

“We have a spirit of faith that is in accordance with Scripture. That is, “I believe and so I spoke,” – we also believe, and so we speak -- because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart.

Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” *2 Cor 4:13 – 5:1*

“I’m not sure when the world will consider me old – maybe it already does – but I do know that I’m no longer afraid of it. I welcome it. And I understand that the best parts of many books are their final chapters.”

Charles M. Blow, “The Beauty of Embracing Aging,” New York Times, June 5, 2024

Two weeks ago, I volunteered at the local pickleball competitions of the Maryland Senior Olympics. I have never seen such an assortment of knee braces and supportive wrist and ankle equipment in my life. It’s quite different from what I see in the church playground when I look out my office window. I see preschool and school-age children zipping around with abandon, running, jumping, getting up from falls with no more than a skinned knee.

Such different ages and stages of life. We look at our lives as a kind of arched dome, don’t we? It’s the shape of a Mallomar cookie, if you remember those. The first part of our lives is about achievement, of learning and mastering skills. We learn to use a spoon! We learn to walk. We dress our own selves, brush our own teeth. As time goes by, we attend school --- achieve degrees. We negotiate relationships, perhaps find a partner or spouse. Perhaps we raise children. We aspire to jobs and status. We measure success by bank accounts and travel opportunities and houses with lots of stairs and closets. We’re on the upward curve and, if fortunate, we travel along the top for a good long while maybe it’s more like a

table, or mesa. Until we get to what's called the third thirty. 0 -30 years, the first thirty, is when we rapidly develop mentally and physically, 30 – 60 year, the second thirty, is when we utilize and build upon those developments and put those abilities to use, and now... the third thirty, we're looking at the transition to retirement and beyond.

It's that last third of life that I found myself reflecting on with these words of Paul. "Even though our outer nature is wasting away..." he writes. And just like those seniors on the pickleball court who were still having a great time participating in a social and active sport, the bodies don't move, don't recover the way they used to. Bodies have become more vulnerable. It's easier to be injured. And it takes longer to heal.

The third thirty has been described as a reversal of our first thirty. After a - hopefully - extended middle age -- for many a time of leisure activities and generativity -- we may transition to what's called the Uncertain Journey. It's a time when a major loss interrupts one's life: typically the death of a spouse, a disabling illness of oneself or one's partner, cognitive abilities may dull, or it may be the realization of the need for a more supportive environment. From there, a transition may come from independence to dependence – a time known, appropriately, as the Reluctant Journey. Ordinary tasks may no longer be able to be accomplished on one's own. All those milestones that were celebrated when we were children now become losses: taking a bath or shower becomes dangerous, basement stairs are too steep. We may no longer walk unaided, or need assistance with eating.

As a pastor, it has been my privilege to walk with members of our congregation and their families on the later part of the aging curve. I've visited those who have crossed the boundary into dependence --- and, it has been my deep privilege to be present in the final course of life, the particularly sacred time of the transition into the silence of death.

Each of those phases... and that journey will be different for us all... is worth a sermon on its own. Each has spiritual gifts and challenges, burdens and blessings.

I want to pause a moment here because, after I've laid this out, many might not be thinking, that longevity is something to be celebrated and affirmed. This could seem frightening -- especially when we consider loss and dependence, when we are equating our older years with emotional and physical and spiritual suffering. This is common, and it is understandable.

It is for this reason, among others, that our denomination has developed a focus on Older and Senior Adults. They've created the Presbyterian Older Adult Ministries Network,

POAMN. Most of the materials from today's worship service are from those resources. The purpose is to celebrate the gifts and contributions of senior adults (those in the third thirty), to educate – especially to raise awareness about positive aging and quality of life issues.

As we look at our curve here, an article from one of those resources, *Spirituality in our Third Thirty*, by Chris Pomfret, offers a really helpful diagram. Just as I talked about that dome of life....illustrating our mental and physical capabilities increasing, plateauing and then declining as we age.... there's another line that goes through it. It starts low and increases throughout the chart – the line called spiritual growth. That growth curve never ends.

Pomfret writes “Despite our understandable reluctances to see our aging as something to look forward to, we nonetheless do ourselves a great favor, and also our loved ones, if we can face the realities of growing older and be at peace with those realities, which will be different for us all. This is where spirituality is our best asset and has been growing within us, all through our lives, whether we know it or not.” *

Spiritual growth and development has differing tasks and opportunities at all stages of our lives. And maturing adults need a new vision of aging that lifts them up, accents the positive purpose of later life, and connects them with God's abundant grace.

POAMN, 2017 Planning Guide, “What's Most Important: Starting Older Adult Ministry, Michele Hendrix

When I consider this, I hear Paul talking to his congregation at Corinth, offering encouragement to them at a phase of their journey where they need reassurance that God's grace and presence and power are with them. “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”

I have seen this for myself --- I believe and so I speak --- I have seen these blessings in our church, in the incredibly profound spiritual gifts of the mature adults in our congregation. An hour spent in the company of our elder elders.... those in their 80's and 90's.... is an hour that is.... there's no better word for it: Holy. There is a depth of wisdom that has come from these years of life experience. It is holy to hear them witness to God's faithfulness. They tell the stories of how grace has shown up throughout their lives.

Conversations with them are filled with testimony to Christ's presence --- ways the Spirit has felt close, or far away, throughout their journey. And to hear them, is to start to recognize God's presence in one's own life. One comes away from such conversations a better person.... A more faithful and loving follower of Christ.

They share the gifts of the inner selves through their actions. Despite any physical challenges they, themselves are facing, I have been brought to tears hearing how our senior

adults are ministering to one another. They are walking alongside each other through chronic illness, through medical treatments, through bereavements. They offer support through for people who are suffering with loneliness, purposelessness, sadness and grief.

And this do all sorts of ways: They send cards.... They read poetry at someone's bedside... they pray with and for one another, they pray for us and for all of God's children.

Our older adult members, especially those who are unable to be here in person with us on a Sunday morning, are a "hidden treasure" and I give thanks to God for the Spirit that continues to shine in their lives.

A seasoned Christian – a mature person of faith --- gives witness to the good news in ways that are powerful, personal, and yes, in them one sees the face of God.

We do well, church, to affirm and embrace those in our congregation who are in the third thirty. We can continue to offer ways for older adults to participate, to continue to grow in faith and service. We can honor the gray hairs, as it were. We do a pretty good job of inviting and welcoming skills that have accumulated from years of experience. We welcome those of grandparenting age who would like to serve as Sunday morning caregivers of our youngest Presbyterians. Older adults make wonderful Stephen Ministers, giving of their time to be caring listeners to those who are going through tough times. We can visit those who cannot leave their homes....and assure them they are still "enough", or perhaps during those visits even hear that for ourselves.

I have heard many many, many words of gratitude for all we have done and are doing to include those who are unable to join in person, often because of age or illness. We thanked the Glennans a few weeks ago, and we welcome Marcellous Dixon who is now our worship technical director. People, particularly those in their third thirty are joining by phone and online, continuing to be part of the gathered community. They always make it a point to say to me that it is vital for them to worship, to sing songs of faith, to hear the scripture and the proclamation of the word, to "have their place in the choir. Here's some good news: On Wednesday night, session voted to fund technical upgrades for our library. It's going to make it easier to join in by zoom or phone for Bible Study and other meetings and gatherings. People will be able to "see" and hear one another much more clearly and become more fully connected through these new tv monitors and sound bars.

I would love to see our ministries – ministries for those in the third thirty -- expand beyond our current imaginings. What needs to be done? How can we help one another to keep growing? Where can we connect with one another more deeply? What conversations can we have together? Maybe we just need time to gather to share stories about how we cared or are caring for aging parents. Or, to share what it was like to say a final goodbye at the bedside of a loved one. Perhaps it's the opportunity conversation about facing our declining health and abilities, and the opportunities for growing in faith that this stage of life can offer.

We don't need to shy away from the realities of aging.... and that does include our dying. Because God is faithful, because we have "a building by God, a house eternal in the heavens," we don't need to swerve away from talking about death. By speaking about it directly, by demystifying death, we can fulfill what's important to a person at the end of their life – to us, at the end of our lives.

And, as an aside, if this sparks an interest.... In a person of any age... I want to let you know that I have a resource that was shared by a member of our congregation. I have materials on how to plan a funeral, how to organize important records and information that your family members would need to have, an "Ethical Will" where you can articulate your values and wishes and preferences and reflections in several areas of your life. Come and see me. I'm happy to share.

It has been good to see that our society has become more open and aware of the gifts and needs – physical, emotional, spiritual -- of maturing adults. Just recently, we have been treated to episodes of "The Golden Bachelor" – a recognition for the longing and capability for intimacy and companionship of those in that third thirty. I understand we'll soon have the opportunity to watch "The Golden Bachelorette."

In closing, I just have to share with you a wonderful book that I read that illustrates so beautifully the rich and deep emotional and spiritual lives of an older adult. It's called *Sipsworth*, and it tells the story of Helen, a woman in her 80's, who has returned home to the English town of her girlhood after a long life and career in Australia. The author, Simon Van Booy, captures the loneliness of her aging as he writes:

"Just as she had once been singled out for happiness, she was now an object of despair. But...such feelings were simply the condition of old age...For her as for others, a great storm was approaching. She could sense it swollen on the horizon, ready to burst. It would come and wash away even the most ordinary things, leaving no trace of what she felt had been hers."

I leave it to you to read it – it's not long – and discover how a tiny mouse becomes an agent in Helen's life, leading her to purpose, to connection, to happiness.... When she had thought all were long gone.

We are "all God's critters." We all have "a place in the choir." Paul's words of encouragement, of reassurance, speak to us still --- no matter how old or young we are. We're all gathered by the Spirit at the table of fellowship and we are all promised that God is and will be faithful... as long as life lasts.... and yes, even beyond.

I invite us to turn to the bulletin and read together our Response of Faith, and then, stand and sing our praises. From youth to old age and gray hairs, God has loved us. Thanks be to God!

**God of grace and hope,
we thank you for life, love, and good memories,
for the gift of age,
and for the wisdom that comes from experience.**

**We bless you for your continued presence,
for with you there is fullness of joy.**

**Give us the courage and faith
to accept life as it comes,
confident that the future is yours
and that we belong to you forever;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

*The upward spiritual growth curve came from the Rev. Dr. Nancy Copeland-Payton, author of *The Losses of Our Lives: The Sacred Gifts of Renewal in Everyday Loss*.