

## November 18, 2007 “Young and Old”

No, Beef and Boards folks, I'm not at Oak Hill. And no, Oak Hill folks, I'm not at Beef and Boards. I found out after I had already done the message that our flight wouldn't actually get back until sometime after these services were over. Actually, it's probably just as well that this is recorded since 25 of us are just returning from our two week travels, walking in the footsteps of Paul in Italy and Greece. I know we will have had a marvelous time, as well as a very inspirational and uplifting experience. Hopefully, next time some of the rest of you will be able to go along for this kind of journey.

And, as soon as we get back, we're running head-on into Thanksgiving! Where has time gone? It seems as though we just had 80 degree days a few days ago, and now we're headed toward the holiday season. Of course, Thanksgiving is early this year, but still....

This year I'm doing what I have done for most of my life at Thanksgiving. Mike and I and our daughter and son-in-law will be spending a few days with others from my side of the family. Now, I have a rather small family, since both my parents have died, and I only have one sister. We're gathering next week at my nephew's near Jacksonville, Florida, where we will have the opportunity to spend some time together. For the first time in 10-12 years, my sister will not be joining us, due to some health concerns, so that leaves us without the “elder” of our family. That means that we'll be missing one of the links to days gone by.

Frankly, I wasn't very good about paying attention to the stories that my parents and grandparents told about their growing-up days, and what things were like then. Now that they aren't here to ask anymore, I regret that. I wish I had listened more carefully, and had had the good sense to realize how precious those stories and memories could grow to be. Of course, I have my own from my younger days, but when our daughter asks me about one or the other of my parents, I draw a blank. That's because I just didn't think I was interested.

My, how things change as time passes, and how I wish I had done things differently! Recently, a clergy colleague shared with me how he was taking his wife, his daughter and her husband and his grandchildren to the place where he grew up. He said he had done that with his daughter, showing her where he had lived, where he had gone to school, where he had played stick ball, and more. She is an adult now with her own children, and she asked him to take all of them once again. She

wanted her children to have an appreciation for their grandfather's past and to have the opportunity to see into his life as she had once been able to do.

When he told me about their trip, I was a little bit envious. What a wonderful chance for his grandkids to garner a little bit of insight into another time and place! What a wonderful gift he was giving his family! I hope they value and cherish the opportunity they have had to do that. Part of what my friend is doing is sharing his life, yes, but he is also sharing the wisdom he has gained from his decades of life.

Wisdom is something that is of great value, and it's something most of us don't have in our youth. We acquire wisdom through years of life, through varied experiences, through victories and failures, through faithfulness and doubt, through joys and sorrows. Those who are young can well benefit by listening to and heeding the words of those who have walked some of those paths in earlier days.

That's a part of what today's Bible passage is trying to help us see. The writer is one of the early pastors of the fledgling Christian church—a writer named James, and he was trying to address some of the missteps he was seeing in those who professed to be among the faithful. He's talking about the importance of wisdom—wisdom that is deep and alive, wisdom that is gained mostly in the art of living life.

Here is what the writer had to say: **“Do you wish to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom...Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings...”**

What more can we add to what James has said? Wisdom has to do with the way we live life. It is a life centered in God, and that God-centeredness shows itself in how we relate with others. It shows in our being gentle and reasonable, in being forgiving and thankful.

We can see the marks of wisdom when we look into the eyes of those who have lived more years than we. In fact, Carver McGriff, who was senior pastor for 26 years at St. Luke's and who was featured in the video segments you saw last week from his World War II days, writes in his book, *Making Sense of Normandy*, about how younger generations today don't really appreciate what their elders have gone through, nor do they see the real person inside the sometimes aging body.

In the epilogue of his book, Carver describes members of the Service Club of Indianapolis, which is a gathering of a couple of hundred men—mostly

old men, he says—who meet for lunch. He says they are former successful business and professional men who were also once boys, teenagers and who as young men, stepped up when the country was in need.

McGriff goes on to say that young people sometimes make fun of old people, and then he relates what we do not and cannot know just by looking. He talks about Tom who's now 82 and who walks with a noticeable limp, but who, when he was 17 starred on the Shortridge High School track team. When he was 19 his foot was blown off while he was saving lives as a combat medic.

One after another, he describes these men, some on walkers, some with canes, one on oxygen, who had distinguished lives in the military and since. He notes that when we look at them, we might just see old men, but without saying the words, he urges us to see the wisdom these men have gained through the living of their lives. Maybe thinking of what those earlier generations have gone will help us be a bit more patient and a bit more understanding this Thanksgiving as we gather with families and friends.

Years ago, I read a book that talks about his very thing. It came to mind as I was preparing this message for today. It's a book I read the only time I have ever been to Alaska, and it told an Alaskan legend of courage and survival. It's *Two Old Women* by Velma Wallis. The story, in its short form, is about an early band of Alaskans who are referred to as "The People" in the story. The tale tells of a particularly difficult time for "The People," when food was scarce and their survival was at risk. The chief of the group and the band's council decided that two of the oldest, two women, were holding everyone else back, and believed that they would all perish if they continued to try to bring the two women along the trek. With no word of disagreement, "The People" moved away, leaving the two women to certain death.

For a while, the two sat with the things the tribe had left with them, and bewailed their circumstances. They had complained loudly to the others, and had walked with walking sticks, slowing the group. That resulted in the others determination that each person had to make a contribution, and the two could not. So, they were left to die.

Yet as they sat there alone, they began to realize that that was exactly what would happen if all they did was to sit there. They would just be waiting for death. Slowly, but surely, the two women, aged 75 and 80, began to come alert. They realized that young people tended to look for easier ways out of hard times, but they knew, from their years of experience, that simply was not so. As they watched the cold smother the campfire, one of them, Sa,' "came alive with a greater fire within her, almost as if her spirit had absorbed the energy from the now-flowing embers of the campfire," as the book says.

It was then that the two realized that they needed to draw on the things they had learned in the process of living their lives. They had been at a point where they had allowed themselves to grow old and had just stopped living. They had spent their time and energy trying to convince the young ones that they were helpless, but now they became determined to prove them wrong. As Sa' said, **"If we are going to die anyway, let us die trying!"**

They began to draw on the things they had lived throughout their lives—things like fishing and trapping. They recalled how to build a shelter to protect them from the cold, and they remembered a place where "The People" had once gone that was protected and ripe with food sources, so they began walking. Before long, they had discarded their walking sticks, and they had successfully trapped some small animals to ward off hunger. They used skills they had once known to make snowshoes that made the going easier, and they began to grow stronger and stronger.

A year passed, and the two old women had managed to store away much food and fur and had become quite self-sufficient. Then one day, they heard someone call their names, and a scout from the band had come searching for them. They warily responded, and upon meeting the scout and his small group, they realized that, while they had managed to survive and even thrive, the others continued to be half-wasted because of lack of food.

Finally they were reconnected, and the chief and all "The People" found that they couldn't get enough of the company of the two old women. The children especially enjoyed being with them, and spent many hours near their camp while the two women watched and listened to them.

Toward the end of the story, we read: **"After everyone had been reunited, the chief appointed the two women to honorary positions within the band...So The People showed their respect for the two women by listening to what they had to say."**

That will be the opportunity many of us will have this coming week and in the weeks ahead. We're going to be reunited with family members, some of them a lot older than we are. We have the chance to place them in honorary positions within our hearts, and we, too, can show our respect for their wisdom and for their life experience by listening to what they have to say. Can we do that?

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that in the coming weeks, we will listen more and talk less, and grow in wisdom.

Have a good Sunday, (Go Colts!), and go in peace. Amen.

