

## “A Time of Discovery” Psalm 71: 4-21

I want to preach a topical sermon this morning – on the virtues of growing older. I’m just trying to remember what they are! Well, that’s an older joke, but I must confess that, in the last few years, I have come to really appreciate the old adage, “It isn’t who you know or what you know; it’s what you can remember in time!” So, how old do you need to be to be considered “older” these days? When I was forty, I was playing in a pick-up game of volleyball on Ogunquit Beach and our team was not faring well. One of my frustrated team-mates huddled us together and gave a brief motivational speech: “Come on, guys, let’s get with it! The only one who’s hustling is the ‘old guy’!” I was just thinking, “There’s no ‘old guy’ on our team; I’m by, far the oldest one...” When it dawned on me that my volleyball game had just been complimented and my ego trounced! It’s the gray/white hair that is the give away. Even the Psalmist connects the two: “So even to old age and grey hairs, O god, do not forsake me.” Proverbs 16:31 – “Grey hair is a crown of glory”, it is gained in a righteous life”. Well, in the almost thirty ensuing years since that beach incident, I have come to appreciate being “chronologically advantaged.” (I especially like it when middle-aged women hold the door for me, and I love being called, “sir”!) But most of us resist thinking of ourselves as an “older person”. (Incidentally, I prefer “older person” to “Golden Ager” or “Senior Citizen” both of which to me smack of having dinner at four thirty in the afternoon.)

I love the humorous account that poet, John Ciardi wrote years ago about how his wife just loved to begin his day by reading the obituary page of the New York Times aloud to him at the breakfast table: “O’, she will begin, ‘Dexter died.’ Dexter, as nearly as I can recall, was a senior member of Martin Van Buren’s Cabinet. ‘How old was he?’ I ask. ‘Ninety...’ She looks at the page. ‘Ninety-three.’ ‘A nice sense of timing.’ I say through my coffee cup. ‘why do you sound surprised?’ ‘I liked him,’ she says. The sweetness of her non sequitur is an anciently structured thing...The act of liking someone excuses that person from doing fieldwork in mortality...Sometimes her announcements are oblique. ‘Didn’t you have a prof named Craig once?’ Her tone is all blue sky and by-the-way. ‘Pittdown Professor of Theoretical Irrationality at Jurassic U.’ I recite. ‘He was born emeritus, lived to be a fossil in his own time, and died trying to fill the vacuum he himself created.’ ‘Barnaby F. Craig,’ she reads. ‘Professor Emeritus, Jurassic U. of cancer. Age 72.’ She has scored her surprise. But how can that be? I shall be ticking 60 my next birthday. Thirty-five years ago, when I sat in his class, that man was already mummified. How can I think of myself as of his generation? Almost of his decade? I reach for a pack of cigarettes on the mantel and find myself looking into the mirror. It give me back a knowledge I was not looking for and do not want. ‘Ridiculous,’ I say. ‘Why do we subscribe to that ridiculous paper?’”

Well, I suspect some of us can identify with that. Intellectually, we know that none of us can escape “fieldwork in mortality”, but we don’t want to think of ourselves as in “God’s waiting room.” But, one of the advantages of being an older adult is that most older adults come to terms with their own mortality. To put it theologically, I believe aging is

“sacramental.” And in the sacrament of aging, we learn that death, too, is of God (not beyond God or other than God) and that without the boundary that death brings, life would be unbearable. As one older person put it: “One who has once met God no longer finds the hereafter question very interesting. Whoever has learned to live in the Great Light is no longer worried by the problem of whether the Light will still be there tomorrow.” It is often noted that, unlike many cultures where elders are held in great respect and counted on for their wisdom and knowledge of traditions, ours is a youth culture which tends to de-value the contributions of older persons.

None of us are immune from buying into the stereotype about aging. A couple of years ago, I was playing golf with a good friend who was pastor of a church in a neighboring community. He was lamenting, as we walked along, the reaction he was getting from parishioners over changes he initiated as he was trying to move his congregation to a ministry beyond the walls of the church. Rather than saying what I was really thinking, which was, “Have you mistaken me for someone who wants to talk “shop” on our one day off?!” Instead, I said rather thoughtlessly, “Well, you know, change is difficult for older folks.” He responded, “No, it isn’t! The older folks are leading the charge for the changes! It’s the younger ones who aren’t open to any new ideas!” I should have known that! That has been my experience in every church I’ve ever served! Yet how easily I fell into the stereotype of attributing resistance to change to older persons! (Even when “I are one”.) And that’s not just anecdotal evidence. One of the things that religious researchers have made progress in measuring is a faith that can be called “mature” – a “mature faith.” According to the sociologists of religion a “mature faith” is characterized by a combination of two phenomenon: First, a transforming relationship with a loving God, and, secondly, a consistent devotion to serving others. By that yardstick, it is rather alarming that only 16% of the church members in their twenties, who were tested, have a “mature faith”. By contrast, 57% of those over seventy had a “mature faith”. Of course there are exceptions, but most of us get a perspective on life as we grow older. It is a perspective born of the wisdom of how much fulfillment in life depends upon our ability to adjust to the changing circumstance of life. That is the key! Because none who grows older escapes life-changing griefs.

Think of all the changes which are inevitable as one time or another as we grow older. Certainly, there are changes in health. These days, there’s a lot of literature on how old you have to be to be considered an older adult and some say you’re older if you’re “in the fourth quarter of your life,” but it isn’t like a basketball game where we know when the clock is going to run out! Some of the literature suggests that these days we should think of three different groups of older adults: 1) Young older adults (ages 55-74) (I reached back and got you with that 55, didn’t I?). 2) Middle older adults (75-85), and 3) older older adults (85 and older). But I think the best indicator was suggested by the woman who said, “You know you’re older when it feels like the morning after and you didn’t do anything the night before!”

We grieve our robust health. And, eventually, we grieve the loss of the most important person in our life whether by divorce or by death, or perhaps, cruelest of all, by their loss of memory and cognitive function through Alzheimer’s or some other illness. And one

change leads to another. If our vision is impaired, it may mean not driving and the flexibility and mobility that driving provides. If our spouse dies, it may mean a change of living arrangements for us. But as monumental as all these changes are, none is as important as our ability to respond to these changes. (Victor Frankl, writing from a concentration camp in World War II said that no matter how many freedoms are taken from us, the freedom we cannot lose – the “final freedom” – is the freedom of, how we respond to the changes that life imposing on us – or not.)

For example, 71% of us elders describe our health as excellent, very good, or good – that doesn't mean we don't have a little heart disease, arthritis or hearing impairment, but we don't let it affect our life-style in any significant way. (I've had arthritis since I was thirty-five, but my wife still gives me the pickle jars to open – and I don't think it's totally to preserve my male ego!)

Of all the gifts of aging, I think the richest gift, is a sense of perspective. It isn't just a “been there; done that” response, but a real sense of what isn't so important in the long run and what is important. Florida Scott-Maxwell says, “I want to tell people approaching and perhaps fearing aging that it is a “time of discovery”. She goes on to say “Age puzzles me. I thought it was a quiet time. My seventies were interesting and fairly serene, but my eighties are passionate. I grow more intense as I age. To my surprise I burst out with hot conviction.”

Perspective comes I believe, from having fewer wishes and more hope. “Wishing” and “hoping” are, I believe, quite different. Wishes have objects attached to them – houses, cars, promotions, wealth; but we hope “in” someone, or many someones. It was the elderly Gandhi who said, “Whenever I begin to despair, I remember that all through history, truth and love have triumphed. Tyranny often seems to rule and be enviable but at last is always overthrown. Always!”

On a much smaller scale, that's why grandparents, and great-grandparents, are sometimes more understanding of the struggles of their teenaged grandchildren than their parents are. Hope enables the long view! That's why we get a chuckle out of parents keeping things from grandparents because “we don't want to shock them.” One grandparent said, “I am a prisoner of selective communication.” As though you hadn't seen it before; as though you would give up hope! Perspective is hope wedded with conviction and humor. Elderly people often have a much better gift of humor than their children do. Someone has suggested that true humor is “knowledge with a soft smile.” You can only laugh at those things that you keep in proper perspective so that you take yourself seriously but not too seriously.

Some of you, I'm sure, will remember this offering from poet Marie Kennedy Roberts from “When I am an Old Women I shall wear Purple.” It is dated, but it still makes us laugh at ourselves. It's entitled, “Dear Paul Newman.” “Dear Paul Newman, after all these years it's over between you and me. There's a younger man. I get to see him five times a week and he tries to bring me the world. I worried a lot about your racing them fast cars, your beer drinking, the fact that the color of your eyes is fading a little with age.

Paul baby, it was fun, and I'll never forget your spaghetti sauce but I gotta move on. I'm the same age as you, but in the dark Peter Jennings will never notice!"

Far from clinging to the past, hope wed with humor enables us to celebrate the vitality of life in this day and to lean into the future. As those who are "chronologically advantaged", let us celebrate the advantage!