

Aging or Growing

sermon digest

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Joshua 14:6ff

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I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this morning. I had no idea, as you, that this day would be one when our hearts would be so heavy. However, through many of my musings as I thought about what to say, Charles came up as an example of many of my points. I invite you to keep thoughts of him close by today as we think through some things together.

Over the last few weeks, Larry and Carolyn have been preaching on various elements of time and how we are involved and affected in it or by it. As I began thinking on how I could fit into the thought stream, my thoughts turned to how time affects us as individuals, as physical beings. So I will start there.

Many of you know that over the last few months, I have been mentioning my impending birthday to become 50. I wanted the day to be memorable – though maybe not as memorable as it turned out to be. That was the day Mom had her heart attack, fell, and landed in ICU starting the process of requiring she move out of our home. All that was a bit more memorable than I had desired. Not that I viewed turning 50 as “old”, it was more that it was an event that marked a milestone and caused me to reflect on where I am and where I want to go. I have jokingly always said when asked about my vocation that “I didn’t know what I want to be when I grew up.” The idea of turning 50 prompts me to think that maybe rather I better hurry up and decideor maybe, I’m already there.

Getting older is something that sneaks up on you. I had no idea that becoming 50 would arrive so soon. Only yesterday, we were in seminary preparing for our careers and today, we are preparing for that elusive thing called retirement. One day you are able to run and jump with youthful vigor. Then in what seems to be a day’s time, one finds they have aches and pains and doing some of the same old tasks cause one’s body to creak and crackle while we utter moans of pain. And that happens just about the time we finally get the hang of things. The old adage that youthfulness is wasted on the young seems easy to understand why it was stated in the first place. When we finally get the ability to be good at something and appreciate the skill for what it is, we begin to lose the ability to do it. Not fair.

So how do we keep it all in perspective and have a good attitude about it all? Where is God in this physical maturation process? As the physical challenges increase, are we given a reprieve and our responsibilities lessen? Hmm.

What does God expect of us as we get older? Is it different from God’s expectations of us when we were younger?

Our very first church out of seminary was Baptist Temple in Reidsville, NC. Rodney was Minister of Music & Worship and I was Minister of Education and Youth. But in addition to those tasks, we were together given the job of directing the new Senior Adult program. Now remember we were both in our mid-twenties and had never served a full-time church. Rodney’s experience with senior adults had come from his days working as an intern at a local nursing home while in seminary. Mine came from being the only child to parents who my father referred to as Abraham and Sarah for having had me so late in their married life. (They were 42 when I was born.) We were not ready for this, but they were gracious and loving and taught us so much about life and truly living. This group had searched for a name and after study and discussion, they settled on Mountain Climbers. Their name came from the story that was read this morning of Caleb going to Joshua at age 85 and asking for another mountain to climb, for another challenge to lead. The name befitted them wonderfully for they were of that same caliber. They were always ready to go and be of service so hence we did. While there were many trips we took for fun, the predominance of our excursions and experiences were for learning or to serve such as our mission trips to New York City and New Jersey.

When we traveled, and we did that a lot, we had buttons that we wore that said Mountain Climber on them. People where we visited were forever asking about a group of senior adults wearing “Mountain Climber” buttons and what it all meant. We had a good time telling them the story and each time the hearer seemed to appreciate the significance of the name.

But, the story of Caleb is one worth taking a closer look at. Notice that when we find Caleb coming before Joshua, he is doing so because of what had happened 45 years earlier. The Book of Numbers gives the record of the exploration of the land of Canaan by a small group of the Israelites who had left Egypt and were wandering around in the wilderness. As they prepared to enter Canaan, they had sent spies and Caleb had been one of them. When the spies returned, Caleb and Joshua had been the only ones who had brought back a report that was in any way encouraging. While the task of moving forward was daunting, they both believed that God would be with them and that they could do this. The others were frightened and tried to influence the Israelites not to even begin the process. In spite of ridicule, Joshua and Caleb stood strong. Because Caleb had followed what he knew to be right, even when he was in the definite minority, God had blessed him and promised his family an inheritance. Caleb was coming now to claim it.

Unlike most inheritances today, his inheritance was not something he could easily take possession of, nor could he sit back and relax as he enjoyed it. His inheritance was a section of the countryside that was still occupied territory. The Anakites lived there in fortified cities. So Caleb was fully aware that this challenge could kill him and that it was not something that would happen overnight. He was beginning a new journey that could take years to accomplish and yet he was pleased to begin it, even at the young age of 85, and asked for God’s help as he did.

Now, some may say that he could do that because 85 back then just wasn’t the same as it is today. Not so. They may have lived longer, but the years still had their effect and they did not have access to the technology that we do today. It would still have been as a person ready for retirement and the opportunity to slow down to begin a whole new career ripe with possibilities. It was a daunting task. One that, most importantly, he asked for and one that he took on with passion and courage. Amazing.

Admittedly, IF I ever get to retire, the idea of something that overwhelming is not what I dream of. I think of the opportunity to do some of the things that my work life has not let me do. I would enjoy spending time with family, working in my flower garden, taking walks in the mountains, things such as those. Do you hear how peaceful and relaxing those things sound? The idea of starting back to school so that I can start a new vocation is just not as relaxing. Yet, there is a continued call for us to grow past where we are today and to continue striving for the best that we can do. As I read through other scripture passages for today, all were in agreement that there is no term-limit on our service to God. Giving many examples of those who were aged and yet were still growing in the grace of the Lord, the Bible makes no indication that there will come a time when we can begin to sit back and take it easy in reference to service or our faithfulness. We are to be continually growing. I think that is where the difference comes in “getting older” and “growing older.”

Growing old is a term that we use rather flippantly. However, I kind of like it. It has an element of grace in it and gives an indication that we are still in process. We are not yet complete but are still growing. Getting older is what happens to us. Growing older is how we should do it. We have no control on the fact that we are aging but we have lots of control over how we handle it, how we understand it and how we live it out. Caleb was an example of one who was continuing to grow. He wanted more challenges and wanted to prove God's faithfulness in doing so. You see, one of the things I am beginning to understand is that as one ages, they have more and more examples of God's faithfulness to use to prove their point. God is faithful and throughout life, I can look back and see that God has done God's part. When at a juncture like this and someone asks how or why as they did to Caleb, he had 85 years worth of stories to draw from giving him the confidence that God would see him through this as well.

So Caleb asked for the next challenge, fully aware of his own limitations and fully expecting God to go with him through it. Though he was 85 years old, he had not gotten "old." He was not through with life. He had not stopped growing and was not ready to stop learning and experiencing new things. His job through the years had been to serve God boldly and he was not ready to stop. He knew that if he were willing, God would have the next adventure ready for him. He just had to be willing to serve whole-heartedly.

Wholeheartedly it says. That one simple, qualifying word may be the catch to the whole thing. It is much easier to do things half-heartedly because you don't have to expend so much effort or put yourself out there as much. It doesn't make us as vulnerable and we are not so totally responsible. However, Caleb had seen what happened when he gave himself totally to God's will and was willing to continue with it. So, it is not just enough to want to take on another challenge, but rather to take it on with our whole being. That is even more daunting.

A modern day example of this was when over 4 years ago, we all witnessed the unlikely event of a wedding between a man of 92 years and his young bride in her 80's. So many people have by that time in life given up on all new relationships, especially on romantic love and yet these two not only found it, but they openly and gently taught the rest of us the value of reaching beyond our years, and comfort zones, to see what God has in store for us and then seizing it, even if it seems like an unlikely task.

Charles and Anna Kate were willing to undertake their new adventure because both were still growing and were open to God's opportunities as they came their way. Charles was still writing and working in his field of expertise; still growing. It will not be only those of us here in this place that will miss Charles Barton, but rather the community of the world who will miss out on the discoveries that will have to wait on another due to Charles' creativity being silenced. Fortunately, we still Anna Kate as a continuing example for us. Being one of the youngest ones here today even though I am 50, I consider myself lucky to be surrounded by so many wonderful models of people "growing older". Your vibrancy and your thirst for new experiences is terribly refreshing and encouraging.

So why would I even bring up this point for us to think about today IF you guys are already there? It is pretty simple. I am aware that "growing" takes work and is hard. It would be so much easier to default and let someone else do it. Or just to let things happen and not get involved. We can become discouraged or even lose sight of the opportunities in front of us when faced with health limitations or other things that can come our way. While this is understandable, it is just not what we are called to be. Daily, we are changing. Life is changing. Everything is changing and for some, this may seem frightening. Sometimes, I admit I feel overwhelmed and want to just stop and get off the Merry-go-round. But that is not an option for us. We will continue to age and there is little we can do to stop or slow it down. Oh sure, we can use all manner of creams and lotions, but those pesky wrinkles will be there tomorrow or worse, new ones will have come along to take the place of the ones already hidden. Even when we do feel overwhelmed at the tasks ahead, we must have some sense of hope in it all for we continue to daily use those creams and lotions, indicating we believe that tomorrow can be better than today.

Throughout scripture, the theme is that we continue to maintain this hope, to remain faithful and continue to grow, even when circumstances overwhelm us. Remember Job? The first chapter of 2Peter has some things that may be helpful for us to hear again. (vv 12- 14, 3-9).

So if we are to continue to possess these things, they are to be in increasing measure, meaning we will always have work – worthy work – to do. Growth can always happen. As I see it, that is the point for today. At no time are we given a reprieve for responsibility. We are instead challenged to continue growing in the grace and nature of the Lord.

So, how are you? How is life going for you? Would you consider yourself aging or are you growing? Do we see the daily challenges as opportunities for growth or causes for self-pity? Are we like Caleb asking God for more opportunities to serve and bear witness to God's power and strength? Of the challenges and opportunities that we do have, are we willing to give our whole selves or are we satisfied with just doing what will get us by? Apparently, The challenge issued by Caleb is one that has plagued humans through the ages. Think of the many songs you know that are about "climbing mountains." Each one is a metaphor for overcoming – just as many of the hymns we have used today expressed. My prayer for us today is that we will take this opportunity to re-evaluate how we live our lives. I pray that we will make the decision to "grow through life" and redeem the time that God has given us here on this earth.

Amen.