

ACT YOUR AGE!

(06/13/10)

Scripture Lessons: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
Hebrews 11:1-12

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” (Ecc. 3:1)

This past week I was searching for a book of the Bible that we could use as our focus in worship this summer. As you know, most of the time I use the gospel reading as the basis of my sermon. This is because I am more interested in what Jesus said and did than I am in the Old Testament prophets or what Paul and the other theologians of the early church thought about the central message of the Gospel.

During the summer months I try to compensate for my bias by taking a book of the Bible that I wouldn't tend to use as a focus for my sermons and examine it as a kind of Bible study. Ideally, we read one of the chapters each week during worship. Then I go lift up the passages that I regard as instructive or inspirational. By the time we are done, we know one of the books of the Bible a lot better than we did before we began.

Since I will be preaching at both Pilgrim Church and our church for the first six weeks this summer, I have been searching for a book of the Bible that has six chapters. My second option would be either a shorter book, where we could go into more depth, or a book with twelve chapters where we could do two chapters a week.

As I scanned the Book of Hebrews, which happens to have thirteen chapters, which I don't like, but which focuses on faith, which I do like, I was struck by something interesting. The passage that we heard this morning lists some of the great examples of faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition, examples of creative and transforming power being set loose in the world, examples of people who made lasting contributions to the evolution of a higher religious consciousness.

The author seems to have a sense of history as meaningful, of God acting within history through people of faith. The epistle was written to convince the Jews that Jesus stood firmly within their tradition. It invites them as Christians to experience the gifts of faith that were displayed by people from their own religious tradition in ages past.

What I found interesting about this particular passage, this listing of the great examples of faith, was that most all the people mentioned by the writer were old people.

By the old reckoning, Noah was six hundred years old when he started to build his ark. Abraham was seventy-five years old when, as the Bible says, he

obeyed the call to set out for a country that was the inheritance given to him and his descendants, and he set out without knowing where he was going. By faith he arrived, as a foreigner, in the Promised Land, and lived there as if in a strange country, with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. They lived there in tents while he looked forward to a city founded, designed and built by God.

The author of the letter goes on to list other examples of faith. "Sarah, in spite of being past the age, was made able to conceive, because she believed that the God who had made the promise would be faithful to it." Sarah was ninety-nine years old at the time of Isaac's birth, and Abraham was one hundred. "Because of this," the author says, "there came from one man, and one who was already as good as dead himself, more descendants than could be counted, as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore."

The list continues.

It was by faith that Isaac gave his blessing to Jacob and Esau for the still distant future. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, leaning on the end of his stick as if bowing to pray. It was by faith that, when he was about to die, Joseph recalled the Exodus of the Israelites and made the arrangements for his own burial.

This list of men and women of faith could just as easily be described as a list of the Senior Citizens, the Gray Panthers, the Silver Foxes, or the Golden Agers of the Bible.

This passage challenges us to confront our assumptions concerning when we can no longer "bear fruit," the age at which life is no longer worth living. It challenges us to accept and live our age no matter what it is, and to find a sense of meaning in our particular stage of life. It challenges us to not give up on life, lie down, and pull the dirt over ourselves, not to commit the kind of emotional and spiritual suicide that might lead us to die physically before our time.

Elderly people play an important role both in our society and in our religious tradition. There is a wisdom that comes with being old, at least if we have lived our life fully. This wisdom, which arises from reflective life experience, is not experienced at earlier stages in life and cannot be duplicated by any amount of book learning.

Although in many other cultures the elderly are respected, in our culture it is commonly thought of as a disgrace to be old. People lie about their age, and some women won't tell you how old they are even when they are in their thirties. Health and fitness clubs advertise not on the basis of helping us become healthier, but on the promise that we will look younger. Dish detergent companies assure us that by using their product we will not be able to tell the mother's hands from the daughter's. Face lifts and cosmetic surgery are becoming increasingly common, carrying with them the promise of looking twenty years younger. Many men dread retirement, afraid that with the cessation of daily productivity they will no longer have a feeling of worth and perhaps no longer have a reason for living.

The prejudice against old age is often subtle. For example, when a person of seventy is still full of life, still has his/her wits, is involved in activities like Senior Citizens and the church, still enjoys his/her family and hobbies, we think we are saying something complementary when we remark that he/she acts like someone who is fifty. This way of thinking is contrary to the life process. We wouldn't apply this sort of thinking to a tree, so why apply it to ourselves?

The expression "Act your age!" has always carried a certain power. This is because we sense that there is something wrong when there is a discrepancy between who we are and how we act. By trying to be or by pretending to be something different from who we are, we make ourselves superficial. If we assume God has a reason for setting up life the way it is, we have to assume there is a reason for each and every stage in the life process. In order to be ourselves most fully, we must be or act what we are where we are, for to try to be anything else is to live a falsehood.

There seem to be two general areas of dissatisfaction for people with regard to the matter of age. These are expressed by the two phrases, "Grow up!" and "Act young!" The first is an expression of impatience with youth; the second is the expression of a reluctance to accept one's advancing years.

With regard to the first, some parents won't let their children be children. They think it's cute for a four or five year old to act like he/she is forty or fifty. Their children are prim and proper at all times, don't get dirty, and delight in the conversation of adults.

"He's such a little man," we say, and the child believes this. In reality, this is no cuter than a forty or fifty-year-old acting four or five. We should be equally saddened by both.

We should also be saddened by the cultural phenomenon of not allowing our children to enjoy their particular stage in life. Children in Junior High School are not allowed to be children for they have to get ready for high school. High school students have to work and study like adults in order to get ready for college. College no longer is an experience to be enjoyed for itself, for one must maintain at least a 3.0 GPA to stand a chance of being admitted to graduate school.

When we force children to forego age-appropriate behavior in order to prepare them for the next stage, or when we try to move them into the next stage prematurely, we force them to rebel just to be who and where they are. It is unfortunate when they hurt themselves by rebelling, but it is also sad when they don't rebel, when their spirit has been broken, when at a very young age they are already cogs in the great machinery of our society.

This matter of not allowing children to be children, of pressuring them to be grown up and mature, finds expression in a letter that was written to Erma Bombeck many years ago. A young mother wrote,

I know you've written before about the empty nest syndrome, that lonely period after the children are grown and gone. Right now I'm up to my eyeballs in laundry and muddy boots. The baby is teething. The boys are fighting. My husband just called and said to eat without him, and I fell off my diet. I need some words of advice to help me enjoy today.

Erma Bombeck replies,

One of these days you'll shout, "Why don't you kids grow up!" And they will. Or "You guys get outside and find yourself something to do, and don't slam the door!" And they won't.

You'll straighten up the boys' bedroom neat and tidy, bumper stickers discarded, spread tucked and smooth, toys displayed on the shelves. Hangers in the closet. Animals caged. And you'll say out loud, "Now I want it to stay that way." And it will.

You'll prepare a perfect dinner with a salad that has not been picked to death and a cake with no finger traces in the icing, and you will say, "Now, there's a meal fit for company." And you'll eat it alone.

You'll say, "I want complete privacy on the phone. No dancing around. No pantomimes. No demolition crews. Silence! Do you hear?" And you'll have it.

No more plastic tablecloths stained with spaghetti. No more bedspreads to protect the sofa from damp bottoms. No more gates to stumble over at the top of the basement stairs. No more playpens to arrange a room around.

No more anxious nights under a vaporizer tent. No more sand on the sheets or Popeye movies in the bathroom. No more iron-on patches, wet knotted shoestrings, tight boots, or rubber bands for ponytails.

Imagine! Not needing a baby sitter for New Year's Eve. Doing laundry only once a week. Seeing a steak that isn't ground. Having your teeth cleaned without a baby on your lap. No PTA meetings. No car pools. No blaring radios. No one washing her hair at 11 o'clock at night. Having your own roll of Scotch tape.

Think about it! No more Christmas presents made out of toothpicks and library paste. No more sloppy oatmeal kisses. No more tooth fairy. No giggles in the dark. No knees to heal. No responsibility.

Only a voice, "Why don't you grow up?" And the silence echoing, "I did."

Each age has its inherent beauty, its own pleasures, its distinct meaning and value. We cannot turn the clock ahead, nor can we turn it back. Life is a one-way street. All we have is the present, and we must live the present to the fullest. Young or old, man or woman, we must discover the treasure that is right where we are, for this is the only way to live a meaningful life, and the only path to true happiness.

The Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung tells us that the process of life follows a parabolic trajectory. From the time of birth to mid-life, the curve is going up. This is a time of activity and productivity, of outpouring and outgoing. It is a time to climb the mountain. From mid-life to death, the curve slopes down the other side. It is a time of intake, of reflection. No longer is the person out to conquer the world, but a deepening takes place within his/her own little piece of it. The second half of life is a time to prepare for death. As Jung puts it,

Being old is highly unpopular. Nobody seems to consider that not being able to grow old is precisely as absurd as not being able to outgrow child-sized shoes. A still infantile man of thirty is surely to be deplored, but a youthful septuagenarian--isn't that delightful? And yet both are perverse, lacking in style, psychological monstrosities. A young person who does not fight and

conquer has missed the best part of youth, while an elderly person who does not know how to listen to the secrets of the brooks as they tumble down from the peaks to the valleys makes no sense; he/she is a spiritual mummy who is nothing but a rigid relic of the past. These people stand apart from life, mechanically repeating themselves to the last triviality. (Feifel, The Soul and Death. p.6.)

Life can be exciting at any age. Meaningful things can happen if we expect and are willing to accept them. This is because each age has its own role to play in the shaping of the soul. The people of faith listed in the Book of Hebrews did not live lives of comfort, peace and prosperity. Their lives were marked with meaning, usefulness and generativity, often in the midst of hardship, of pain and suffering. There is a joyous energy to youth, and there should be a dignity and wisdom to old age.

The law of life is that we must die in order to be born to new and different adventures, new and different meaning, to a new and different self. Exciting and fulfilling events can happen at any age, but they are more likely to happen if we can accept the age we're in. We should act our age, live it to the fullest, and let other people act theirs too. Perhaps then we will discover what it means to be people of faith, and perhaps then we will discover the ways in which we as distinct individuals might join the communion of saints, might make our contribution to creating the kingdom of God on earth.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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