

Sermon for Sunday, July 23, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"HOPE FOR THE OVER FORTY CROWD"

Acts 3:1-10, 4:22

Text: "For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old." Acts 4:22

When I graduated from seminary, I was awarded a graduate fellowship to be used to pursue further study. I chose to do my Master's of Theology degree in the field of pastoral counseling. During those early years of my ministry I did a great deal of counseling. However, as I matured as a counselor and as my experience increased, I became aware of a growing frustration. My problem was that I did not see people really getting well. Of course, counseling helped and yes, there was often marked improvement. Yet, the fact of the matter was, people with problems were still often crippled emotionally and I found myself involved in more and more long term supportive counseling. This was especially frustrating since God had called me to a total ministry as pastor and that included a lot of other things besides counseling. It included preaching, teaching, church programming, educational structuring and training, evangelism and many other facets of the ministry. Yet, as a matter of fact, counseling was absorbing an increasing and disproportionate part of my time.

After about six years in the ministry the matter came to a head for me. I was working with a young man in his mid-thirties who had a sex-related problem. Since this was somewhat outside my particular training, I referred him to a psychiatrist. A few days later I received a letter from the psychiatrist and this is what he said: "Dear Andy. I have tested Mr. Blank and have spent some time with him. At his age of 35 his personality characteristics are already hardened. Even if we put him in psychoanalysis (that means going perhaps as often as twice a week for a period of several years---very time consuming and very expensive) it is doubtful if any significant changes would occur." Well, there sat the young man in my study, still with his desperate problem that was ruining his marriage; still crying out, "help me." Unfortunately for both of us, I was not able to help him and soon afterwards he and his wife were divorced and he disappeared from the scene. I've often wondered what happened to him and have said many prayers in his behalf. That event is as vivid in my mind as though it happened yesterday and in some respects was a turning point in my life. I began to ask the question, "is there no help; is there no healing for the over forty crowd who have desperate needs, yet whose life styles are set, whose habit patterns are fixed, and whose personality characteristics are hardened?"

That's a very serious question that faces many of you this morning for many of you are over forty. Can you change? Can you be different? Can significant changes occur in your personality structures and in your developed characteristics?

Perhaps we ought to approach the question from another angle. First, are you satisfied with who and what you are this morning? Do you like yourself? Are you content with life and does it mean to you what you once hoped it would? Now, I suspect that most of us at the very best would have to give a very qualified "yes" or at worst simply respond, "no."

The second question is this: Can you change? Is there for you any possibility that fixed habit patterns, set life styles and hardened personality characteristics can be changed in any significant way. Is there any real possibility that life can take on exciting new dimensions, thrilling new levels?

Let me say quite frankly to you that I seriously doubt that--on your own--you can really change. Most of us will go to our graves basically as we are this morning. We will keep on being basically the same kinds of persons we are, acting pretty much in the same ways we do this morning, relating basically to others in about the way we relate today, living with our same hang-ups, our same needs, our same desperate problems.

That isn't a very pleasing prospect to most of us. As a matter of fact I suspect that practically every one of us would like to change--to be different--from what we are this morning.

The third question is this: Why can't we change? Well, there are a lot of answers to that. One of the reasons is that we don't always understand the psychodynamics in our heritage, our background, our environment that make us as we are. Understanding why we are as we are is an important role that I believe counseling, psychology and psychiatry plays in our world today.

Another reason we don't change is because the way we are may give us a certain form of security. Now it may not be the best security or even a good form of security. For example, in the fifth chapter of St. John we are told of another man over forty who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus asked him point-blank, "Do you want to be healed?" Apparently the man was not so sure. He had a certain security in being ill. He wasn't expected to work or do his share. He was probably pampered and given special treatment much like the woman whose husband says to the children, "Let's be very quiet tonight and I'll fix dinner for us all. Mother has another of her migraine headaches." To be healed for the ill man meant giving up a way of life to which he had adjusted and which had certain good dividends even if it had some bad. So, at first he equivocated with Jesus. He said the reason he was sick was because he didn't have anybody to put him in the pool of water during the time of the year when the angel of God moved upon the water to cure the first person into the water. Now, we don't know all of the conversation since all of it is obviously not recorded in St. John. But at some point the man dared to run a risk. He dared to give up his security of being an invalid to risk the uncertain future of being well. So, Jesus eventually said to him, "Take up your pallet and walk."

So bad security is often better than no security at all. That may seem hard to realize, but sickness or some form of disability has become a way of life (either physically or emotionally or even spiritually) that persons are reluctant to give up because they don't know what will happen to them. While their invalidism--in whatever form it takes--has disadvantages, it also has some advantages and people are afraid of giving up the known and the secure for the unknown and the insecure. To put it bluntly, they don't want to get well. They don't want to get healed.

Another reason we don't change is because the pain of changing may be more intense than the pain of staying as we are. I once worked with a man who was having an affair. Now, he got certain emotionally benefits from that affair. It fed his ego to know he was still attractive to someone beside his wife. The woman involved made him feel manly, important, a person of significance. Now, his affair caused him certain pain it is true. It made for bad family relationships; it gave him guilty feelings; he ran the risk of public exposure and perhaps the consequent loss of his job. He had a lot to lose and it did hurt his conscience. Yet, the fact is, the pain of breaking off the affair was greater than the pain of continuing it, so he refused to end the sordid relationship. The pain of being as you are has to be greater than the pain and effort and threat of changing before you will change.

I think this is fairly typical of alcoholics. A person drinks basically as an escapist--as a means of hiding from life. But drinking in itself causes other problems and other pains. Which pain is greater--facing up to life or facing the consequences of being an alcoholic? How a person answers that question determines whether or not he quits drinking.

Another reason we don't change--and this is just another form of some of the reasons I have already given--is that in changing we are afraid we will have to give up or stop doing something that we enjoy or like. I have had people say to me, "Well, I would like to be a Christian, but I'm afraid if I accepted Jesus I would have to stop doing so and so, or give up such and such and I'm not really willing to do that."

But aside from all of these reasons, there is one overwhelming reason we don't change. That reason is that we do not have the inner ability to change. We don't have the inner power, the inner resources, to make the necessary changes. For example, I was working with a young lady once and we began to unravel some of the twisted knots in her life to the point that she began to understand why she was like she was; why she did some of the things she did. One day she sat in my office crying as though her heart would break. She sobbed, "I know why I am doing the things I do, but just knowing it doesn't help. Why do I get the power to act differently?"

Well, that's the key question, is it not? Is there any hope for the over forty crowd? When personality characteristics are hardened, when habit patterns are fixed, when life styles are set as though made of concrete, where do we get the power to be healed, to be changed, to be different.

It was precisely at this point that God drove me back to the New Testament. In my own counseling this was the point, the question, at which I had arrived. Counseling helped people, no doubt. Counseling gave understanding of actions and hidden motivations. But when a person began to understand these things, where did the power come from to change? The answer is not difficult to find. The only resource for the power to change for the over forty crowd comes from Jesus Christ. This is vividly brought into focus for us in the story of the crippled man at the gate of the temple called The Beautiful Gate. He is asking for alms--pennies for the poor--when Peter and John passed by on their way to the temple. In effect Peter says to him, "I don't have the pennies you are begging for. As a matter of fact, I don't have any money at all. But I do have something that will meet your deepest need. I do have something that can change your life. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." And the Bible says, "...the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old."

It doesn't matter how old you are, how hardened your personality characteristics, how set your ways, how fixed your habit patterns. God--and God alone--has the power to enable you to be different. Let me give you three simple rules to follow in letting God deal with your problems.

Here is rule one: Admit your inability to deal meaningful with changing your life. Remember our text from St. Paul last Sunday? "I do not understand my own action," he wrote, "For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate." God can't help you until you know you cannot help yourself.

Rule number two: Admit to yourself and to God that you are the way you are. Another way to put it would be to confess your sins. At this point you may need the help of someone else in understanding yourself and your needs. The Bible puts

it this way, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (St. John 1:9) And again, "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed." (St. James 5:16) So, first admit your helplessness and second, ask for healing and forgiveness. Psychology calls this catharsis, but the fact is God can't deal with you until you ask to be cleansed.

Rule number three: Ask God to deal with your specific need as you understand it. Do you remember the blind man named Bartimaeus who came to Jesus? Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Just as he asked the man at the pool, "Do you want to be healed." Blind Bartemaeus replied, "Lord, that I might receive my sight." Be specific with God.

No, you do not have to be as you are, even when you are over forty. God can heal you and make you different. He can make you into a new creation. In his book, Dare to Live Now! Bruce Larson tells the story of a St. Louis woman. Let me share the story with you.

"A beautiful young mother in the middle of a nervous breakdown was taken to a large hospital in St. Louis where she resisted all therapy. She was hurt that her husband and her mother would permit her to be confined to the psychiatric ward. For weeks she was sullen and morose and uncooperative."

"One day she was standing by the barred windows of the ward looking out on Kings-highway which runs by the hospital. All of a sudden this woman, who had grown up in the church and knew the great truths about God, suddenly heard Him say to her, "Ruth, I love you. You don't have to live like this. Stop struggling and let me have your life and all of the resentments in you." (Do you see the principles? "stop struggling"--that is, admit your helplessness. "Let me have your life and all of the resentments in you"--that is, confess your sins.) Now came the third rule: "When the awareness of God's love and Christ's presence came, something in her broke and she felt released. When she confided this to her doctor later that day, he told her that he saw an astonishing change. He called her husband and she was released the next day and went home to live a new life, with a new center and a new sense of her own worth."

There is hope for the over forty crowd--the hope that we are not prisoners of fixed and hardened personality characteristics that cripple us and make us beggars of life. There is hope because Jesus can set us every one free. As St. Peter put it, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."