

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Your Last Worry-Free Night's Sleep

Isaiah 40.21-31 and John 21.18-19

Russ Dean, February 5, 2006



My older sister was born to an anxious and eager young couple living in southern Virginian. My father was the pastor of the rural church he served first as a seminary student on the old Wake Forest campus. My mother, a teacher, was “barefoot and pregnant” at the time, playing the piano, baking cookies, filling all the roles of the Baptist “first-lady.” Their first child came during a cool October, and the new family arrived home to the small parsonage, as excited and utterly petrified, as every young family begins. A daughter, exploring a new world. A father, fumbling to find his place. A mother, answering a call as old as life itself, with nature as her guide.

Mothers are amazing creatures. Anyone who ever says they are part of the “weaker sex” has obviously not observed a mother – in any stage of that calling. My grandmother, who was one of the strongest people I have ever known, gave comfort and aid to her oldest child when she counseled my mother, “Don’t worry...they come with instructions.” That statement never made any sense to me until I became a father and observed a mother from this angle. In the middle of the night: “How did she know that’s what he wanted?” In the middle of the day: “He’s crying about what?” As women seem to discover, my grandmother was right about the instructions. But along with this bit of anxiety-easing inheritance, my grandmother also passed along a not-so-comforting word. “Helen,” she said soberly, “You’ve had your last worry-free night’s sleep.”

From nursing to skinned knees; apron strings to “the birds and the bees,” even the rites of passage into adulthood don’t ease the mind, from car keys to matriculation fees,

each fear seems ever greater. And the 80-year-old who sat in my office recently proved my grandmother's wisdom to be ageless – even successful, mature, fifty-year-old sons are not beyond the reach of a father's heartache.

“...Your last worry-free night's sleep,” indeed!

Last week's news was heartbreaking. The authorities and her children, after four undoubtedly sleepless nights, found her, curled up in a fetal position and hiding under a stack of clothes in a storage closet. She was just down the hall from her own room in a health-care facility for the aging. Alzheimer's and too many years had returned her to an infancy that most of us can hardly bare to conceive. Instead of sweet cries and coos, there is the constant babble of distant memories and the awkward non sequiturs from a mind that can no longer connect to today's events. And instead of tender comfort and care there are halls filled increasingly with lonely and broken down once-somebodies, doing life-sentences only for the crime of being irrelevant, unattractive, unproductive.

The statistics on our “graying population” are staggering. As the “baby boomer” population enters retirement our society will face an unprecedented challenge. If we cannot learn to reach across the aisle and join hands and hearts in respectful dialogue and open-minded non-partisanship, the disheartening divide that we witnessed during last week's State of the Union address will only grow more destructive. Our “Social Security crisis” is not going away, as the president rightfully warned; the numbers indicate that by the year 2030 over 21% of the population (more than one in every five Americans) will be 65 years-of-age or older. (In 1900, by comparison, that number was 4.1%.)

But the issue before us is far more important than how we settle our national policy. And it is not an issue only for parents who have had their last worry-free night's sleep. For not everyone in this room is a parent. But everyone here has parents, and those of us who are fortunate enough to have one or both of them to survive into our own maturing years, will have to face that old adage, "Once an adult; twice a child." The issue is simply this: How will we care, generally, for the aging – whether parents, neighbors, or friends? What is your attitude toward those who are, simply put, "old?"

Let me begin by affirming the work of our burgeoning industry for the aging. I believe in the good work and loving care that is being given. My comments about last week's tragedy are not meant to reflect a disdain for health-care facilities, nor for those who make such a choice for a parent. There come times when a level of care is required for the aging that the average person cannot provide in her or his home. People who choose institutional care for their loved ones need bear no guilt for this decision.

But... But, when we set aside the old, when we put them away – and this can happen in an institution and within the isolation of our own homes – we are guilty of failing one of life's essential duties. Not everyone is a parent. But everyone has parents.

The ancient Decalogue, those commandments given to a people trying to discern God's Way for a people living together, recognize this priority. There is no commandment for taking care of children, which are, strictly speaking, optional! But parents are not optional. "*Honor your father and mother ...*" (Exodus 20.12) is a command given not so much to children, as to the aging children of aging parents. Children, as my grandmother knew, come with instructions. Their tiny, innocent

helplessness almost assures their protection. There are horrific exceptions, of course, but just as horrific is the abuse of the elderly, which is more prevalent and often overlooked.

We are responsible for the aging – for our aging parents, and for the aging who have no children – despite the fact that the aging do not come with the same onboard guidance as do the very young. Yet their care is no less important to the survival of our species, for how we care for them reveals something of our humanity.

Our society despises the old. Lately Amy has heard me say that when I get old I'd rather lose my mind than my body. You see, if I lose my mind, I won't have to admit that I'm "worn out" and "useless." (I won't even have to know it!). But if I lose my body, not only will I know it, but everyone else will know it, too! This is how I feel, but I have to acknowledge that in saying so, I have bought the pitch that advertisers are selling on every single page. And I'm not the only one buying this bill of goods. The search for the Fountain of Youth is a global, multi-billion dollar empire. From herbs to acupuncture, from anti-wrinkle cream to Geritol, from Viagra to cosmetic surgery, our marketing and consumerism reveals that growing old, even more than dying, is perhaps our deepest fear.

In his wonderful book entitled, "*Aging: The Fulfillment of Life*," Henri Nouwen calls the elderly our prophets, for their sheer presence reminds us of the inescapable truth. Despite all the procedures and preventions our society can muster, we are all aging! Nouwen says that our attempt to silence the aging reveals our insecurities. If we don't have to see them, hear from them, perhaps we'll forget that one day we, too, will need reading glasses or a cane, a wheelchair, a bed pan, a nurse. But the sooner we come to grips with this reality, the sooner we can begin to see old age not as a time of darkness, but as a time of light, of fulfilling, of revealing, of true maturing.

Grow old along with me! (said the poet Robert Browning)
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith 'A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all nor be afraid!"

The greatest fallacy of all is the fallacy of independence. "I can do it by myself!"
But we cannot. One day, unless we die prematurely, "*Someone else will fasten a belt around [us] and take [us] where [we] do not wish to go...*" If we live, then, we will need one another. And we will need God, who gives *power to the faint, and strength to the powerless*, both old and young. The real lesson of maturity is not self-sufficiency, it is inter-dependency. We need each other, and the sooner we can see this in ourselves, the sooner we can be who God created us to be, and that is givers and receivers of love.

Again, from Nouewn: As long as we think that caring means only being nice and friendly to old people, paying them a visit, bringing them a flower or offering them a ride, we are apt to forget how much more important it is for us to be willing and able to be present to those we care for. And how can we be fully present to the elderly when we are hiding from our own aging? (p.97)

To know the aging is not just to humor them by listening to their worn-out stories. It is to come to know ourselves in them, by truly hearing them, by allowing their wisdom to inform our foolishness, their pain to influence our joy, their joy to give us strength. To know the aging is to come to know ourselves, and this is the only way to sleep in peace.

For the aging, who are old, thanks be to God. And for the aging, who are still young – may we be so fortunate!

Amen!