

September 11, 2022

Post-Pandemic Purpose: Seniors

Joel 2:15-17, 28-29

We've been talking for a month or so now about the changes we're seeing in our society as a result of the past couple of years – or rather, the underlying weaknesses of society that the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare – and how we as a church might respond. One of the weakness that the pandemic has revealed is our failing system for caring for our elderly.

But we should start by looking at how things were even before the pandemic, because it wasn't great then, either. One of the distinctives of the United States – in many ways one of our great strengths – is our belief in individual achievement. Our pioneer ancestors inspire us to stand on our own two feet as rugged individualists, but we should note that that is genuinely different from most cultures. Growing up in Singapore, I was surrounded by a Chinese-Confucian culture in which family and society always takes precedence to the individual, and especially important are the elders of the family. Here in the USA, the individual comes before family. We can't wait to spread our wings and leave our families to seek our fortune and careers on our own. I live 900 miles away from my parents, and that's as close as I have lived since I was 22. Many of you could tell similar stories, about how scattered your families are. For us, the extended family is *really* extended. We even celebrate our separation. We hold up the “nuclear family” as the basic building block of society – Did Wally and Beaver Cleaver even *have* grandparents? – but that notion is utterly foreign to other cultures. Through most of human history, the extended family, the clan, has been the center. Not here. But of course, there are down sides to our individualism, and one is the fact that in times when extended families would gather to support each other, as in caring for an elderly family member, we ain't around.

Add to that the miracles of modern science, which have extended life expectancies ten, even twenty years beyond what some of us can remember. And this is a good thing, too, right? But it also means that conditions that would have killed our grandparents in their seventies are only temporary inconveniences to us. And, of course, the longer we live, the more likely it is that those extended lives will include increasing physical limitations or dementia.

You put those things together – separated families and extended lives – and you end up with an increasing number of seniors living precariously alone at home or, eventually, in residential facilities. Sometimes this because they don't have family nearby, and sometimes it's because they have medical needs that require more care than even family could provide. And so, over the past few decades, the nursing home business has boomed, and not necessarily in a good way. Fifty years ago, most such facilities were run by counties or by churches or by charitable organizations. Today, increasingly, they are managed by venture capitalists who have seen a potential gold mine in elder care, provided they can charge enough money and keep expenses down. Thus we have hedge funds investing in nursing home businesses, because they see senior citizens as a reliable and easily renewable source of corporate profits.

As I say, all these conditions were in place before Covid-19, and many people were already sounding the alarm about a system that was neither fair nor humane nor sustainable, but the pandemic stripped away any illusions we might have had. Seniors who lived in their own homes and whose social existence was already tenuous became hermits. Residents of nursing facilities became prisoners, surrounded by infection and cared for by inadequate staffs paid

inadequate wages. Families who had grown used to being separated by distance discovered that saying goodbye to their parents on Facetime was not adequate. The difference between being an individualist and being just lonely has never been great, but over the past two and half years, loneliness has won. At all ages, but especially for our elders, depression has become pandemic.

It is too soon to know if anything will change in response to the heartbreaking loneliness that the pandemic has revealed, but I am hopeful. The near-criminal conditions of many for-profit nursing facilities have been held up to public view, and proposals for change that were languishing in poorly-attended professional conferences are now being seriously considered. More than that, I have begun to read individual stories of people changing their priorities, putting community over themselves. Now that we have learned that many jobs can be done just as well remotely as in person, some of those people who moved to the big city for work have begun to move back near their extended families – to do the same job in Hastings, Nebraska, that they used to do in Manhattan or Chicago. We'll see, but anything that fosters community beyond the narrow confines of the so-called “nuclear family” is a good thing, in my view. Which brings me to church. Our reading today comes from the prophet Joel.

We read today from the prophet Joel, chapter 2, verses 15-17 and 28-29:

*¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.
¹⁷Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.
Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
“Where is their God?” ’*

*²⁸Then afterwards
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
²⁹Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.*

This prophecy, interestingly enough, was written in the wake of a national catastrophe. A locust swarm had devastated the land of Israel, leaving ravaged fields and starvation in their wake. So the prophet calls for congregation to come together as one: *all* the congregation. The aged,

children, infants, and newlyweds. Come together to support each other and lay your griefs and your fear before the Lord. Let the ministers of God lead the people in weeping and lamentation. (Note that, by the way. Often, we ministers are told that our job is to be positive and encouraging. Don't be a downer! Well, sometimes our job is to encourage. And sometimes, by God, our job is to lament.) But then, after the lamentation, after the prayers for help, we read God's response. God will send his spirit on the congregation: *all* the congregation. The old and young, male and female. In the community of God, generations are not separated. Lament and praise, prayer and thanksgiving, all is best done together.

I probably sound like a broken record sometimes, always banging on about how the church has been absorbed and corrupted by our corporate society. So it's good today that I can talk about one way we have resisted. Our culture treats senior adults as commodities. They are a target for telephone scams, a voting bloc to pander to, a demographic to target in sophisticated marketing (yes, Google has started to fill my web browser with ads for Metamucil). Worst of all, they are a disposable resource to monetize for corporate profit. But the church of Jesus Christ has steadfastly refused to follow suit. From the beginning, the Church has regarded elders as worthy of respect – Paul specifically directs Timothy and Titus to honor the elders, both men and women – and when those elders need support and community, the Church has consistently taken on that role in their lives. The first ministry begun by the church of Jerusalem was a meal for widows. And the reason that the early Christian church grew so rapidly, even when it was persecuted, was not – I'm sorry, but it was *not* – the preaching of Paul and Peter and the like. It was the way that early Christians loved and took care of each other.

This is who we are to be, and who we are. In our church, during the pandemic shut-downs, we were just as isolated as our neighbors. Those who lived alone couldn't receive visitors, and those who lived in residential facilities couldn't even leave their rooms. But you, the members of Lake Street, got on the phones to check on each other. First you called those whom you knew. Then, many of you called me and said, "Is there someone else, some other homebound member that I could check on occasionally?" It wasn't organized, and I'm sure we missed some people, but it was organic. It simply sprang from your own hearts. Your response to a world-wide crisis was, "Who can I take care of?" You were the Church. Well done.

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Final word: To wrap up this series on a post-pandemic church, let me say two things. First, I am genuinely fearful about what we are facing. Some things we were used to before the pandemic are not coming back. One of those things is numbers. While our membership hasn't really changed, our people are differently distributed, and as a church we are already operating as if we were about half the size that we were in 2019. Things are going to change in ways we don't know yet. But second, in my calmer moments, I am genuinely excited about what lies ahead. The Church of Jesus Christ has changed forms more times than we can count, and it's been fine. Indeed, sometimes it takes a national catastrophe to bring us to our senses and remind us of who we are. As long as we can gather congregation – elders and infants, children and adolescents, men and women, sons and daughters, married and single – with care and respect for each other and reverence for God, God will find a way to use us anew. If we will love our children and guide our young people, God will use us. If we will seek meaning in our work, and work toward the meaning that we have found, and if we will cherish those seniors who have walked God's path before us, then our future is bright. Different, but bright.