

Aging Well

20 August 2006

Bible passage: **Proverbs 18: 15** (*The Message*)

“Wise men and women are always learning, always listening for fresh insights.”

Sermon nugget: There are certain clues for aging well, as opposed to just aging as we grow older. How do we grow both older and better?

Did you hear the story about the man in his mid-90's, hair well groomed, great looking suit, flower in his lapel, smelling slightly of good aftershave, presenting a well looked-after image, who walked into an upscale cocktail lounge? He took a seat at the bar next to an attractive-looking lady, maybe in her mid-80's. He ordered a drink, took a sip, and then, in an attempt to strike up a conversation, turned to her and said, “So tell me, do I come here often?”

Or how about the man who had had serious hearing problems for a number of years? He went to the doctor, and the doctor was able to have him fitted for a set of hearing aids that allowed him to have full hearing.

A month after, the man went back to the doctor, and the doctor said, “Your hearing is perfect. Your family must be really pleased that you can hear again.” The man replied, “Oh, I haven't told my family yet. I just sit around and listen to the conversations. I've changed my will three times!”

Somehow those are some of the jokes that area floating around about the older generation. And I have to tell you—I'm not exactly sure how to take this, but those two, and a whole lot more, have been coming to me via email for some time! What is that supposed to mean?

Growing older—that's something every single one of us is doing every single day. After all, Paul McCartney, who sang “When I'm 64” as a young Beatle, now *is* 64! There's no exception, unless, of course, we've ceased breathing, to getting older. It's inevitable, and that's something that's hard for some folks to take—especially in a society and culture that doesn't seem to value much except being young and beautiful.

As this cartoon “**You know you're getting old when your bank sends you their free calendar...one month at a time!**” shows, society in general doesn't think those of us who are on the other side of 40 are going to be around very long! While that's very different in other parts of the world, typically growing old isn't something that we Americans look forward to. I have a friend who whines around all the time about her aches and pains, and about how getting older is such a bummer. Frankly, I don't agree with her; I wouldn't trade places with any earlier year that I've been through for anything! I happen to like where I am right now, and I hope I can continue to say that until the day I die.

There are a lot of pluses in growing older that many people fail to think about. Our memories are a lot longer—at least most

of the time. Let's just see what I mean. I have a little quiz for us to take, so pick up a pen or pencil, and mark how many of these you remember:

Blackjack chewing gum, candy cigarettes
diners with table side jukeboxes
home milk delivery in glass bottles
party telephone lines
newsreels before the movie
P.F. Flyers, Butch wax
elephone numbers with a word prefix like Olive 6933
Howdy Doody, 45 RPM records, S&H Green Stamps
Hi-fi's, metal ice cube trays with a lever
mimeograph paper, blue flashbulbs
roller skate keys, drive-ins
Studebakers, wringer washing machines

If we remember 0-5 of these things, we're still young, at least according to the makers of the quiz. If we remembered 6-10 of them, we're getting older. And if we remembered 11-15, we probably shouldn't tell our age, the quiz creators say.

I think the Bible passage we have for this morning gives us a very different way to think about aging, and about aging successfully. The Proverb reads like this: “**Wise men and women are always learning, always listening for fresh insights.**” It seems to me that this is pretty easy to understand. It tells us that wisdom, at any age or stage of life, has to do with being open to learning new things, to seeing in new ways, to experiencing entirely new opportunities.

You see, one of the marks of aging well is the capacity for lifelong learning. George Valliant, in his book *Aging Well*, offers an analysis of studies done about successful aging, and tries to help us understand what is meant by lifelong learning. He writes, “**The challenge in retirement is to combine the fruits of maturity with the recovery of childlike wonder.**”

It's a matter of combining the experiences we've already had with a curiosity about what else might be. It's like the story of a 97-year-old woman who entered the record books as the oldest person ever to earn an undergraduate degree from Harvard. That was in June of 1997. The data that Valliant studied found a strong correlation with a lifelong desire to learn and the ability to grow old well. He said, “**The capacity to take a fresh look at things makes a young person out of an old person.**”

Vailliant writes about some other characteristics of successful aging that I thought might be helpful for us to consider, seeing as how we're all in the process of aging. One that he mentions is future orientation, and by that he means the ability to anticipate, to plan and to hope. It is the person who feels hopeless about tomorrow who grows old poorly, and not the one who looks forward to what each day holds.

Yet another characteristic, and a very important one in my view, is the capacity for gratitude and forgiveness. We've

talked about both here time and time again, but suffice it to say that being able to be thankful, regardless of our situation, is a mark of a positive person. It's seeing the blessings that infiltrate each and every day, and taking them in as fully as we possibly can. And forgiveness is an absolute must if we are going to age well. To hold onto long-standing grudges, to build walls instead of bridges, to refuse to speak or connect with friends or family—all of those make a sure-fire prescription for a miserable old age.

Another quality Vaillant speaks of is the capacity to love and to have empathy with others. In order to make connections with others, we have to try to put ourselves in their places, and imagine what they're experiencing. That's what is meant by empathy.

Loving has to do with having a network of family and friends to be with, to enjoy, to laugh with, to cry with. In fact, the most important factor for good aging is a strong social network. It is the ability to keep old friends, while constantly expanding our circle of friends and acquaintances to include those who are younger than we, more traveled than we are, to get to know those who have different sets of life experiences than we. When it comes to old age, it's poverty in love, and not poverty in dollars, that makes the biggest difference.

One of the surprises that Vaillant writes about had to do with faith. He had assumed that, as one grows older, one's faith gets deeper. However, none of the research projects that he studied and analyzed bore out that assumption.

That revelation caused him to reconsider his concept of religion and faith to that point that he began to use the term "spirituality" rather than either faith or religion. And while he didn't exactly relate depth of spirituality as a characteristic of aging well, I found myself wondering if he still had too narrow a definition.

Again and again, he noted the centrality of hope and love to life span development, and in my mind, hope and love are essentially what faith is all about. He talks about the primacy of relationships with others, and I'm very convinced that relationship with one another is interconnected with our relationship with the One who is greater than we are, that Higher Power, the ultimate source of our being. If hope and love and relationships aren't grounded in faith, I don't know what is!

There are obviously other factors that contribute to positive aging, but I'm not going to try to expound on them. Rather, it seems to me that experiencing aging as a successful process is a lot about the habits we develop as we move our way through life. We're deciding how we age by how we live during our 20's and 30's and 40's and 50's. Each of us has the power to decide how that is for us, and no one else can do that.

I have to tell you that I had a rough time getting this topic down to a manageable size. Maybe that has to do with the largest population segment in the U.S., the Baby Boomers, all getting older; maybe that has to do with me personally and where I

am, but there was a lot of stuff out there about growing older with grace and style.

Maya Angelou, now 70+ years old, was interviewed by Oprah 2-3 years ago, and she had some words of wisdom to share from her life. I thought they were worth passing on for us to think about. This is part of what she had to say:

I've learned that no matter what happens, or how bad it seems today, life does go on, and it will be better tomorrow.

I've learned that you can tell a lot about a person by the way he/she handles these three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights.

I've learned that making a living is not the same thing as making a life.

I've learned that life sometimes gives you a second chance.

I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands. You need to be able to throw something back.

I've learned that even when I have pains, I don't have to be one.

I've learned that every day you should reach out and touch someone. People love a warm hug, or just a friendly pat on the back.

I've learned that I still have a lot to learn.

Maybe now's the time for each of us to ask ourselves what we're learning as we grow older. What would we say about aging well?

CLOSING:

Surprise, Surprise! George Carlin had something to offer about aging successfully. He shared his Top Ten List (oops, that's Letterman) about how to stay young. Here they are:

Throw out nonessential numbers, like age, weight and height.

Keep only cheerful friends.

Keep learning.

Enjoy the simple things.

Laugh often, long and loud.

The tears happen. Endure, grieve and move on.

Surround yourself with what you love, family, pets, keepsakes, music, plants, hobbies...your home is your refuge.

Cherish your health. Preserve it; improve it; get help.

Don't take guilt trips.

Tell the people you love that you love them, at every opportunity.

Aging well has a lot to do with loving, learning, being thankful and forgiving. What more could we ask for?

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.