

First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Second Sunday after Epiphany- January 14, 2024

Scripture lessons: Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 & II Corinthians 4:16-18

## GROWING OLDER

Whenever we enter a new calendar year, I always feel the passage of time more keenly. This year that has led me to think again about how last year I turned 70. That milestone brought home to me more than ever the fact that I'm now well past the halfway point in my life so that I rightly expect far fewer days ahead than those I've already had. It's safe to say, I think, that most, if not all, of you have the same expectation.

There's no getting around it- we're all getting older. But before I focus further on that inescapable fact, there's another one I'd like to highlight- namely, that every single human being, no matter what our age might be, is literally getting older. Every one of us starts to age from the moment we're born, and we keep on aging until the day we die.

We usually don't think of children as aging. We think of them as growing and developing. We think of their growth and development as continuing steadily into adolescence, young adulthood, and even middle age. This growth is mainly an increase in physical, mental, and emotional capacity, which, of course, is a very good thing.

But there's another kind of growth that can and needs to take place *throughout* our life. It's the kind that properly guides us *both* through the increase in physical, mental, and emotional capacity that we have when we're younger *and* in the diminishment of those same capacities when we get older. I'm talking about spiritual growth, which for us, as Christians, is the most important kind. It's paramount when we're younger, when we're middle-aged, and when we're older. Today we'll concentrate on its specific meaning for our "advanced" years.

To be sure, our culture tends to be youth-obsessed and constantly urges us to fight heroically against older age. We're repeatedly told to do our best physically and mentally to remain as youthfully vital and active as we can. Insofar as this means taking care of ourselves through plenty of good exercise, nourishment, and rest, it's a message we need to hear and fully embrace. In that form, it simply summons us to love ourselves as God means us to love by honoring the gifts of body and mind that God has given to us.

But when the call to arms against older age starts edging into denial that our bodies and minds do eventually decline, then it's time to wise up and say no. It's time to face frankly that even though for millennia people have longed and searched for the proverbial "Fountain of Youth", there is no such thing. To varying degrees and at their own distinct pace, our capacities of body and mind diminish as we get older. There's no getting around that fact with any happy talk about "the golden years".

The Scriptural tradition of our faith is completely upfront about this. Today's reading from the book of Ecclesiastes provides one of the best examples. The poetic imagery it uses to describe the physical decline that comes in older age is striking. Ecclesiastes 12 speaks of how legs begin to shake (the guards of the house tremble), knees become arthritic (the strong men are bent), teeth begin to fall out (the women who grind cease working because they are few), eyesight starts to fail (the doors on the street are shut), voice grows feeble (all the daughters of

song are brought low), hair turns white (the almond trees blossom), sexual desire fades (the grasshopper drags itself along) and eventually we die (the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it).

The famed psychologist B.F. Skinner once described the reality of aging bodies by saying, “. . . (I)f you want to know what it feels like to be physically older you should smear dirt on your glasses, stuff cotton in your ears, put on heavy shoes that are too big for you, and wear gloves. Then try to spend your day in a normal way.” With those words, B.F. Skinner and the book of Ecclesiastes are on the same page.

We all get older. When we get old enough, wrinkles come, memories fade, and reflexes slow. In another passage directly related to this, St. Paul says in today’s second Scripture reading, “(O)ur outer nature wastes away” (4:16).

There’s no denying that when we lose abilities that we’ve long relied on and been accustomed to, it can be hard to bear. It can tempt us even to despair, as it may have for the writer of Ecclesiastes. Recall how often in his book he says, “Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity” (e.g. 12:8 in today’s reading).

To resist this kind of temptation, which is among the worst that we can know, we need to immerse ourselves in the wisdom that St. Paul offers as he continues in II Corinthians 4. He says, “*Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.*” Therefore, Paul says, “we do not lose heart”.

He freely acknowledges that as our bodies and minds age, they inescapably lose capacity. At the same time, though, Paul insists that in the depths of our hearts and souls- that is, *in spirit*- we can be renewed *every day*. Spiritually, we *can* decline along with our bodies and minds. We *can* let our spiritual powers deteriorate along with our physical and mental ones. But Paul’s point is that this is *not* inevitable. In spirit, we can keep growing. Our inner nature can be renewed day by day until we die.

The first step in this growth, I think, is steady ACCEPTANCE of the truth that as we age, we unavoidably lose physical and mental abilities that we’ve come to rely on. To develop this crucial acceptance, I also think that a good sense of humor can be particularly helpful. As with so many other areas in our life, it can serve to puncture our false pride and keep us from taking ourselves *too* seriously.

During my years as pastor at the Haslett Community Church, one of its members, Pat Cannon, shared with me a host of jokes about this. He had started to feel unmistakably the decline of his body in his older years and found that these bits of humor helped him to live better with it. Here are a few that gave us both a good chuckle. (If you’ve already heard them, just bear with me.)

What are some of the perks of getting “up there” in years? Well . . .

In a hostage situation, you’re likely to be released first.

No one expects you to run into a burning building.

People call at nine o’clock at night and ask, “Did I wake you?”

You can eat supper at 4 in the afternoon.

You have a party, and your neighbors don’t even realize it.

You quit trying to hold your stomach in, no matter who walks into the room.

Your health plan begins to pay off.

Your joints do a better job predicting the weather than the National Weather Service does.  
“Getting a little action” means you don’t have to take extra fiber today.  
“Getting lucky” means you’ve found your car in the parking lot.  
And finally, your secrets are safe with your friends because they can’t remember them, either.

So . . . what was my original point?

OK, I got it. Graceful *acceptance* of the physical and mental loss that comes in older age is the first step in the daily spiritual renewal that we can have in our later years. And good humor about those losses helps us to grow in that acceptance.

Good-humored acceptance of these losses can also help us to find and start taking satisfaction in other things that we still can do but that we may not have tried much before. For example, we can uncover and develop vitalities of our inner life like reflection, contemplation, and prayer. These are things we may have largely neglected in the past because our peak physical and mental abilities so easily drew us towards and allowed for an almost total engagement with the world outside of us.

These abilities, however, can help us to grow spiritually in our older years simply because we have, e.g., in retirement, a lot more time for them. We can apply them more thoroughly to examine who we’ve been, who we’ve become, and who we will be. The ancient Christian discipline of self-examination is meant to encourage our engagement in this practice all through our life, but in the fuller Sabbath time of our older years, when the hubbub that’s often so loud in our young adult and middle years finally dies down, the opportunity for honest and searching self-examination is much greater than before.

Serious self-examination invites us to face our legacy. We all know that this involves so much more than whatever our financial worth might be on the day we die. Growing spiritually in our older years, we can dig much deeper to take fuller and truer stock of who we’ve been and who we’re becoming now.

What has our legacy been to this point? How are we presently adding to it? How will we add to it in our days still to come? Will we make, are we making, have we made ourselves known for our smiles or our frowns, our laughter or our complaints, our generosity or our stinginess, our kindness or our selfishness, our love or our indifference? If we don’t like the answers that we get to those questions, our senior years give us new and focused time to change them.

In other words, we can still become better people. We can create new memories by moving past old injuries, petty grievances, and crusty prejudices that may have weighed us down and held us back. We can plant seeds deeper in the soil of the Holy Spirit to harvest a crop of spiritual fruit more varied and abundant than ever before.

We can do this by freshly appreciating the ability we have to redefine our life with other people. In our later years, beloved family and long-time friends move away or die. That’s undeniably true and it’s among the most challenging aspects of our older time in life. Yet there are always other people we can open ourselves to, others to whom we can reach out in love, care, and compassion.

It’s always right to grieve deeply for the loss of loved ones who are no longer with us. But we need to remember even more that there is a child of God in every face that we see. Heeding the call to find our lives by loving others as God loves us remains the core truth of our faith

throughout our days. It's the way to life abundant every day even after we've lost all those loved ones we have cherished before.

The great Jewish rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote, "Older people need not only recreation. They need vision. (They) need not only a memory of the past. They need a dream of the future." "It takes three things," he said, "to attain a true sense of being alive. It takes God, it takes a soul, and it takes a moment. All three of these are always with us."

Heschel insisted that in finding new and creative things to do despite increasing physical and mental limitations- by, for instance and above all, seizing the chance to become better people by finding new people to care for despite the loss of those that we've loved before- in these ways, we continue to join our souls to God. We join them with our Maker in every moment that we're given, finding afresh the sacred vision that renews us in life's blessing and holiness. We grow daily in the recognition that despite the serious losses of older age, we can still be joyfully alive in God.

The poet H.S. Fritsch wrote:

Age is a quality of heart.  
If we've left our dreams behind,  
If our hope is cold  
If we no longer look within or ahead  
If our ambition's fires are dead,  
Then we are old.  
But if from life we take the best  
And if in life we keep the jest,  
And if love we hold;  
No matter how the years go by,  
No matter how the birthdays fly-  
We are not old.

We can be old in years, but we never have to be old in spirit. Our outer nature wastes away, but our inner nature can be steadily renewed. The wisdom that our faith offers for growing older teaches that we can grow spiritually *every* day until we die. To that, may we always say, "Amen!"