

The Need to Change and Grow

Luke 2:52, II Corinthians 2:17-18

One of the seven needs of children, says Dr. Seuss, is the need to change and grow. This need continues our whole lives.

Jesus too! In one of the few glimpses we get of Jesus' boyhood Luke writes: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and others" (Luke 2:52).

There it is: intellectual growth, physical growth, spiritual growth and social growth. I hope we never stop growing and changing.

I

Parents are called to care for the mental, physical, spiritual and social growth of their children. Teachers and the church are their allies. Nutrition, instruction, spiritual guidance, socialization!

We celebrate moments of physical growth in our children: the first step, the first words, the first haircut, the first book they read.

There are the transition events as they move toward adulthood: graduation from one grade to another, one school to another, as we did for our graduates and

students last month. In the Jewish tradition there is the marvelous celebration of young manhood and womanhood in the *bar-mitzvah* and *bat-mitzvah*.

Sometimes in our Baptist tradition such things happen when young people are baptized.

What about the momentous transition at 16 when young people get their driver's license. We could call it a *Car-mitzvah*!

II

Jesus grew and changed. He did not spring fully-formed like Minerva from the head of Zeus.

He was brought up in an observant Jewish home. He studied with rabbis at the synagogue in Nazareth. At 12 he astounded the teachers in the Temple in Jerusalem with his prodigious learning.

You know the story. He had gotten lost from his parents as they set out with the town caravan to return to Nazareth. When they discovered he was not with them, they rushed frantically back to Jerusalem and found him in the Temple. His mother said to him: "Why have you treated us like this? We were worried sick!" (That's my Southern English Standard Revised Version of the Bible)

We know nothing about Jesus' life from that moment at age 12 until his baptism at age 30. My ministry colleague Cheryl Patterson guesses that this was

because he was grounded for 18 years! We today have learned that four miles from Nazareth was a Roman cosmopolitan city, Sapphoris, where Joseph and Jesus may have worked as craftsmen on its many building projects. It was a crossroads city for people traveling from all over the known world, from Rome to India. I bet Jesus absorbed a lot during those years.

But Jesus not only grew, he *changed!* He had great reverence for the teachings of his faith, but he went beyond them and sometimes challenged them. Five times in the Sermon on the Mount he said, “You have heard it said of old...but now I say to you.” That may have rattled his parents and early teachers, not to mention a whole company of scribes and rabbis.

He also changed the direction and scope of his ministry. His mission expanded beyond the Jews to include Samaritans and Romans and those who were called “pagans”. From the “lost sheep of Israel” to lost sheep everywhere!

In my last book there was a chapter on Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman. In it I suggested that she changed his mind, not just about helping her sick child but also in the enlarging of his mission to include people like her. The notion of Jesus changing his mind made my editor a little nervous, as well as some of my readers. The Son of God changing?!

The early doctrine about Christ said that he was “truly man and truly God”, or as I prefer to put it, “genuine humanity and genuine divine presence.” And his “genuine humanity” meant his brain grew, his body grew, his wisdom grew and his mission grew. Jesus changed and grew!

III

Jesus also calls us to change and grow. He asked *everybody* to change. As he came preaching he said, “Turn, turn around, repent and believe the good news; the kingdom of God is at hand.” The Hebrew word for “repent” was *Shuv*, turn, turn around, back to God. The N.T. Greek word was *metanoia*, to be given a new mind.

He asks everyone to change, change not in the ways that the people might want us to change, but as *God* wants us to change, and as we most need to change. I’ve had more than a few people through the years tell me what God’s will was for me. Most times what they had in mind was how *they* wanted me to change.

He asked Matthew to give up his job as a tax-collector. It was hurting people. He asked the four fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James and John to turn in their fishing nets and begin making nets to catch people, save people.

He asked Magdalene, Suzanna and the wife of Chuza to follow him on the road, and they did (Luke 8:1-3). Yes, the woman who was the wife of Herod's steward, Herod, the one who had John the Baptist put to death and Herod, the one who wanted to do the same to Jesus. I'd love to know how she and her husband worked that out!

He asked the rich young ruler to give up his riches, give them to the poor and come follow him. The young man said no. (Jesus didn't always succeed, then or now.) But later on he spied Zacchaeus up a tree, a chief tax collector and very rich, rich off the backs of others. He invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house, and in the middle of the meal Zacchaeus put down his fork and announced, "I will give half of all I have to the poor, and to all I've defrauded I'll repay to them four-fold." And Jesus said, "Salvation just moved into this house!"

One day he brought a child to him and said, "Unless you change, (yes that's the word, change), and become like children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). What does it mean to become like a child? At least these two things: full-out need and full-out wonder. We come to Christ with our need only and with hearts open to wonder.

I think we all resist change. And it doesn't get any easier as we grow older. We can suffer what someone called "categorical-sclerosis", the hardening of the categories.

But often something needs to die in order for something else to be born. "Truly, truly", Jesus said, "unless a seed falls into the ground and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

Sometimes we need to be emptied before we can be filled. Sometimes we must let go of something we need to let go of that we may more truly live. Anne Lamott writes: "Of course, I've always said that every single thing I've let go of has claw marks on it. It's not my strong suit."

Sometimes the change does not happen all at once, and sometimes it can be barely perceptible to us, but the change comes. Paul said that as we gaze upon Christ we are being changed into his likeness "from one degree of glory to another"(2 Corinthians 3:18). This is my hope, that as I gaze upon him, learn from him, try to live like him I am becoming more like him—which doesn't mean human perfection, whatever *that* is, but moving toward the perfection of love we saw in Jesus in his human life.

Sometimes I fall embarrassingly short, and sometimes I fail miserably. But I think I am gaining on it, and I'm willing to bear the pain of getting it wrong for the privilege of trying to get it right.

Dorothy Day was one of the great saints and most remarkable persons of the 20th century. She was a radical Catholic social reformer who established The Catholic Worker newspaper and started a number of ministries with and for the poor of New York City, and beyond. Once she was being interviewed by Harvard's Robert Coles. He asked if she had any plans to write a memoir. She said that one day she did. She took out a piece of paper and wrote down the title "A Life Remembered". Then she said to Coles,

I just sat there and thought of our Lord, and his visit to us those centuries ago, and said to myself that my great luck was to have had Him on my mind for so long in my life.

It has been my great luck to have had him on my mind for so long in my life. And ours too. Who knows all that that has meant in the formation and direction of our lives with him on our minds.

V

The essential change is growing in our love of God and neighbor. That's the main thing Jesus was about. The two loves, of course, go together. A 4th century

desert father drew a circle, then a number of spoke-like lines from the circumference to the center. As the lines came closer to the center so the lines drew closer to each other. As we travel closer to the center of God's light and love we draw closer to our neighbor. The reverse happens too: as we grow in the love of our neighbor, we grow in our love of God, whether we know it or not, or believe it or not.

There is also moral growth. The contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty says: "Moral progress is a matter of wider and wider sympathy." This is what Jesus was doing; expanding our sympathies with other people and other living things, expanding the definition of neighbor wider and wider until there was no one outside the circle.

Our current moment of racial reckoning is calling us to a wider and wider sympathy, especially with those who have suffered systemic racism and the legacy of centuries of racial inequity.

There are experiences in our lives, both beautiful and painful, which have given us a wider and wider sympathy.

A wider and wider sympathy

A stronger and stronger courage

A deeper and deeper love.

Let's grow there!