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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## The Desire to Grow

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 22, 2017

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### Introduction to Scripture

There was once a man by the first name of Simon; his father's name was John, so in the custom of his times his surname would have been Johnson. He and his kid brother Andy ran a prosperous commercial fishing enterprise in the busy seaside port city of Capernaum. He had a wife and kids, a nice house, prominence in the community, and a comfortable life ahead of him—until one day an unusual man from the nearby country village of Nazareth redirected his whole existence. Simon Johnson was given by the Nazarene the nickname “Peter”—which was the word for “Rock” (so he would have been a Sylvester Stallone in our slang, the ancient world's “Rocky”). This Rocky went on to be the leading disciple of Jesus, the most recognized and respected spokesperson in the early days of the Christian Church, and in his final years he served as an Uber-Pastor, a spiritual statesman overseeing a number of churches and their pastors and elders and deacons.

He wrote a letter (which was so important and so cherished that it was carefully preserved, copied, and passed down from generation to generation). We have it right here in our Bibles. The letter was intended to be read and studied in each of the churches under his care. At the end of his letter he has some profound and direct wisdom for the leaders of the congregations—words that have direct relevance right now to some men and women among us who, later in this service, will be set apart to serve as Elders and Deacons. But earlier in his letter Rocky/Peter speaks to all Christians. He addresses the “what now?” question: Now that you and I have placed our faith in

Christ, our sins are forgiven once for all, and we have settled the issue of our eternal destination, **what does God want us to do next?** How shall we live the rest of our days on earth? I commend the entire letter known as First Peter to you for your personal reading, but we will now zoom in on just a small portion of it, from chapter 2:

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

1 Peter 2:1-3

What should every Christian desire to do? In a word, to **grow**. We are to never stop growing: in our faith in God, in our knowledge of Him, and in our patterning of our life and behavior more and more after the example of our Lord Jesus. The only way to make a positive difference for God in this world, and to be prepared to face and overcome all the obstacles life throws at us, is to grow.

### **God's Growth Process**

Tom Hanks is one of the finest actors of our time. Have you seen *Sully*? He's terrific in it, as he is in all his roles. One of the earliest hits for Tom Hanks—when he was much younger—was the comedy film *Big*. It opens with a teenage boy who is feeling impatient with the slow process of growth. One night at an amusement park his frustration boils over. And then something magical happens. After making a wish at the park's "Zoltar Speaks" machine, he wakes the following morning to find himself in the body of an adult.

We understand young Josh's desire to grow to be "big." But although the magic wish-granting "Zoltar" makes him grown-up physically, he is still just a little boy inside. And the film goes on to portray his hilarious misadventures.

Look at the contrast to what God intends to do inside of us. He's not going to make us "big" physically while leaving our inner self

unchanged. He's going to do the opposite: to work on us inwardly. God intends to grow us up in a moral and spiritual sense, with self-discipline and wisdom and love and patience. It's not going to be sudden, like the wizard Zoltar; the changes the Spirit of Christ makes inside of you will be gradual and day-by-day, not overnight.

And this kind of growth is not something that is finished when we're 16 or 18 and reach our full adult stature; we have the capacity to keep on growing as a Christian for as long as we live! Even as our bodies slow down and our strength declines, there is no limit to our growth as believers as long as our lungs are breathing and our minds are functioning. And even when memory starts to fade, that doesn't mean our growth is finished. In the first few years of his decline with Alzheimer's disease, I witnessed my father-in-law continue to be spiritual alive. Though he couldn't remember where he put his car keys, he still prayed every day, still loved to sing hymns in church, and seemed to me to grow more at peace and trusting of His Heavenly Father.

Around New Year's Day—a time when, traditionally, I am thinking about what my hopes and goals for the new year will be—I was reading from my current daily devotional book, and I found these encouraging words:

You're not stuck. You're not encased in concrete. Your life is not a dead end. Growth is possible for you and me even in places we think it's hopeless. Why? Because the Eternal God, the source of all transformation, has come and made His home inside of us.

*New Morning Mercies*, by Paul David Tripp

Think for a minute about the implications. If the One who can do anything has moved into your house and mine, then we are not alone. With His power inside us, we actually can choose to grow and become better.

## Change and Growth

Change is sometimes a scary thought. We get comfortable and secure, and we often react to change as if it only brings loss. But there can be good change, blessed change. Over and over, in the pages of scripture and in the life-experiences and testimonies of generations of believers, we are reminded that real change and real growth are possible. And though God may providentially change our outward situations, or change the other people in our lives to make them easier to get along with, His primary focus is usually to change us within. The anonymous saying from centuries ago has great truth: "I asked God to lift my burden. Instead, He gave me a stronger back." I am a completely convinced believer in the power of change. I've seen God change me, and people I love, and people I had never met before. As long as we live, there is the potential for change—if we will just open ourselves to it.

On Friday a new President took the oath of office. He is really new, having never held a single elected government position in his entire 70 years. I have personally committed to praying for him throughout this year, and I hope you will. I will pray for him because the Bible tells me to do so, and also because he needs it. I am going to pray specifically that God will guide and direct President Trump so that he will grow in office.

We have seen it happen before: people who seem to be unequipped or ill-prepared for the highest level of leadership and its challenges grow before our eyes. I'm certain that Abraham Lincoln grew under the weight of his responsibilities, as did Harry Truman, and Winston Churchill, and Ronald Reagan, and Margaret Thatcher. I am convinced that others did not grow but rather were shrunk and damaged by the pressures: I think this was true of Richard Nixon, and Jimmy Carter, and Neville Chamberlain.

I invite you to join me in praying daily that our President will grow inwardly and spiritually, as well as in his knowledge and leadership skills and mastery of a very complex world. He will face

many unforeseeable challenges, and will make mistakes. He has many enemies without and within who want to see him fail. Whether you or I voted for him two months ago or not no longer matters. We need to be praying for him.

This morning we have been blessed by the visit of our New Horizons kids. Many of us have devoted hours to tutoring them after school, and many others of us have given financially to support this incredibly strategic ministry. And what New Horizons is all about is providing opportunities for growth for these children whose parents brought them to this new land. We long to see them grow in their academic skills, their language skills, and their social skills. We long for them to have relationships with loving and caring adults who can be role models for them. And we long for them to know their Heavenly Father and go forward into adulthood with a personal faith.

This is a great thing we do for our country, a very patriotic endeavor. The essence of the assimilation process—which we Americans have been doing for 300 years, whether the new immigrants are Scottish or Irish or Italian or Korean or Hispanic—is to help subsequent generations flourish and become mature citizens. This is what the countries of Europe are struggling and largely failing to do, but it is what makes this nation unique. Thanks to the efforts of the great ministry of New Horizons and many others, some of these first and second generation kids are one day going to be serving in our military, or as care-givers to our elderly, or as nurses and teachers and fire fighters and pastors. We invest in them to help them grow up into the people God is calling them to be. This same passion has led our church to invest in helping to raise up the next generation of Christian leaders, through our scholarship and mentorship program with Gordon Conwell Seminary.

### **Wear It Till It Fits**

In a few minutes some men and women, elected by us from among our own members, will be called to stand before us. In a

practice that is nearly 2,000 years old, we will lay hands upon them and pray for them, ordaining them and setting them apart for the special task of leadership in the church. The baton of leadership has been passed from generation to generation in an unbroken chain. The church will only ever be as strong and mature and faithful as its leaders are. That's why it is so vital that we choose our Elders and Deacons wisely. And that's why it's also vital that we pray for them. For although they are mature and gifted people, they still need to grow. They will face challenges bigger than they are, and they will need God's Spirit within them to equip and mold them for their tasks. If you talk with them, I suspect that each would say that they feel inadequate to the high calling of ministry. And, candidly, they are inadequate. We all are. That's why we need the Lord constantly, to keep us growing.

Some of us remember a famous TV commercial from decades ago. In a spot for Coca-Cola, a famous football player named "Mean Joe" Greene is walking off the field, obviously tired and thirsty after a hard game. A kid in the stands offers him a Coke, which he takes and chugs down. (How Joe managed to drink those 12 ounces of carbonation without burping I'll never know!) Then, in gratitude, he tosses the kid his game jersey, to the boy's wide-eyed amazement. That set off a wave of kids asking players for their jerseys. A true story: One Sunday afternoon a boy in the stands asked a player if he could have his jersey. The player responded, "Son, it's way too big for you." And the boy replied, "That's okay, sir. I'll just wear it till it fits!"

Now that's a young man who understands the principle of growth. It's exactly what our new elders and deacons, and the seminary students who will soon become ordained as pastors, have to do; it's also what newlyweds and new parents have to do, as well as people who take on a new responsibility in their career or as volunteers in their community organization. Although we're all inadequate and "too small" for the jobs God calls us to do, we "wear it till it fits" —trusting that the Lord will help us grow into our challenges.

## How You've Grown

Our Heavenly Father is not some magic “Zoltar” machine who grants us our wish to grow instantly. What He does is much better. He offers to come inside us, as our Savior and Lord and Guide. He works patiently to change us within, and equip us for our tasks and struggles and opportunities. He never gives up in seeking to mold us and make us grow. Will we, in the year ahead of us, willingly cooperate with Him in this holy process?

It's a custom in many homes, and if you look carefully you will spot it. A doorway of a bedroom has pencil marks on it at various heights. At a set time in the year—perhaps New Year's Day or a birthday—a child's height is measured. Standing ramrod-straight, the pencil is placed on their head and the line is drawn. Then the child steps back to see. And Mom or Dad proclaims with wonder, “Look how you've grown!”

We aren't always aware of our growth as it's happening. It's when we step back that we can see it. My hope is that next January our Heavenly Father might say to each of us His children, “Look how you've grown!” ■