

Keepers of the Flame Golden Harvest Dinner Sunday

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bill Chadwick November 5, 2017
Portions of Psalm 71

I like to come to church. (Fortunately!)

When all week long in the wider society I have been bombarded with lies, I like to come to church to hear the truth. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." So true!

The lies which society tells us include:

a new car is necessary for happiness
violence is a legitimate and effective way to solve problems
going to bed on the first date is a good idea
fidelity in relationships is optional
professional athletes, judging by salaries,
are 100 times more valuable than schoolteachers.

And this pervasive lie: being old is bad.

Today we are explicitly stating the truth: growing older is a process to be *celebrated* and held in *honor* by all.

Most countries and cultures know this. Only in the western world have we fallen so far from the biblical model. In the US youth is worshipped and old age is at best a joke and at worst a horror to be feared. Being old in America is often an embarrassment... and that is a tragedy.

As many of you know, my brother-in-law Mark, Kris's older brother, has been a medical missionary in Tanzania for over 30 years. He noted that as his hair and beard turned gray it has been a good thing for him, as he gets more respect now. In fact, he is an honorary Maasai elder. Mark and his wife Linda come back to the States every other summer for vacation and to itinerate, to visit the churches that support their work. He likes to tell of the typical response he gets when he returns from his biennial summer in the US to his home in Tanzania. The Tanzanian people will say to him, "Welcome back, Dr. Jacobson. You look well. You look older and fatter."

Older and fatter is a good thing in Tanzania. Makes me want to move there!

Sometimes people will say of Oak Grove, with concern in their voice: "We have a LOT of old people." And I respond, "Yes, aren't we blessed?!" Without our older people we would not have too much going. Without their gifts of time, energy, money and wisdom we could not do half of what we are doing in the community and around the world. Thank God for our big contingent of older people.

I have always loved older folks, even before I became one. When I was a kid my aunts and uncles on my dad's side were already in their 60s and 70s. I grew up around a lot of old folks. My grandfather was 99 when I was born and he was still alive when I was born. Grandpa Heck (full name Hector) was the first blacksmith in Bloomington. His original shop was near the Bloomington Ferry Bridge, later just across the street here. When he was 100 years old and still living in his house, right where the white building is 50 yards east of here, one day he was settin' on the porch. A neighbor walked by and inquired as to how he was. "Jest fine," he replied. "Well, that is, just fine except my left knee. It's pretty sore and I just can't figure out what's wrong with it."

"Well," responded the neighbor gently, "ya don't suppose it could be old age?"

"No, can't be," replied my grandpa. "The other knee's the same age and it don't hurt a bit."

When my father turned 60 he had a child in kindergarten, my little brother John. (Even when he was 80 whenever people would ask my dad how many children he had he would answer, "Four...so far.")

Which reminds me of a story. (Everything does. It's an occupational hazard of veteran pastors.) The older gentleman's long-time physician finally retired so the man was forced to find a new doctor for his annual physical. The young doctor finished examining the 80 year-old and remarked, "You are in excellent shape. You're good to go for years yet. I'm curious, how old was your father when he died?"

"Did I say my father was dead?"

"What! You're 80 years old and your father is still alive?"

"Yep, he's 104 and going strong."

"Wow," replied the doctor. "Well, how old was your grandfather when he died?"

"Did I say my grandfather was dead?"

Oh, come now! You are 80 years old. Don't try to tell me your grandfather is still alive."

“Still alive. 126 years old. Not only that, he’s getting married next week.”

“126 years old!... But why would he want to get married at 126?”

“Did I say he *wanted* to get married?”

The author of Psalm 71 has lived a long and full life. He looks back on his life—the disasters and difficulties, and the times of triumph. Overall, life has been good. God has been his rock and his refuge. So, he prays “even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your praise to the generations to come...I will praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O God...I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel.”

He lives with that attitude of gratitude. What he still wanted to do with his life was to declare the wonder and power and mercy of God to the younger generations.

Our Judeo-Christian tradition deeply honors the elderly. In the scriptures elders are respected in part because in a largely illiterate culture older folks were the bearers of traditions. They knew the history and were given the highly important role of passing on the ancient stories and lessons of life.

The Jews embody this particularly in Passover. In that ritual each year the extended family gathers together for an evening meal. The youngest child asks the oldest member of the family the ritual questions, “Why are we here? Why are we doing this?” And the patriarch tells the story of God leading the people out of slavery in Egypt. And in the telling and retelling year after year it becomes *their* story. And so it gets passed down.

Those of you in the autumn of life have a responsibility to be living books from which all might learn. And we who are younger have to pay attention! Elders, be for us keepers of the flame. Help us to learn the stories of our heritage. Remind us of who we are as followers of Jesus. Bless us. We need you.

How many of you were significantly affected in a positive way by your relationship with your grandparents? I was. My grandparents were HUGE in my life. I’m convinced that one reason we see such unhappiness among so many of our young people, our children and teenagers, is that so often today extended families no longer live in the same locale. Kids and grandparents see each other only once or twice a year.

I encourage those of you with children, if you don’t have grandparents nearby, to adopt a grandparent out of this congregation. Ask somebody; they will be thrilled.

We need you. In so many ways we need you.

Teach us, amidst our often shallow and scattered lives of frenetic activity to number our days, to know what is enduring.

Show us how to survive change and loss and growth and to meet the challenges of life with grace.

Model for us patience and wisdom and love.

Share with us your experience of God—of divine leading and power and forgiveness and grace. Bless us.

Two more things I ask of those of you who are older. I've said them before and I will say them again.

Some of you, because of failing health, are no longer able to serve in active ways. When I was a very young associate pastor with the Stillwater congregation Mrs. McCormack was very old and quite infirm. Mrs. McCormack had been exceedingly active in the church all her life. She was a deacon, involved with women's circles, and she had been the Sunday School Superintendent for *decades*. You get the picture. When I met her she was frail and pretty much bed-ridden. While visiting in her home one day she said to me, "You know, Pastor Bill, I can't DO like I used to do. But there is *one* thing I can still do. I can pray. I keep the church calendar next to my bed here. And any time anything is going on, I am praying. When you are teaching the Bethel series teachers Monday evening I am praying for you. When you are with the confirmation kids on Wednesday evening I am praying for you. When the Session is meeting I am praying for you. Certainly when the Sunday worship service is going on I am praying for you." Wow! No one in that congregation of 600 members was serving more faithfully and powerfully than this frail, bed-ridden woman. Will you please follow the example of Mrs. McCormack?

And finally this:

How many of you like to help people? Of course. All of us. "It is more blessed to give than to receive," said Jesus. For those of you who are octogenarians or above, all your life you have been doing and giving, and feeling good about that. It feels good to give and to help. For those of you who are now physically less able than you once were, I ask you now to graciously let others help you. That's a gift—to be a gracious receiver and let other people feel good in the act of helping you.

So, you octogenarians, nonagenarians: We need you. We honor you. We praise God for you! We thank you!

Amen!