

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, Jeremiah 1:4-10,
Psalm 71:1-6, I Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

Sermon Resources: <http://www.lectionarystudies.com/sunday4ce.html>

<http://www.word-sunday.com/Files/c/4-c/SR-4-c.html>

Interpreter's Bible Commentary, "Luke/John"

Brendan Byrne, "The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel"

In the story "Little Women", one night the four daughters of the March family sit around in their attic hideaway speculating about what their futures will be like. And they all share, but after the youngest one shares her rather audacious dream of being rich and having a nice piano, one of her older sisters reprimands her, to which she replies, "We'll all grow up, someday, Meg. We might as well know what we want."

We'll all grow up someday. That is true. And that's a theme running through our texts today.

Many commentators for our Psalm reading today say that the psalm is an expression of an older person, who, facing difficulties and enemies and needing to draw strength, is looking back on their long life of faith, a long life of faith in God, a relationship which started from the womb, from the writer's birth. They're saying 'I have lived my whole life in faith, I have grown up in faith.

That's a theme we see in some of our other passages, too, the idea of growing up in faith. In Luke, which is one of only two of the gospels which gives us any insight into Jesus' childhood, we have Jesus, who, we know from earlier in this chapter, was brought up in Nazareth, this is where he physically grew up, and,

as it says earlier in Luke, that he grew in wisdom and in years, while he was there. Here is someone who, in Nazareth, was raised in faith, who grew up in faith.

The same is true for Jeremiah, who, the Lord says, was known by God in the womb, who was consecrated and appointed from childhood, who, though he is “only a boy”, as he says, (comparatively young, he probably means), will be a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah, too, grew up in faith.

That’s the dream for us, to be people, like that Psalmist, who look back on many years of faith and relationship with God, who can draw strength from that, to be people who, like Jesus, grow in years and wisdom, to be people like Jeremiah, known by God all our lives, to be people who grow up in faith. And that’s our dream, too, for people we raise, be it our own children, or children in our community, for future generations, to be people growing in years and wisdom, growing in the knowledge of God, growing up in faith.

And, as that verse about Jesus demonstrates, growing up is not just about age, about accumulating years. Jesus grew in years and in wisdom, and that was really the key element there. Jeremiah was known in the womb, but has only just now grown to where he can be a prophet to the nations. Paul gives us a description in Corinthians of growing up, where he says he once thought and acted like a child, but now he has put away childish things, and part of that growing up is not merely getting older, growing up is recognizing what’s really important, like love, striving for the greater gifts, realizing how much more there is to know. For us to grow up in faith, and to help others grow in faith, is not merely to get older, it is so much more.

But, sometimes, we think about our own growing up in faith, the people we want to grow up in faith, and we think of it like a checklist, like molding to be exactly the same as before, as mimicking and emulating and carrying on in the same ways. And there is great comfort in that, in knowing and relying on solid

traditions, in teaching the wisdom we have found to be valuable. But again, like the mere concept of years, emulating and carrying on what was before, that's not all there is to growing up in faith.

In fact, Jesus and Jeremiah give us some perhaps alarming images of growing up in faith. The Lord tells Jeremiah 'I consecrated you from the womb,' meaning 'you have grown up in relationship with me, you are growing in your faith', and doesn't that sound wonderful to us? But then, why does God have to promise Jeremiah protection? Well, because part of this growing up for Jeremiah is that he's going to pluck up and tear down and build new things and people are not going to be happy about that.

That point is made even more clearly in Luke, where Jesus, son of Nazareth, comes home, goes back to the local synagogue as is his custom, and everyone is just thrilled, oohing and aahing over all the amazing things he's already done, and then he gets up and reads so beautifully, and then...he makes everybody mad. They thought he was going to be just like they expected, they were thinking he would enhance them and build up their image, and instead he says some unsettling and challenging things to them, and the ministry he lays out here is a ministry of challenge and change. He grew up here, in years and in wisdom, and his growing up has proved to be a source of challenge and change, and it makes them so angry they try to throw him off a cliff.

This growing up in faith is different than we might first imagine. Like Paul describes, when he grew up, he put away childish things. He let some things go, he did some things differently. He now recognizes that there is so much more to know, so much more to be. He tells the Corinthians that they're going to have to grow up, too—stop fighting and being divided and being so snobby about your own spiritual gifts, go beyond to the more excellent gifts. If you're going to grow up in faith, Paul says, grow up to be better at loving. Be more patient, more kind, more

supportive, more humble, more quiet, more mannerly, more thoughtful, more focused on other people, calmer, more forgiving, than you were before. For Jeremiah, for Jesus, for Paul, growing up in faith is not so much a matter of mimicry and maintenance as it is challenge and change.

Now, it's worth noting that Paul often uses pretty extreme examples—I mean, in Galatians, he says that he wishes those who argue in favor of circumcision would just go ahead and castrate themselves, he's that kind of extreme. So we need to bear that in mind when considering his thoughts on growing up. I don't think, for instance, that we should take these verses to mean that childhood or being a child is a terrible thing. Jesus, in the gospels, values children, let the children come to me, he says; he describes the most wonderful faith as a childlike faith. So to say 'I have put away childish things, I have grown up and you need to, as well', isn't to say children are terrible.

The point is that for us as a community, a church, as the body of Christ, as people of faith, there's no stopping point where you get to say "And...I'm done. I'm all grown up now, I'm finished growing in faith." In our wisdom, in our belief, in our relationship with God, we have to keep going, we have to keep developing, keep asking questions, keep striving for the more excellent gifts, keep thinking about scripture and belief and community, keep learning more and more, we have to keep changing our minds and learning new things, we have to keep growing up.

Specifically for the Corinthians, Paul is saying 'great you have some spiritual gifts, but you don't get to stop there'. Keep growing up. Keep striving for better gifts. Keep striving to love better, keep learning to adjust for each other and accommodate each other, keep learning to be patient and kind and supportive and humble and thoughtful. Keep learning to focus on others and listen to their way

and adjust to their needs and accommodate their personalities. This growing up doesn't stop for us, it's a life-long endeavor for us.

All of which is easy to say, but not easy to do. It's not easy to grow up in faith, to keep growing up in faith. Because in order to do that we will have to adjust for each other and adapt to each other. Because in order to do that we will have to ask questions and be willing to change. Because in order to grow up we will have to take on new responsibilities from the Lord. Because in order to grow up we will hear new missions to follow. Because in order to grow up, we may have to pluck up and tear down what was before, and we may have to say things that are hard to hear, and it will be a change and a challenge for us.

And it's a challenge for us, when the people coming after us grow up in this way. But actually for the people we're raising in faith, the people coming after us, that's how we want them to grow up in faith. It might not seem like it, we might not enjoy it, we might prefer them to just emulate us and carry on the way we did, but the true sign that we're helping them grow up in faith will be if they ask questions, if they strive for more excellent ways, if they adjust and accommodate, if they look for ways to pluck up and tear down and change what needs to be changed, but that will challenge us.

And because of the change and challenge involved, we might want to ignore what those folks coming after us are saying and doing. Or get angry, like the people in the synagogue. I mean here is Jesus, Joseph's son, who does he think he is coming in here, saying these things? We raised him. So they try and throw him off a cliff, instead of listening, and he disappears from their midst. As one commentator put it, we may miss a message from God because it comes through someone familiar, and we don't have the humility to listen. Who do they think they are, telling me that, challenging me, asking questions and doing things differently and changing?

It's a temptation in our families, in our churches, in our communities, in the places where we do know each other well, where we are most familiar, and so we stop really hearing each other. We say "so and so always says that", or we assume "they think this", and "they will say that". Those are the places we're less likely to adjust for each other, to accommodate each other, the places we're most likely to be impatient or unkind, to be arrogant and boastful and insist on our own way, rather than make room or listen or adjust for someone else.

It's easy to think of reasons to ignore or dismiss those who are issuing challenges and changes, like they're too young, or they don't have the same experiences as us, or don't have the same lifestyle as us, or don't have the same skin color as us or they're too familiar to us to take seriously, or they're challenging too much, they're changing too much.

Our instinct, like the people in the synagogue, like the people Jeremiah would encounter, might be to get angry, to ignore them, to be dismissive, to insist on our own way as the only right way, the only way things can be. In seminary, my first year, there were two 4th year students in some of my education classes, and every time my roommate and I had an idea or got excited about something, those 4th year students would rain on our parade and tell us "that will never work" or "this isn't worth getting excited over" or "you'll see once you've been here a little while". And my roommate and I vowed we would not be like them when we were 4th year students. And then, of course, when 4th year came around, I sighed and looked with pity and ignored and dismissed the excited 1st year students, because I was very wise and they were not. And maybe that's the way of the world, but I also had a choice about how I acted, and I wish I had chosen differently. Some of those 1st year students are now doing really cool things in the church and the larger denomination, and I wish I had paid attention sooner to their ideas and their changes and their challenges instead of dismissing them.

Growing up in faith isn't going to look like merely adding on years, or being molded to what came before. Paul equates truly growing up to putting away childish things, and part of putting away childish things is being able to love better. And for Paul love is not a feeling, nor is it just being nice to each other. He means loving the way he describes. And part of what he describes is that love is not arrogant or boastful or rude, love does not insist on its own way. That is, love means being humble, love means taking seriously another way of doing things.

So, if we're gonna keep growing up in faith, we'll have to love in a way that's humble. To be humble enough to realize that we only know in part right now, to be humble enough to know that someone familiar to you might have something to teach you, to be humble enough to hear from someone we'd easily dismiss. To be humble enough to hear from someone we might assume is too young, or too different from us. To be humble enough to hear from someone who is talking about plucking things up and tearing things down, who is talking about change, who is talking about things which challenge us.

And if we won't do that, if we won't grow up that way, if we won't let other people grow up that way, the church suffers, our relationships suffer, division increases, faith diminishes, and we don't hear the word of God.

We'll all grow up someday, we all have to grow up, constantly, continuously, and we have to bring others up, in faith, in a way that is willing to question and adjust and develop over time. We have to grow up and bring others up, so that they challenge us and instruct us and help us keep growing, too.

Let's be willing to grow up, but in the way of faith. Let's wonder and ask questions, let's keep learning, keep pursuing wisdom, let's keep striving for the more excellent way, let's keep striving to love better. Let's adjust and accommodate, let's be humble and focused on others. Let's raise up future generations who ask questions and pursue wisdom and strive for a more excellent

way. Let's listen to people who follow the Lord's call and speak about plucking up and tearing down and building new things. Let's be willing to grow up, to be changed and challenged. And let's humble ourselves to hear what the people coming after us have to say. Let's be people who keep loving, who keep learning, and who keep growing, even through the challenge and the change. Amen.