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Ephesians 4:1-15
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LIFE'S PROPER PURPOSE

". . . grow up into him in all things, which
is the head, even Christ."

--Ephesians 4:15

Shortly before Thanksgiving Day my wife and I were driving on a nearby Wauwatosa street, when we passed a florists's shop which has in front of it a large illuminated sign used for advertising. On the sign were the words, "Thanksgiving First".

The sign conveyed several thoughts to my mind, the first one being that it would be appropriate for each of us to thank God for the blessings we already have before petitioning him for further gifts. Thanksgiving comes first. The florist intended the sign to mean, no doubt, that one should take care of Thanksgiving shopping before he began to think of Christmas. "Thanksgiving First."

My wife and I agreed that we were all for that--first things first, one thing at a time, and all the rest. Don't rush Christmas, get Thanksgiving over with first. The day we noticed the sign, however, we were out doing some of our Christmas shopping.

But now Thanksgiving is over and we can with full justification turn our attention to Christmas. If there is one passage from the Bible which we might well keep in mind during the whole of this approaching Advent season, and which deals with the subject I am particularly concerned with this morning, it is that passage we repeat here at the baptismal font every time we baptize a child. After he tells of Jesus' birth and childhood, Luke concludes by stating, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man."

That I take to be life's proper purpose for every person--to grow; physically, mentally and spiritually. The minute we stop growing we commence dying, which explains why some people are old at the age of 30 and some still young at 90.

II

Perhaps the primary reason human beings surpass the other animals in intelligence is that for a much longer time the child remains with its family and continues to learn and be loved. This is an extremely significant fact which few people ever stop to consider. The average human child remains in the bosom of his family, loved and cared for and continually learning, anywhere from 17 to 20 years. That gives him a great advantage over the animal which continues with its parents for only a few weeks or months and stops learning at a very early age. Such animals may continue to grow physically, but

mentally they are pretty much at the end of the line when the parent ejects them out into the hard cruel world.

I have given this matter renewed thought during the past several weeks as one of my sons has become an entrepreneur and arises at 5:00 a.m. each morning to deliver newspapers. On a number of occasions, influenced either by pity, an alarm clock which failed to function, or my wife's gentle persuasions, I have joined him in his early morning rounds. I can commend those early morning hours to you. They are beautiful and exceedingly quiet.

But as I have walked through my neighborhood just as the day was beginning to brighten, I have noticed many things which I never noticed before. I realize anew that children and youth learn much more quickly than we adults because they are much more open and leisurely in taking in this world around them. I venture to suggest that in your case as well as mine, your children know the names of more people in the neighborhood than you do. They know who lives where, what the back yard looks like, how many children are in each family, whether they go to church, what the father does for a living, and how many TV's they have. You and I go racing through the streets in our automobiles and seldom learn a thing. We don't even stop to consider that there might just be something worth learning in our own neighborhood. If we would learn how to look at our total environment with leisurely childlike vision the world would become a new and more wonderful place every morning.

Now I would be the first to insist that parents are the greatest thing that ever happened to children, but I would also have to admit that it is often the parents' fault that children stop, or at least greatly decelerate their rate of growth. We tell them, and sometimes it is necessary to tell them, to stop doing this, stop doing that, and that this or that is dangerous or risky. As a result, if we are not exceedingly careful, we stifle their exploratory instincts, their imagination and the love of learning which should continue and even increase as long as they live. There are many teachers who also share responsibility for this tragedy.

"Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that this process ever stopped, short of the crucifixion.

III

Let us now jump from childhood to youth. Many there are who speak as if childhood and youth were the greatest time of life. It does have its moments and its advantages. But being well past that stage, my own conviction is that youth is highly over-rated. When I was a teenager, and also in my early twenties, I was afraid of many things which are no longer fearsome to me. I was afraid I might not be popular, that I might not get a good grade, that life might be too much for me.

Those fears haunt me no longer. Some of them, I must confess, have been replaced by other concerns, but I am much better prepared to meet those new concerns than those I had to meet when I was young.

It is both tragic and ludicrous that many people stop growing during this period of their life. Their intellectual curiosity dies or is smothered. They have the greatest opportunity life will ever afford to go on growing and expanding their mental and spiritual horizons, and so much of this opportunity is wasted or ignored. Many, when they graduate from school, never so much as crack a book for the rest of their lives. Their mental and spiritual growth is limited to the infinitesimal amount of challenging material offered them by radio and television.

For all practical purposes, these people have stopped growing, stopped fulfilling the purpose for which God gave them life. Instead of being tools and instruments which God can use to help fashion a better world, they have (and this may sound very harsh) become impediments to that better world. Growth is life's business, but for many people business is bankrupt by the time they are 25 or 30 years of age.

IV

Then come those middle years. Theoretically I should know more about those years than others for I am in them. I doubt sometimes, however, that such is the case.

The middle years are probably those in which we are the most busy, the most productive, and the most harrassed. But for precisely that reason they can be very productive years for our continual growth.

During those years we worry about our children, and then quite frequently just about the time our children are through with school and about to marry and settle down and not require so much of our concern, we have to start worrying about our aging parents.

But worry, concern, problems, difficulties, in this or any period of life, are part of God's method of helping us grow. Meeting challenges, responding to them positively, we can continue to learn. Strangely enough, we adults are always urging our children to learn by their experiences, but often fail to learn by our own. One of the saddest sights in life is to witness that adult who faces challenge and difficulty by lamenting, "Why did this have to happen to me?" Or, "Why did God do this to me?" You will learn the answer to those questions only as you face the challenge and respond to it with the best that you have.

During those middle years is when we are in greatest danger of developing a mind set that will very reluctantly accept change. Those of you who remember the old radio show, Amos and Andy, will

recall that Andy would always respond to any financial deal with the remark, "I'm for it. What is it?" We middle agers easily tend to do the opposite and respond to any proposed change, "I'm against it. What is it?" This attitude can certainly keep us from growing.

V

Then comes the last of life, "for which the first was made", as one poet once put it, and which I have always felt was a kind of inane observation.

There is an awful lot of nonsense spoken and believed about old age. True, the body does not ordinarily function as well as it did fifty years previous. But a lot of this is in the mind. Dr. T. K. Cureton, a pioneer in physical reconditioning, has taken decrepit, feeble men of 50, 60, and even 70 years of age, and at the end of a two-year period of training has had them running five miles a day. They feel better and medical tests show improvement in heart function and other vital organs.

The other night I spoke with a faculty member of the Marquette medical school who reiterated that the human body was a wonderful organism made to last much longer than it usually does, and that if we learned how to use it properly and put into it the proper things, it could serve us far better than it usually does and for a much longer time.

Dr. Martin Gumpert, author of You Are Younger Than You Think, says that the normal person is at his best mental period between 40 and 70.

Dr. W. R. Miles of Yale, testing people from age 10 to 89, found that learning ability and imagination can stay at a high level all through life and that the reason a lot of people stop growing early is that their emotions get in the way. They think their days of growth and development are over and they put themselves on the shelf.

Dr. Maxwell Maltz, author of Psycho-Cybernetics, puts it a different way. Speaking of the ordeal of retirement he says,

"It is not retiring from a job that kills these men,
it is retiring from life."

You can go on growing right up to the very end of life, and God intended that you should.

VI

Now let me sum up. Life is meant to be a continuing process of growth. That's the only way it can have any meaning or make any sense. Both science and religion more and more are telling us that this is the case.

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If, however, we are to go on growing, we must develop a philosophy of growth, and a training program equal to the task. Growth is not automatic. Neither men nor the world get better and better, every day, in every way. We have long since given up that shibboleth. Growth must be intentional and deliberate. Today's outward disasters, both social and personal, demonstrate man's inward bankruptcy. The more control we gain over things and our environment, the less we seem to have over ourselves.

All this must change. We must make mental and spiritual growth our supreme goal, and until we know our end, we cannot select the proper means. Having selected growth as our life's proper purpose, then all we are and all we do must serve that one purpose or be eliminated. In no other way can we "grow up unto him in all things which is the head, even Christ."