

Sermon for Sunday, August 21, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"TEACHING NEW TRICKS TO A MIDDLE-AGED DOG"

Acts 3:1-10 Acts 4:22

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

Three Sundays from today, on September 11, I will have a birthday. Birthdays have never bothered me very much, but this one does. As a matter of fact I have been thinking about and for some reason dreading it for several years because it will be my fiftieth. One of my dear friends has told me to think of it as the youth of old age, but somehow that has not helped very much! My wife tells me not to worry about it because it is just middle age. But if fifty is middle age, I keep asking her, how many 100 year old people does she know?

With the approach of what has become for me a significant birthday I have been asking myself a couple of questions that I want to share with you. I suspect they may be relevant questions for most of us. The first question is this: am I satisfied with who and what I am this morning? Do I like myself? Am I content with life and does it mean to me what I once hoped it would? If you are as I am, I suspect that most of us can give at best only a qualified "yes" to that. Most of us are not really who and what we would like to be. Most of us have character defects and bad qualities about our lives that we wish we could change or correct. Most of us have habit patterns we wish we could control or change.

The second question is this: Can I change? Is there any possibility that fixed habit patterns, set life styles and hardened personality characteristics can be changed in any significant way? Can we really be any different from what we are after we pass forty--or fifty--or sixty?

I once referred a young man with whom I was counseling to a psychiatrist because his particular problem was one that I did not feel competent to deal with. I will never forget the letter the doctor sent me and it went something like this: "Dear Andy. I have tested Mr. Blank and have spent some time with him. At age 35 his personality characteristics are already hardened. Even if I put him in psychoanalysis (and that means going to therapy twice a week for as much as two or three years) 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 in desperation, "help me." Unfortunately for both of us, at that time in my career and life, I did not have the answers he was so desperately searching for. Soon afterwards he and his wife were divorced and he dropped out of sight. Many times I have thought about him over the years, wondering what happened to him. That was a significant event in my life because it brought me face to face with what the psychiatrist called "hardened personality characteristics" and it raised the question for me, "is there any way to teach new tricks to a middle-aged dog?"

Let me say quite frankly to you that I seriously doubt if any of us past thirty can really change ourselves. 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 to others in about the way we relate today, living with our same hang-ups, our same needs, our same desperate problems. And for those of you who are younger, who may be feeling that what I say this morning is not relevant to you, let me add this warning. The relational patterns you are now establishing, the habits you are forming now, the character you are building now is likely to be the one you will have for the rest of your life. The patterns you are establishing now will abide with you and in all likelihood will be with you the rest of your life.

Are you sure they are the ones you want? Are you positive that you will enjoy the fruits that will one day grow on the little trees you are planting today? Oak trees grow from little acorns and a character grows from little habits you are establishing now. Do not think that later on you will change and be who and what you want to be. No, the seeds of your destiny are being planted now and whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.

But this raises a third question. Why can't we change? Well, there are a lot of reasons that change comes so hard. For one, we don't always understand the psychodynamics of our heritage, our background, our environment that has shaped and moulded us into who and what we are. When young people are getting married, I give them a little test that tells me about the family structures out of which they come. And the fact is, we can predict with great accuracy what kind of home the young couple will have because it is shaped and moulded tremendously by their own past, by the experiences they have had at home. So to you parents of young children let me warn you that they will not be a great deal different from you. You are already shaping and forming the character of your children. If there are things in your life that you don't like, it is probable that you will instill that into the lives of your children. The Bible says that if we train up a child in the way that he should go, when he is old he will not depart from it. By the same token, if we train up a child in the way he shouldn't go, he will not easily escape that either. As the Bible puts it, when the fathers eat sour grapes, the children's teeth are set on edge.

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 kind of security. For example, in the 5th 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?" On the surface that seems a foolish question. Yet, being ill had certain benefits. He wasn't expected to work or do his share. He got special treatment because he was crippled and other people looked after his needs. To be healed meant giving up a way of life to which he was adjusted and which had certain good benefits even if it had some bad. So at first the man equivocated and said he didn't have anybody to put him in the pool when the angel of God moved upon the water to heal the first person in the water. But at some point that man dared to run a risk. He dared to give up his security of being an invalid to risk the uncertain future of being healed. And when he dared, Jesus said to him, "Take up your pallet and walk." Yes, bad security can be better than no security at all and sometimes we don't want to change because we are afraid of giving up the known and the secure for the unknown and the uncertain.

Another reason we don't change is because the pain of changing may be worse than the pain of staying as we are. I see this often. For example, a man may be having an affair. His affair may be causing him certain pain--the pain of guilt, the pain of a broken marriage if he is discovered, the pain of losing his position in the community if he is found out. Yet, he is getting certain important benefits from the affair. He is still attractive to someone. His affair makes him feel manly, that he is a person of worth for someone cares for him. Now, the pain of his affair is real, but the pain of changing, the pain of losing those ego benefits is greater. And as long as that is true, he will not break off the affair. Which brings us to a rule about ourselves you have heard me mention numerous times, for we will not change unless the pain of being as we are is greater than the pain of changing.

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This is true of any problem we have. For example, an alcoholic will not change until the pain of being drunk is greater than the pain of sobering up. A person on dope can never break the habit until the pain of being an addict is greater than the pain of getting well. Or again, a poor housekeeper will not change until the pain of her sloppy habits is greater than the pain of bringing some order and discipline into her life.

But aside from all these reasons there is one overwhelming reason we do not change. You see, the fact is, the older we grow, the more ingrained our habits and patterns, the less ability we have to change, the less possible it is for a middle-aged dog to learn any new tricks. For example, I was working with a couple on the verge of divorce. The wife had gained some insights into herself and began to understand why she was as 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 and she said, "I know why I am doing the things I do, but just knowing it doesn't help. I try so hard to be different and I keep failing. Where do I get the power to act differently?"

Well, that's the key question, isn't it? How do you learn new tricks when you are middle-aged? When personality characteristics are hardened, when habit patterns are fixed, when life-styles are set in concrete, where do we get the power to be healed, to be changed, to be different?

The answer to that question is spiritual. That is why AA has a spiritual dimension. That is why any successful drug therapy program has a spiritual dimension. This is vividly brought into focus for us in the story of our scripture this morning. The crippled man at the gate of the temple was asking for alms--pennies for the poor--when Peter and John passed by. 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 money won't change you, and I 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."

Do you like yourself this morning? Are you who and what you really want to be? Are you the kind of person you really want to be? I doubt that you will ever be much different on your own. I seriously doubt that you can make any significant changes in your life by the strength and power of your will. But there is a power available to you that can change your life. That power is Jesus. Let me give you three simple rules to follow if you want to change.

Here is rule one: admit to God your inability to deal meaningful with changing your own life. St. Paul once confessed, "I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very things I hate." God can't really help us until there is a surrender, an acknowledgment that we cannot help ourselves.

Here is rule 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." (I John 1:9) And again, "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another 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.

And here is rule three: Ask God to deal with your specific needs as you understand them. Do you remember the blind man named Bartimaeus who came to Jesus. Jesus asked him, "what do you want me to do for you?" That is, Jesus said to him, "Tell me exactly how you want me to touch your life?" And Bartimaeus said to him, "Lord, that I might receive my sight." Don't ask God for generalities such as, "Lord, make me a good person." No, be specific. Ask him to touch you at the specific points in your life that make you a bad person.

Bruce Larson, in his book Dare to Live Now! tells the story of a St. Louis woman that is worth repeating. He writes, "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 looking out on Kingshighway 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..."

Yes, new tricks and middle-aged dogs. There is hope for all of us. We do not have to be prisoners of fixed and hardened personalities, of bad characteristics that cripple us and make us beggars in life. There is hope because Jesus can set us, every one, free. As Peter put it that day, "In the name of Jesus, walk."