

Life in the Real World: Aging Ps. 92:12-15; Gen. 17:15-17;

Ps. 71:17-18 1/19/20

As I was thinking about this sermon on aging, I began by wondering what I could say that would be helpful and encouraging to our older members. As I reflected on this, I recalled that during this past year, I dealt with plantar fasciitis in my foot, sciatic nerve inflammation in my hip, sleep apnea, and had a skin cancer removed- all things often associated with older people! And I realized that at 66 years of age, I am one of the aging! After further thought, I comforted myself with the thought that in fact all of us are aging from the moment we're born, and that the alternative to aging-death- isn't so great either!

So, this week I spoke with Linda Thompson, who works at the Office of Aging here in town. She reminded me of some of the positives to growing older: older people have more time to spend with family and friends, have more leisure time, and can engage in more travel.

She also talked about some of the challenges she sees in those who are older: losses of strength & flexibility which can lead to problems with mobility; hearing and vision losses; and a whole host of other health issues. There can be losses of mental acuity, grieving the loss of a spouse or friends, and adjusting to life without them. The loss of driving can be a profound one, limiting independence and isolating the individual. It can

also be harder for seniors to find a sense of purpose, and there are often financial stresses. Concerns about “Where should I live?” come to the fore, accompanied by concerns about continuing healthcare. And, of course, the prospect of death is always hanging around. Getting old is not for cowards!

So what does God have to say to those of us who are nearer the end of our lives than the beginning? Last week we talked about dealing with loss and disappointment in life. Since a number of the challenges of aging are losses, the three things we said last week about dealing with losses apply here: First, don't deny or minimize your loss. Second, rely on your church community. And, make use of spiritual resources. I think all three of these things can be useful as we grow older.

In addition, I would add two more insights. A “Pearls Before Swine” comic strip illustrates one of them. Pig is talking to his neighbor, and says, “Hey neighbor Bob. I hear you're retiring. Whatcha gonna do with all that free time?”

Neighbor Bob responds, “Yeah. I'm trying to figure that out right now. I'm making a little list.”

“That's wonderful. What do you have so far?”

“This.

-sit around.

-await death.

Pig says, "Maybe you need a hobby."

To which Neighbor Bob replies, "Is sitting around a hobby?"

Many older people, especially after retirement, struggle to find a sense of purpose and meaning in life, like Neighbor Bob. For many people work has been their primary source of identity, significance, community, and purpose. When you stop working, you have to find other ways to meet those needs. These words from Ps. 92 may help.

¹²The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

¹³They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God.

¹⁴In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap,

¹⁵showing that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him. (Ps. 92:12-15)

The Psalmist likens us to healthy palm trees, which still produce fruit in old age! (He says that they're green and sappy!) I take this to mean that God is not finished with any of us yet. Our work life may be over. We may

be retired in that sense. But God is never finished with us. He still wants to produce fruit in us. That can mean continuing to shape us into the people we were intended to be- the process theologians call “sanctification.” And, God has more work for us to do! We never fully retire from doing God’s work in the world.

There are numerous biblical examples of people God used to do great things in their later years. Caleb led God’s people into the Promised Land of Canaan when he was 80 years old. Anna, an 84 year-old widow, gave one of the first testimonies to the identity of Jesus and witnessed about it to everyone she met. And then there is Abraham.

God spoke to Abraham when he was 75 years old and called him to leave his homeland and go to God only knew where! God invited him into the adventure of a lifetime at 75. And God promised that he and his wife Sarah would have a son from whom a great nation would be descended. Abraham obeyed God and went, but unsurprisingly given his age, nothing happened in the descendant department. He and Sarah remained childless. Fast forward a few years- 24 years to be exact.

¹⁵God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of

peoples shall come from her.”¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

(Gen. 17:15-17)

I love the honesty of the Bible. Abraham, a patriarch of 3 major religions, is not overwhelmed by piety when he hears God’s promise to him. Instead, he falls down laughing, which I’m pretty sure you and I would do, too, if we were in his situation! But God was faithful to his promise, miraculously giving them a son, Isaac, within a year. And through Isaac came all the people of Israel, God’s chosen people- including Jesus himself!

The point is that God is not finished with us just because we are older! He does some of his best work through aging people. Immanuel Kant wrote one of his best philosophical works at the age of 74. Verdi penned his classic “Ave Maria” at 85. And, Michelangelo was 87 when he completed the “Pieta,” his greatest work of art. I don’t know what God has in store for you in your golden years, but I know he isn’t finished with you yet!

Now older people who flourish generally find meaningful things to do with their time- often serving others. Around here, they are active on

boards and committees. They serve on mission trips or at the soup kitchen or with Gettysburg CARES or Ruth's Harvest. Here at church they serve as elders or deacons, or teach Sunday School, sing in the choir, or help in the office. They call or write encouraging messages to others. They write to our missionaries. Serving others is a great way to find a sense of purpose and satisfaction!

A number of years ago I was visiting one of our homebound members. We talked together; and I read some Scripture and prayed for her. As I was leaving, she said, "You know, Dave, I pray for you every day." Wow. That blew me away! I was deeply touched and humbled by her commitment to pray for me. Maybe you could have a ministry of prayer for others, who like me, desperately need those prayers! God is not finished with you yet.

And, there is one more kind of work to which we are all called.

Listen to these words from Ps. 71.

¹⁷O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

¹⁸So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come. (Ps. 71:17,18)

The Psalmist knows that God has walked with him from his youth and is still continuing to do so. In fact, he asks for God's help so that he will have time to proclaim the faith to the next generation! How have you done in proclaiming God's goodness to the next generation? To your children? To your grandchildren? My parents and my grandparents had a profound impact on my own faith. You'll have to ask my kids how I'm doing with theirs! But you can affect the next generation's faith- perhaps your children or grandchildren, or by helping with Children's Church or youth groups or Sunday School or Youth Club. You can pass the faith along to the next generation.

You may have heard the newly popular phrase, "OK, Boomer!" It's a way to dismiss the thoughts and ideas and values of a person from the Baby Boomer generation. I find it to be disrespectful and ageist, but then again, I'm a Baby Boomer! But this phrase runs counter to the truth that God is still at work in and through all people, including older people. God is not finished with us yet! We still have meaningful things to contribute to our world that only we can do. And the Holy Spirit living in us never grows old, and the Spirit will lead us to new adventures in service to God and God's people.