

“I Don’t Want to Grow Old”

Date: November 8, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Psalm 92:12-15

Theme: Aging, elderly

Occasion: Unafraid, series

Three sisters, ages 92, 94 and 96, live together. One night the 96 year-old draws a bath. She puts one foot in and pauses. “Was I getting in or out of the tub?” she yells to the other two. The 94 year-old hollers back, “I don’t know, I’ll come up and see.” She starts up the stairs and stops. She shouts, “Was I going up or coming down?”

The 92-year old is sitting at the kitchen table having tea, listening to her sisters. She shakes her head and says, “I sure hope I never get that forgetful,” and knocks on wood for good measure. Then she yells, “I’ll come up and help you both as soon as I see who’s at the door.”

We all laugh and chuckle at that little joke, but for different reasons. For some, there is a bit of recognition as they too have become a bit forgetful. For others, there is some fear that they may be that way one day. We Americans have a fear of growing old.

Go the store to buy a birthday card and notice how many of them joke about getting older. Is it just having a good time, or is there a bit of ageism in some of those jokes and cards? Our society is obsessed with youth and trying to stay young as long as we can.

One survey among college students showed that 25% claim they hate the thought of growing old *so much*, they would rather just flat out die at retirement. It is inconceivable to them that there is any quality of life after you reach that age.

There are several things which drive our fear of getting old. For one, there is simply the fear of leaving behind the life stage we’re currently in.

Teenagers can't wait till they turn 21, but most people in their 20's are hardly looking forward to turning 30. Few 30-somethings are elated to turn 40. And few persons in their 40's are thrilled to turn 50. So forth and so on.

Yet, what I've experienced and many people also report, is that each stage of life has been better than the one before. We fear that as we get older we will become less happy than we were when we were younger. But the evidence suggests just the opposite.

In every survey conducted related to aging, self-reported happiness drops in the decades of the 20's, 30's, 40's and into the early 50's. Now, it's not that they are unhappy in general; they're just *less* happy than when they were in their early 20's. Early in life we're working hard to launch a career, putting in longer hours, we earn less and we experience more financial stress. Young children bring their own demands into the mix.

What happens in the early 50's? Children move out and grandchildren are born. We usually have more vacation time and higher incomes. We may have lower expenses. We also have more life experience to cope with the stresses of daily living. We've been there, done that and have the experience to get through those challenging times.

The increase continues into the 80's. In many surveys, the happiest people are seventy and older. Despite some of the physical limitations that come with age, they still report *greater* life satisfaction. Interesting though, when asked, both young and old people believe it must be the *younger* people who are happiest. But when asked to rank their own personal happiness, those over 70 outrank those in their 20's.

Why would that be? Here are five of the reasons researches believe older adults are happier than younger adults.

1. They have more reasonable expectations.

2. They are more appreciative of what they have.
3. They have more time to spend with family and friends.
4. They tend to have time for hobbies, travel and other leisure activities.
5. The breadth of their life experiences leads them to be less overwhelmed by adversity.

We fear getting older, but it appears as though people living in the last quarter of their lives are the happiest of all. If you fear growing older, simply know this: everything you thought you knew about growing older is probably wrong.

Older adults are doing more, staying more active, and enjoying their lives more than you may have thought. And unless you yourself are in your 70's or beyond, *they* are likely happier than you are right now.

So let's quickly look at a couple more of the fears we have about getting older. Among the greatest fears we have about growing older is being stricken with Alzheimer's disease and losing our mind and our memories.

This is understandable; as we get older we do struggle with some memory issues. But statistically it is unlikely that you will get it. If you're between 45 and 65, the chance that you have early onset Alzheimer's is .24; which means you have a 99.76 percent of *not* having it.

Yes, it does happen, and when it does for people we know it is tragic. But this fear should not control our lives or the way we think about getting older. Statistically, most of us will not suffer from this disease.

Another common fear is that we will end up spending the last years of our lives in a nursing home or care facility. Statistically, only 5 percent of all older adults live in a home or care facility. The average stay in a nursing home is six months. Some people *will* need it, but not everyone.

One final fear to think about: Many people fear that as they get older they will simply become useless. After retirement, many feel as though they have no purpose, no reason to get out of bed, and sadly, no reason to live. The suicide rate for American men is four times higher after retirement than before. Many older adults are depressed, feeling useless

Listen to this poem, by Elsie Maclay, entitled *I Miss Being Needed*.

“I miss being needed
Once the whole family depended on me.
I was the breadwinner, only I didn’t win the bread,
I worked hard and earned it.
When I picked up my paycheck, I was proud.
I didn’t mind that it went for the family.
I was proud to buy shoes, a sled for the kids, a college education.
I was needed at work, in the community, at home.
To build and to haul, to serve on committees, to decide things.
To help people out.
Sometimes I’d get exasperated and say,
Does the whole world have to lean on me?
Now I wish somebody would.
The trouble is, now that I’m old,
people have no idea what I’m good for.
Well, neither do I.
But I can find out.
Maybe to be needed, a man doesn’t always have to be doing
He can just be there. Like a star. A fixed point.
For others to take their bearings from.”

Wow! That’s powerful. So, what if we looked at retirement and growing older not as being “put out to pasture,” but as being freed up to do more of the things we’re passionate about. What if this was a chapter in our lives where could read, study, and learn about the things we love, including our faith? Not having to punch a time-clock frees up a lot of time.

What if we took the time to serve in ways which used our gifts and abilities, doing things that are meaningful and of interest to us, while having

a positive impact on those around us, and serving God at the same time?

When we turn to the Scriptures we find that God has a habit of working in and through older adults. God chose Noah when he was ancient to build the ark. Abraham was 75 and Sara was 65 when God called them to head to the Promised Land. Moses was 80 when God called him to return to Egypt and confront the Pharaoh.

Simeon and Anna, in the New Testament, were both senior citizens when they witnessed the young Christ child and prophesied about the meaning of his life. God often chooses and uses senior adults to do God's greatest work, and our greatest adventures often happen when we're past retirement.

I love this quote by Robert Browning: "Grow old with me, the best is yet to be." Perhaps the words of one lover to another, or perhaps they are the words of God spoken to each of us. Let me conclude with this reading which I found, written by June Block, called "Growing Old."

"I choose to grow old proudly and triumphantly. Not old and worn, weak and weary, not like a rotten apple, shriveled and tasteless – but like cheese ripened to exquisite sharpness. Not old like an old calendar, out of date and useless – but like an old painting, its beauty bringing new pleasure with each new viewing.

Not old like an outdated newspaper now lining the bird cage – but old like the Bible whose truths still speak to those who will hear. Not old like an old magazine tossed into the rubbish – but old like an old valentine, its message pure and sweet though the paper has grown yellow and brittle.

Like the last delicious bite of butter-brickle ice cream from the bottom of the dish – held for a moment on the tongue and savored before it passes to its eternity. Let me savor the words and all they mean when I say,

"I HAVE GROWN OLD!"

And so I say it again, "Grow old with me, the best is yet to be." Amen!