

18 September 2016

Good News for Seniors
Ecclesiastes 12:1-8; Luke 2:25-38

The cynical author of Ecclesiastes speaks bluntly of the trials of life. He is no less blunt about the trials of old age. We read chapter 12, verses 1-8:

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; on the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.

Despite the troubles that accompany aging, though, the Bible overwhelmingly regards elders with respect. In Luke 2, the newborn Jesus is not just welcomed by poor shepherds, but greeted by two faithful seniors. We read verses 25-38, and if you are able, we invite you stand for the reading of the Gospel:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'*

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting

and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

We are a culture obsessed with youth. Our ideal of beauty is based on what a few twenty-two-year-olds look like. Our picture of living life to the fullest is taken from those Mountain Dew commercials where young adults do dangerous things that require them to get their tee shirts wet. Athletes, pop stars, actors, and (especially) actresses are thought to be over the hill at age thirty-five. Our television shows are usually about and for young adults, not because young adults actually watch network television (they don't), but because they're the demographic that advertisers want to target. Among the few advertisements that are aimed at older adults most are for products, services, and pharmaceuticals designed to make us look or feel young again. Youth good; age bad. Welcome to America.

And it's not just physical youth that we value. We also, for some unfathomable reason, care more about the *opinions* of young adults. Rebecca and I are getting besieged by political survey calls now, but nobody wants to talk to us; they all ask for our son Ethan. ("I'm sorry, he doesn't live here anymore. And no, he doesn't have a landline.") It feels as if the only ideas, preferences, opinions, buying patterns, and style choices that matter are those of young adults. Ask yourself this: How many articles have you seen recently on what "Millennials" are doing these days? And how many articles on trends among senior adults? We are a culture obsessed with youth.

But as we've been looking at the concept of the gospel the past couple of weeks, we've stressed that the good news of Christ is for all people. Last week, we talked about the good news for all races, that no ethnic group or culture has any advantage before God. This week, I'd like to point out that that's equally true for generations. The gospel is good news for people of every age. However, since every age faces different challenges, the good news may be experienced differently at different stages of life. Today I want to talk about the good news of Jesus Christ for senior adults.

Throughout this series I've stressed that the good news not really about achieving some goal one day, but rather about becoming children of God now, and the *good* part of the good news is that God has already done, and continues to do, what is necessary for that process. Becoming children of God is not something we achieve by our own efforts but something that we discover when we allow God to step into our time and space as Christ stepped into time and space once before. In a deep sense, then, encountering the gospel is a letting go of our own projects, and nobody knows more about letting go than seniors.

Aging can feel like an inexorable series of losses. Our reading from Ecclesiastes offers a fairly depressing catalog of them, describing the loss of hair, teeth, strength, vitality, sexual desire, vision, and sleeping through the night. At times, the list of things that you look forward is overwhelmed by the list of things you used to do but can no longer. Life feels like a series of compromises that you make by necessity in order to be able to do *some* of what you used to take for granted. And perhaps the greatest loss that people feel is the loss of independence, when we can no longer do things for ourselves: care for our gardens, drive, live in our own homes. And always lurking in the background is the fear of even greater losses: loved ones, memory, identity.

No, we will not all face all these losses. But if we live to be old, we will know some of them, and we will have no choice but to let go of some of our dreams, some of our preferences, some of our projects.

But here's the good news. There is no letting go before God that is, in the end, a loss. Every time we admit that we cannot do everything ourselves, it is an opportunity for us to lean on God, to open a welcoming door to the One who loves us most. Every loss that we lay at the feet of God is an opportunity for God to fill that void with deeper meaning than we had ever imagined. This is actually true for people of every age, but in many ways seniors have an advantage over youths. Young adults are prone to the insanity of thinking that they are self-sufficient. In truth, we are all desperately dependent on God for true meaning, and seniors who have been forced to deal with loss after loss know that best.

Most of all, seniors face the reality of death. At times, it feels as if you are surrounded by death. A senior adult who doesn't want to think about the fact that we are all dying has to work very hard and keep his or her eyes very tightly shut. I talk to people on Sunday morning who are exhausted, having gone to three different funerals the week before. It's half of some people's social life. They have seen their parents die, many of their friends and siblings, often their spouses, sometimes their children. It can feel as if everyone you love is outlined with that approaching shadow. In the magical world of the Harry Potter books, there are certain things that are invisible to most people, that can only be seen by those who have experienced the loss of someone they loved. In this world, too.

But here's the good news in the face of death. The gospel is built on the reality of God's love, which is forever. There is no love, not even our weak imitations of God's love, that is ever wasted. I said a couple of weeks ago that the gospel is not really about "Yay! I get to go to heaven if I follow these steps!" and I still believe that. God is not a late-night infomercial host hawking an easy three-step shortcut to achieve amazing results in your own home. But having said that, God is eternal, and heaven is real. The gospel is not good news if it is temporary. Eternal life may not be the *goal* of the gospel, but it is a necessary consequence of it. At the final letting go, God will be there to catch us.

So. What does this mean for the Church? Now you would think, looking around at the gray heads in our congregation, in a slightly higher percentage than the population as a whole, that we would do all right expressing the gospel to seniors. But that's not been my experience. If anything, the Church is more obsessed with youth than our culture is, driven by a panic that we're losing ground in society. I went to a United Methodist conference in Chicago last month, where there were at least three different breakout sessions on how to get Millennials to come to your church. Not one on ministry to senior adults. (A brief aside here. I went to one of those sessions, where I got suggestions on how to attract Millennials by making church feel more like video games. Now I'm not a Millennial, obviously, but if I were, I think I'd be insulted by that. I might not be interested in going to a church that assumed I was that superficial. But hey, what do I know?) Now, I get it. I read the demographic reports, too. I see that young adults are staying away from church in droves, and if current trends remain, we will have a lot of empty church buildings in a few years. But when I encounter the assumption that we have to turn all our

attention to reaching the youth market *now*, or we will die, I want to respond: if survival requires us to ignore our widows, our grandparentss, our elders – then maybe we should die.

Here's how the church can be the gospel: by being the place where all people are valued simply because they are, and not because we need them. We Americans are an intensely pragmatic people, and there is much that is good in that, but the evil side of our pragmatism is our tendency to value people according to their usefulness. By God, that is *not* the gospel. When a church bases its priorities on who has the most to offer for the good of the institution, then it does not represent God but Satan. And I do not say things like that lightly. So, again, the gospel declares that God's love for us has nothing to do with how effective we are; we, as bearers of the gospel must love in that spirit. We take the church to those who cannot be here themselves, we hold the hands of people who do not recognize us any more, we mourn with those who mourn, and we shoulder burdens with those who are heavy-laden.

And when we do that we discover something that our society has forgotten. In the letting go that accompanies age comes wisdom. In the temple that day so long ago, crowds of priests and worshipers bustled by Mary and Joseph as they brought in their infant son Jesus, who was the salvation of the world. Only two stopped. Only two recognized that they were in the presence of all they had ever hoped for. Only Simeon and Anna. Old. Widowed. Alone. They were too old to serve on church committees, too weak to volunteer in the kitchen, too poor to support the church financially. They had had to let all that go, leaving them nothing but to look for God, which is why they were the only ones who knew him when they saw him. We have much to learn from our elders, and one of the things we can learn is the gospel.