

"CHILDREN OF GOD"
April 13, 1991

TEXT: 1 John 3:1 "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."

When I was a young boy growing up in a suburb of Chicago, there was no television to keep us company when we got sick. Instead, we listened to the radio. And I remember two programs in particular. One was Don McNeil and the Breakfast Club, which came on early in the morning. And the other was the National Farm and Home Hour which came on about noon. I remember the latter because every day, no matter how terrible the weather, it always began with these words: "It's a beee-utiful day in Chicago."

Well, I know it is chilly out. And I know it is rainy. And I know it is likely to stay that way. But "It's a beee-utiful day in Milwaukee." It is a beautiful day for the Muths for our paratrooper son is here with us after eight months in the Persian Gulf. And it is a beautiful day for this church because this morning thirty-two new members are joining our fellowship. As we told them a few moments ago, we welcome them with great joy, but what is it that we welcome them to?

The most obvious answer, of course, is "to this church." But what does that mean? What is a church? More specifically, what is this church? What is it here for? What does it do? And what do we do because we are a part of it? Our Covenant says we are here for the object of worshipping God and of making God's will dominant in the lives of men. And that is just fine as far as it goes. But it seems to me that leaves something out. Something without which neither our worship nor our service can ever be what they ought to be.

That "something" is personal Christian growth. In our Scripture this morning we read, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." And what do children do? They grow! One compensation Peggy and I had while Peter was in the Persian Gulf was having our grandson, Jared, with us. And it has been fascinating to watch him grow, not just physically, but in personality as well.

As God's children, we, too, need to grow. Leighton Ford writes, "God loves us the way we are, but he loves us too much to leave us that way." And John suggests much the same when he writes, ". . . it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2) Growth is a large part of what it means to be a church and to be a Christian. Even Jesus had to

grow, and we read in Luke's gospel that he "increased in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and man." (Luke 2:52)

Without growth, our worship can remain childish and our service weak. After all, as delightful as they are, children are basically self-centered. When a baby is hungry, or dirty, or lonely, the only thing he wants from those around him is his having his needs met. And, unless we are careful, we can find ourselves looking to God the same way.

I hope most of us are too mature spiritually to think of God as some kind of celestial bell-hop Who is supposed to get us everything we ask for. But there is probably still a lot of truth in the old story about two angels. The way I heard it, God chose two angels and sent them to earth to gather up all the prayers and bring them back to heaven. One was told to collect all the petitions and the other all the "Thank-you's." But, when they had finished their work, the angel with the requests was so weighed down she could hardly fly, while the one with the "Thank-you's" had scarcely anything to carry.

Now, do not get me wrong! I am not saying that it is wrong to ask God for things. St. Paul writes, "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Philippians 4:6) And sometimes God gives us what we want. But sometimes He loves us too much to do so.

But either way, the real answer to prayer is not in this or that, but in God, Himself. After telling us to make our requests known, St. Paul went on to say, "And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7) That is the real answer to prayer and, indeed, its foremost purpose, to know and experience the peace of God. But sometimes we need to grow before we realize that.

In the same way, many people seem to think that the Church exists to meet their needs. And why not? Our free society, and our Congregational freedoms encourage us to think that way. When we move into a new community, we go looking for a church. And what could be more natural than to look for one which "meets our needs." When I was teaching, I moved several times, and went through that very process.

But, once we have a church, there ought to be a change in our thinking. Once we have found a place where our needs are met, we ought to think less about ourselves and more about God, more about the church, and more about others. Jesus said, "The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve. And only by following his example can we fulfill the covenant we affirmed together this morning. Only then can our worship and our service be freed to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:18)

Centuries ago there was a great Christian Bishop by the name of Augustine. But he was not always a Christian. As a young man, he had given himself to a constant search for pleasure, just as many do today. It was that search which led him to Rome and then to Milan, where he finally became a Christian. At last he found the thing, or rather the One, who alone could fill his emptiness. And he wrote, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and the heart of man is restless till it finds its rest in Thee." But he did not look upon his conversion as the end. Indeed, it was only a beginning. And, in his Confessions, he wrote, "Narrow is the mansion of my soul, O Lord. Enlarge Thou it, that Thou mayest enter in."

God answered that prayer for Augustine. And the Good News is that He will answer it for us, too, if we really want Him to. No matter what we have been until now, no one needs to stay that way. In speaking of the claim that Christianity can lift us to a new and better kind of life, Carl Jung, once wrote that no one can laugh this out of court, for it has done so.

History is full of people who have changed and grown because of their faith. Some are well known; most are anonymous and known only to God. Some involve great transformations, like Saul on the road to Damascus. Others, no less beautiful, include only a steady, almost imperceptible, growth in character, faith, and service.

But the important thing is that we grow somehow. Years ago, in my former church, a group of us were sharing answers to the question, "What about your spiritual life dissatisfies you the most?" We had been together for some time and had learned to trust each other, so our answers were pretty candid. But we were all stunned when one man said, "I'm not dissatisfied with anything. I am completely satisfied with my spiritual life just the way it is."

I wish I could believe his confidence was justified, but I can not. From what I know of human nature, and of my own spiritual quest, I can only conclude he was deceiving himself. I know there has been some progress in my own spiritual pilgrimage, much of it only because God has nudged me reluctantly on my way. But I still have a long way to go. Most of us do. And that is what the church is for. A fellowship where we are loved and cherished and encouraged to keep on growing.

To that fellowship, and to that growth, we welcome our new members this morning. And to all of us I offer these words from St. Peter: "Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord. Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones, be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood . . . acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:2-5) AMEN.