

“All those years!”

Psalm 71:1-9, 17-18, 8/22/10, Ray Larson

When one turns 60 or so, you begin to look at your generation with different eyes. You remember Amos and Andy, Arthur Godfrey and the Morning Breakfast Club when everyone was invited to march around the breakfast table; all this on radio of course.

On the occasion of Memorial Day there would be a Civil War survivor who had been gently placed in an old convertible who managed to raise an occasional hand for a slight wave.

We realize that when we were young and full of energy we should have paid more respect to those of the older generation. We are they say, “Graced with gray” but some are better at hiding it than others.

Tertullian, the third century theologian once said, “The harder we work to conceal our age the more we reveal it.”

Aging is not a choice. Those who are ageing are not just the old, all of us are ageing, if we aren't we're dead. We only choose how we will age and that only to a degree.

Our genetic make up will pretty much determine the process but of course if we do the right things to and with our bodies and minds we can stave off the finality of life, for a period or at least enhance the quality.

Good habits of exercise for body and brain, proper eating and the lack of accident and fatal disease may mean we fade into the sunset of life instead of drop off suddenly. But as we all know, there is no guarantee what our final act will read like in the drama we call life. When it comes to ageing, whatever number one picks on the age scale, it is relative. Now that I have safely passed 66 I have pondered a bit about the experience of ageing and have come to the conclusion that when one is 60, 80 is old. When one is 70, 85 is old, when one is 80, 90 is old and when one reaches 90, it is 95 and one year at a time after that until one reaches 100; denial is real!

Denial is also some times a good thing. Casey Stengel the former manager of the NY Yankees once said, “I'll never make the mistake of turning 70 again.”

Age like so many other things is relative. Age is related to attitude, activity, social interaction, continuing responsibility and faith. It is when one disengages the vital routines of life that the ever-pursuing character called ageing catches us. As Satchel Page said, “How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?”

As long as we keep putting one foot in front of the other we make progress. Life is like riding a bike; stop peddling and you fall off.

According to a Macarthur Foundation study on *Ageing in America*, a common characteristic of seniors who have aged well is that they're actively engaged with life through productive behavior and meaningful relationships with others. In fact, feeling a part of a social network is one of the most reliable predictors of longevity.

In another study said, "A surprising study of elderly people suggests that those who see themselves as self-disciplined and organized achievers have a lower risk for developing Alzheimer's disease than people who are less conscientious." The article called it, "Having a purposeful personality."

For most of those who identify chronologically with the Psalmist's words of, "Old age and gray hair," their social and spiritual network is, of course, the congregation. And, I am happy to say that at PPC, it is the same network for so many younger as well.

The mysterious magnet of sacred music, meditation on the eternal word of God, a smile or a few words from a familiar face gives mortals a taste of eternity while living in the present. The fun of a youth event and the crazy things they do all makes for community. That is what happens in God's household whether it is worship, work group or witness.

We are knit in the fabric of mystery through the transcendence of God who is holy, high and lifted up. We are also woven together in the immanence of God through the lives of fellow worshipers who touch us physically and spiritually. The smile and greeting of a familiar face is a good elixir. The cry of a new born is our hope for the future.

The Psalmist in today's reading realized the spiritual connection he had through all the negative circumstances of life. There was a constant for the Psalmist that wove its way through the warp and woof of life that can only be attributed to a larger hand in his life.

He will continually praise God even to "Old age and gray hairs," is his comment. This praise is not the celebration of the powerful and prosperous. It is the language and life style of those who know at all times and circumstances that their life belongs to God.

As we say in our Brief Statement of Faith, "In life and in death we belong to God." Although having grown old the Psalmist still expects new things, indeed he expects to proclaim the praise of God to the next generations.

He doesn't know the future but is counting on strength for another year, counting on grace to marinate an ageing and sometimes impatient personality, counting on a significant place to make a contribution in a needy world.

The Psalmist wasn't bound by the number of years lived but was free to look forward to the yet un-lived time and anticipate a rich experience in the space he would occupy.

Ageing with purpose can be found in Henri Nouwen's words, "The vision which grows in ageing can lead beyond the limitations of human self. It is a vision that makes us not only detach ourselves from preoccupation with the past, but also from the importance of the present.

We believe that ageing is not a reason for despair, but a basis for hope, not a slow decaying but a gradual maturing, not a fate to be undergone, but a chance to be embraced."

Acceptance of the ageing process is a work of grace from a God who is in the habit of shedding unmerited favor upon the faithful. God doesn't separate time as we do into three neat categories of past, present and future. For God all is present and that may be a way to embrace our lives from birth on to death.

The newborn is aging and so is the 80 year old. To believe in youth is to look backward, to look forward we must believe in age. I believe in ageing, it is a good alternative of the opposite.

We might say the first 40 years of life give us the text, the next 40 the commentary and the remaining years the celebration of divine grace through a life time of constant challenge and the ever present humanness of life.

However, we can't go on ageing forever, when our humanity and age come together in debilitating ways there are adjustments in life that are some of the most difficult. Giving up the independence of a driver's license, a home, and mobility are not for the faint of heart.

All of our lives we have been striving to learn the new and master the art of change. Then comes a time when the tables get turned and we are striving to hang on to what we have, and, finally to curb the losses of what we had.

In a society that places so much emphasis on youth and independence, ageing brings with it quizzical little puzzles that are ironical if not sad. We have this notion that some

dependencies are okay and others are not. It is okay to need a car with wheels; it is not okay to need a chair with wheels.

It is okay to go to a hairdresser to get your hair done but it is not okay to need someone to wash your face and hands. It is okay to wear glasses to read the paper but not okay to have someone read the newspaper to us.

Walter Issacson, in his book on Albert *Einstein* says as Einstein comes to the end of life he seems to be more troubled by the scientific discoveries he has made and doesn't completely understand himself any more than his own mortality. Albert Einstein said, **“I live in that solitude which is painful to youth, but delicious in the years of maturity.”**

And of course that is where we hope we all will end up when we reach that station in life we think is “Old;” those *delicious years of maturity*.

When that comes the *lines* show on our faces, the *commentary* shows in our eyes, the *experience* of many miles shows in our step, and the *wisdom* found in a life time of faithfulness to God shows in our countenance. Even in old age and gray hairs we, like the Psalmist can praise God.

Those among us who have gray hair and have seen many-a-season can celebrate; we can manifest the grace of our dignity and God's goodness.

We are here because of God's grace, because of this sacred space called sanctuary, the sacred relationships of congregation and the mercy of God inhaled with each breath. We are here and we love both this place and the traditions passed on by both the youth and long of tooth.

AS A WHITE CANDLE IN A HOLY PLACE,
SO IS THE BEAUTY OF AN AGEING FACE.”

Joseph Campbell

