

Sermon: “To Be Full of Years: Honoring Our Elders”
Rev. Martha Hodges October 25, 2009

Today we have something very special to celebrate. We gather today in gratitude for one of the many special gifts of this church, the presence among us of people of all ages, and, in particular, the companionship of four of us who have, within the past few months, celebrated their ninetieth birthdays: Frieda and Lloyd Fergus, Ruth Ellis, and Dick Tarble. Amid messages that tell us to fear the coming of age, we thank these four for showing us the way, for showing us what we may be at ninety if we are both intentional and fortunate. They demonstrate to us all that age need not bring any diminishment of curiosity, good humor, creativity, love of ideas or pleasure in the company of others. They show to us that, just as autumn comes with its own beauty and serenity, our later years are no less rich with potential for a deep and quiet satisfaction.

Today we celebrate the natural rhythms of life; the cycles of birth and death that give shape to our days. We declare that the seasons of life, growth, bounty and rest, are all necessary and precious. We are held by forces that turn the world, from spring to summer, to fall and winter, and back again to spring. Our lives don't stand still; nor do they merely happen to us; nor do they occur in isolation. What affects one of us affects us all. This is no less true of our lives as we get older. If we doubt any of this, we have only to take a look at these four friends – how their presence in our lives adds meaning to them, and how this community enriches theirs.

Virginia Woolf wrote, “One of the signs of passing youth is the birth of a sense of fellowship with other human beings as we take our place among them.” I see this to be true of Frieda and Lloyd, Ruth and Dick. Families, neighbors, old friends, of course, but also book groups, discussion groups and theater groups bring meaningful connections to them. Gardening, travel, photography; an interest in science and religion, politics and social sciences – all these reinforce the sense of connectedness to the world that is so strong in these four.

I said earlier that these lives didn't just happen; a sense of helplessness, of passivity, is not consistent with a good old age. More than one person in this congregation has told me about starting early to practice for their later years by developing interests and relationships and aspects of their personalities that they expect will enhance their retirement. In the words of Fred Astaire, another example of someone who lived with grace and verve until he died, “Old age is like everything else. To make a success of it, you've got to start young.” Have you noticed that our characters tend to become even more pronounced as we age? It behooves us, then, to cultivate at an early age the characters, habits and interests we want to live with for the rest of our lives. As Plato said, “He who is of calm and happy nature will hardly feel the pressure of age, but to him who is of an opposite disposition youth and age are equally a burden.” (*The Republic*)

We can't control everything that happens as we age, of course. We lose friends to death, we may live with less money, and our bodies change. Loss is a very real part of aging, and it's dishonest to portray age as a mere state of mind. But our age is, indeed, partially, mental, social, emotional and spiritual as well as physical. In fact, who isn't surprised by the appearance of the first wrinkle and gray hair, not to mention the first arthritic pain? The Irish novelist Molly Keane told this story: "Once I was looking through the kitchen window at dusk and I saw an old woman looking in. Suddenly the light changed and I realized that the old woman was myself. You see, it all happens on the outside; inside one doesn't change." How do you deal with a body that thinks it's older than you know you really are, on the inside?

Of course, you can do your best to prepare for a healthy old age by taking care of yourself your whole life. As the pianist Eubie Blake said upon reaching the age of one hundred, "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself." But, honestly, health has a large element of luck to it, including the luck of the genetic draw. Who do you become when you no longer feel fully in control of your health, when the invincibility of youth has vanished with the first serious illness, or the inevitable loss of strength and stamina? How do you age gracefully while working to hold onto health and strength for as long as possible?

As with so many aspects of aging, it seems that how you deal with the physical changes that come with years depends on the habits and attitudes established much earlier – in this case, on the kind of relationship you've had with your body all along. If you've always been a physically active and fitness-conscious person, you enhance your chances of maintaining a strong body. On the other hand, if your self-image is very tied to your health and appearance, it may be harder for you to accept these changes. Whatever our physical condition, we need to differentiate between ailments and perfectly normal physical changes. In both cases, it's up to us to challenge the prevailing norms of our culture that equate health as well as beauty, with youth.

I used to hear that as the baby boomers aged, ideas about what was attractive and healthy would change. It's true that there are more celebrities who cheerfully confess to being forty, fifty or sixty. But have you noticed that sixty year-olds today look like the forty year-olds of yesterday? Gray hair has become a rarity in women under eighty. Botox and plastic surgery have allowed our culture to avoid dealing honestly with the natural effects of aging. I'm still waiting to see those expected changes in the standards by which we measure ourselves in our aging population... and I'm still hoping.

People who have the easiest time accepting that they are physically unable to do everything they once did, one would guess, may be the most likely to look for other compensations and to discover and enjoy the advantages of aging, as expressed in this well-known manifesto by Jenny Joseph:

When I am an old woman,
I shall wear purple - -
With a red hat which doesn't go,

and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension
on brandy and summer gloves and satin sandals,
And say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
and gobble up samples in shops
and press alarm bells
and run with my stick along public railings,
and make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
and pick flowers in other people's gardens
and learn to spit!
You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
and eat three pounds of sausages at a go,
or only bread and pickles for a week,
and hoard pens and pencils
and beer mats and things in boxes.
But now we must have clothes that keep us dry,
and pay our rent
and not swear in the street,
and set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner
and read the papers.
But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me
are not too shocked and surprised
when suddenly I am old,
And start to wear purple!

In later years, we are free to become our truest selves. No more need to impress or meet someone else's expectations. No more need to compete, or please, or pretend. The opinion of others becomes less important when we finally know who we really are. When I was a teenager, I couldn't wait to be forty. I'd figured out that by that age, I'd no longer be considered a work in progress, incomplete. If I hadn't accomplished anything by that age, the pressure would be off. It would become clear to all that I was a lost cause.

Ironically, this didn't prove to be the case. My forties turned out to be the decade when my life took off in all kinds of new directions. And while it's true that age brings with it greater security about who we are, the best old age is one in which we continue to grow – in understanding, in compassion, in knowledge and judgment. In short, in maturity. For we are works in progress, incomplete until our time on earth is finished. And age is no guarantee of maturity or wisdom. Those require a little work, an open mind and some humility – the realization that we still have much to learn. An enthusiasm for learning may be the greatest determinant of a good old age. Ruth, Dick, Lloyd and Frieda are proof of this.

Classical Hindu belief holds that life is divided into four eras, each with its own tasks. In the first twenty-five years of life, the student's concern is to acquire knowledge and self-discipline, to learn how to follow the path of right action, to establish the good habits of a lifetime. The next twenty-five years is the time of the householder, when one's proper concerns are earning a living, being a spouse and parent. One's responsibilities are to family and society. From age 50 to 75, our focus shifts to gaining and sharing wisdom as we become less attached to the material world. Finally, in old age, our task is to dedicate ourselves to spiritual pursuits as we renounce the things of this life.

In our western society, renouncing the world is hardly encouraged or even understood. But spiritual deepening can, paradoxically, take place through connection in our western context, rather than through withdrawal. The task remains the same, although the means to achieve it depends on our culture. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung said that among all his patients in the second half of life, there had not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious or spiritual outlook on life. As we look back on our lives, we are forced to ask the basic questions: has my life been good? Useful? Happy? What has been my purpose here? What are my regrets and how can I achieve greater peace of mind?

As our mortality looms closer, it becomes imperative to seek and grant forgiveness and to reaffirm what is good and beautiful; to achieve peace by practicing gratitude; to strengthen our feeling of connection, of belonging, of mattering within the interdependent web of the universe. This spiritual quest is the task that confronts us all; its urgency increases in times of crisis or as we realize our time here is limited. And as we become more at home in the universe, we become more completely ourselves.

To Frieda, to Ruth, to Dick and to Lloyd, we give out thanks and our love. They show us what it looks like to be at home in your own skin, in your own life, at home in the world. They are pathfinders. In this age of segregation of the generations, we are blessed to share this community of all ages with them. Ruth, Lloyd, Frieda, and Dick, accept our congratulations, our gratitude and our loving best wishes for many more years of full and happy life. May we all follow your examples of saying "yes" to life.