, for Nickie had a good view of the upper bunk and saw what had happened. The Indian was bleeding to death.

It was just beginning to be daylight as Nickie and his father walked along the road leading to the lake. The doctor turned and said, "I'm terribly sorry that I brought you along Nick. It was a horrible thing for you to see". "Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies, daddy" "No, Nickie that was exceptional". "Why did he kill himself daddy?" "I don't know Nickie. I suppose he just couldn't stand some things" "Do many men kill themselves daddy?" "No....not many" "Do many women" "No hardly ever" "Daddy....yes Nickie...." "Is dying hard?" "No I think it's pretty easy, Nick" "It all depends"

They were seated in the boat, Nick in the stern, and his father rowing. The sun was just beginning to come over the hills. A fish jumped in the water, making a circle. Nickie trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the cool freshness of the morning. In the early morning, sitting in the boat with his father rowing, Nick felt sure that he would never die. His father was not afraid, so Nick was not afraid. Their relationship was such that nothing, not even death, was a cause of concern.

God, our Father, does not save us from the pains of growth. He does not save us from trial, trouble, sorrow and death. But he goes with us all the way. And because of him our fears can be conquered, and because of Him we know that "whosoever liveth and believeth in Him shall never die."

LET US PRAY: Our Heavenly Father, we stretch our hearts and our minds and our understanding, and as we do we come to see and to comprehend that Thou art our God - the companion, the friend, and the master of our every day.