

21 October 2018

Faithfulness

I want to tell you about a friend from a previous church. Bob was well into his nineties when I was his pastor. He had been the chair of the building committee that built that church's current building 50 years ago, and he still knew where every heating duct led. Bob was married to Grace, a musician and artist. One Sunday someone told me it was Bob and Grace's anniversary, and I noted it during church and asked which anniversary it was, "Sixty? Sixty-five?" Bob smiled tolerantly and said, "Seventy-three." Bob and Grace were utterly gorgeous people, and Grace had dementia. I don't know when it started, but it progressed slowly but surely through my twelve years there, and Bob took care of her. He never left her alone, never went anywhere without her, never betrayed a moment of impatience. Seventy-three years and inseparable.

One Sunday I was preaching on faith and had taken time to explain a Hebrew root meaning. Usually this is pretentious and unnecessary, but this one is important. The Hebrew word that we usually translate as "faith" comes from a verb that means "to make firm." So to have faith is to "confirm a covenant"; it's an action not a belief. We sometimes understand "faith" as "agreement with an idea" or "acceptance of a creed," but in the Hebrew Bible it means to demonstrate your fidelity by your life. Not "faith" so much as "faithfulness."

Anyway, after that sermon, I stood at the rear entrance, as usual, and watched Bob and Grace coming up the aisle – very slowly, which was how they went anywhere. Grace had her hand tucked in the crook of Bob's right arm, and Bob's left hand lay over hers. When they (finally) got to the door where I was standing, Bob looked up at me, nodded once, and said, "Faithfulness, huh? I like that."

And I almost lost it.

The Gospel for Seniors

Psalm 71:1-9, 17-21

We read from Psalm 71, verses 1-9 and 17-21:

- ¹ In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.*
- ² In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.*
- ³ Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.*
- ⁴ Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.*
- ⁵ For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O Lord, from my youth.*

⁶ *Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.*
⁷ *I have been like a portent to many,
but you are my strong refuge.*
⁸ *My mouth is filled with your praise,
and with your glory all day long.*
⁹ *Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
do not forsake me when my strength is spent.*

¹⁷ *O God, from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.*
¹⁸ *So even to old age and grey hairs,
O God, do not forsake me,
until I proclaim your might
to all the generations to come.*
*Your power ¹⁹and your righteousness, O God,
reach the high heavens.*
*You who have done great things,
O God, who is like you?*
²⁰ *You who have made me see many troubles and calamities
will revive me again;
from the depths of the earth
you will bring me up again.*
²¹ *You will increase my honor,
and comfort me once again.*

For six weeks I have talked about “faith stages,” discussing the different needs and the different patterns of faith that appear at different points along our shared journey through life. I’ve talked about children, adolescents, and both young and middle-aged adults. Today, we come to senior adults – the only one of the stages that I haven’t experienced myself (whatever my children might say). So I’m operating blind, using my own observation from twenty years as a pastor, and of course, scripture. Such as this marvelous psalm for seniors, Psalm 71.

This psalm simply has a different perspective than most. There are psalms that echo with wonder, psalms that sing joyous praise in the congregation, psalms that pour out individual distress and plead for God’s help, and psalms that demand action from God to resolve injustice. There are, in fact, psalms for every faith stage. But this psalm approaches pain and injustice from the perspective of a lifetime with God. “Lord,” the psalmist says, “I am in distress again.” But then he adds *You, O Lord, are my hope, / my trust, O Lord, from my youth*. God has always been there before – *Upon you I have leaned from my birth* – and the psalmist has a calm assurance that God is still listening. As verses 17 and 18 summarize it, *O God, from my youth you have taught*

me, / and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. / So even to old age and grey hairs, / O God, do not forsake me.

The psalmist has experienced God's faithfulness and with faithfulness will await God's response. This is a more patient approach to distress than we see in other psalms, or for that matter in younger people. But let us not minimize the very real challenges, fears, and troubles of old age. This is a time of life when – slowly at first and then more rapidly – we begin to face loss upon loss. There is the step-by-step loss of strength and independence: the ability to do things we had once done for ourselves. Never underestimate how hard that is: it is almost a physical pain to depend on others for transportation, for instance, or to realize you can no longer care for your own beloved home or garden. Even this is small compared to fears of deeper losses, such as the ever-present fear of losing your memory, which feels like losing your identity. And then there is the constant reminder of loss that we face each morning in the obituary pages and in the realization that our social lives largely consist of funerals, each one marking a closed door. Friends broaden our lives; losing them feels like a constriction, a tightening. As a church member once told me, "Getting old is not for the weak." Facing the cycle of loss after loss that characterizes old age requires a kind of courage and strength that I can only pray I find in myself when I need it. But putting yourself in that context only makes the patience of Psalm 71 more powerful. *O God, who is like you? / You who have made me see many troubles and calamities / will revive me again.*

So, each week in this series I have written out a suggestion for what would constitute good news for people at that stage in life and faith. Perhaps a gospel for seniors would look something like this: *Christ, who also walked this human road, will forgive every sin, heal every hurt, dry every tear, and when your journey continues into newness of life, will walk with you still. God has loved you from your birth and will never cease, and Christ's church is your family from now until forever.*

How does the church communicate this gospel to our honored seniors? How do we proclaim this good news? Well, the first thing that many will think of is to remain connected. For many, old age is a gradual narrowing of experiences and relationships, and loneliness is a scourge. If we as a church are going to proclaim a God who is faithful, then we must demonstrate that faithfulness ourselves. And I need to tell you something: this church already does this as well as any church I have known, with our LakeCare visitors, our radio broadcast (which has a reach that never ceases to amaze me), the accessibility team's attention to things like ramps and rails and hearing devices, and the Stampers and their cards. Well done. There is always more, but you have shown your commitment to doing what you can.

There are a couple of things specifically for me to keep in mind. First, I must also be a part of this connection. There are many time demands on pastors, and nearly every demand presents itself as the number one priority. It is easy to let those demands fill my week up, leaving no room for home visits. I must not let that become habit, no matter what others say should be my top priority. I was at a meeting a few years ago where a church growth consultant specifically told us pastors that we needed to stop wasting our time on pastoral care and start focusing on the stuff he wanted us to do. (Don't worry. I have a rule against taking pastoral advice from jerks.)

But more than that, I need to preach and teach about the hard things that seniors face. For instance, we should talk about death. As a society, we Americans live with a neurotic denial of death, seeking desperately to avoid it, disguise it, and pretend it isn't real. This avoidance cannot extend to the pulpit, too. We who follow the Savior who conquered death need to say so.

There's one more thing. I've saved it for last because it's not just a need for seniors, but for people at every faith stage: relevance. We need to find a way to include everyone, from every life stage, in our purpose. When I talked about children, I pointed out that they know they are a part of the church when they have a role. Just this past week, Jill Weisenbeck led a devotion for our Finance Committee that reflected on her years as an acolyte, and how important that was to her – as she put it, it was how she knew she didn't just *belong* but was *needed*. The same applies to adolescents. They need to be listened to and given a role as well. Teens and young adults, with their idealism, need to feel that the church is actually working to make the world better, and that they can be a part of that. Middle adults need to feel that their efforts are not just going to maintain the status quo but will be of some lasting value. We all need to be relevant. The psychologist Victor Frankl wrote a memoir of his years in a Nazi concentration camp, called *Man's Search for Meaning*. He observed that in the camp, those who had a goal and purpose survived, and those who lost that died quickly. We are constructed in such a way that we need to know we are not useless, but that our lives have meaning, and this is true from our childhood to our last days.

Seniors, we need you. We need you as mentors, and we need your wisdom, born of your deeper perspective. First, mentors. We need you to be involved in the lives of our children and youth and young adults. We've all heard about how young people are leaving the church, right? Well a few years ago, a group did a study. Not a study of those who had left the church, but rather of those who had stayed. What was it that had kept them involved in church when all their peers had wandered off? They discovered one common factor. Among those who had remained in church, every one of them could name at least five adults in their church other than their parents who had been influential in their growing up. It wasn't doctrine, or music style, or video screens. It was people. Mentors. Connection across generations. You will hear this again from me, but think about it for a moment now. Maybe the problem is not that young adults are abandoning church; maybe the problem is that the church abandoned them first. We need mentors.

And we need your wisdom. I close today as I began, with a story. A month or so back I visited one of our seniors, whom I had heard had just marked her 99th birthday by contracting shingles. I went in, and she greeted me warmly. I asked how she was, and she said, "I'm fine." So I let that stand and talked about other things for a few minutes, until she mentioned the nurses coming in to treat her back. "Yes," I said. "I heard you had shingles."

"Yes."

"I hear that can be quite painful."

"It is, yes."

So I said, “So why in the world did you tell me when I came in that you were *Fine?*”

She sat up straight in her chair, looked me in the eye, and said, “I am the one who makes the decision whether I am fine.”

That’s what wisdom looks like, wisdom that comes from knowing that God has always been with you, courage that comes from a lifetime of faith. *O God, from my youth you have taught me, / and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.*

Let’s pray.

God, our journey is long, and as we grow older we do not need you less.

Sometimes we think we do, think we outgrow you,

Think we’re all right, competent, capable.

God, we aren’t very smart.

As we face loss and grief, give us your peace that passes understanding.

As we face uncertainty and confusion, give us a rock to stand on above the floods.

As we face weakness, give us a new kind of strength.

And God, hold us together. Not as an institution or a service club or a hobby group or a co-op.

Hold us together as a family, each one learning and each one teaching.

Each one needed, each one in need.

For we are indeed your children at all ages, together.

Amen.