

Aging: Learning to Live and Die in Ordinary Time

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“Once a young man asked me, ‘What was it like in your day?’ ‘My day?’ I said, ‘This is my day.’” Rosina Tucker, age 104

“One must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day has been.” Herodotus, age 60

Through the giving and receiving of books as Christmas presents this year (one of the reasons for giving other people books for Christmas is to give yourself a chance to read them first, isn’t it?), I had the opportunity to read the new books by John Updike (*Rabbit at Rest*), Gabriel Garcia Marques (*The General in His Labyrinth*) and Philip Roth (*Patrimony*). Though widely differing books, they all three portrayed the aging process of their main characters. In the case of the Roth book, which poignantly tells of the last years and the death of the author’s father, the reviewer in *The New York Times* remarked in passing that anyone who teaches writing on the college level these days will normally receive dozens of the same genre!

The point of all this is to say that our artists show us as we are—aging. The point of this essay is to urge the pastor/preacher to proclaim a word from the Lord on this subject in this Ordinary Time after Pentecost.

For aging has, in our lifetime, become ordinary. Of course people have always grown old, but only in our lifetime has growing old become normal for everyone. Half of all the people who have ever lived to be sixty-five in the history of the world are living right now. One hundred years ago, no one retired; now everyone does. One hundred years ago, it was normal for one parent to die before the last child left home; now a couple will live one-third of their married life after all the children have left home. Approximately twelve per cent of the population of the U.S.A. are over sixty-five; there are about as many people over sixty-five as there are under twenty-one.

In the church this fact has been noticed, but given an unfortunate twist: It has been noted that the average congregation is full of old people and the response has been, “We must redouble our efforts to reach the young.” Of course we should, but the fact of the matter is that the older people will still be there and their presence is reflective of the population trends mentioned above except more so: Approximately twenty-four percent of the members of the congregation of the mainline churches (I am assuming that most of the gentle readers of *Journal for Preachers* are pastors of mainline churches) are over sixty-five.

The reason for this new demographic trend is rather simple. It is not

primarily due to the high tech, exotic medical procedures that consume an inordinate amount of our treasure and make all the headlines, though obviously they make a modest contribution. It is rather that the countries of the first and second worlds are combining a lower birth rate with the abrogation of childhood and infectious diseases (to a lesser degree this is also the trend in the third world). Whereas in the past, death was related to birth especially and could strike at any moment in life, increasingly it makes its entrance at the end of a long life, and aging has become the norm for everyone. And this is the trend for the foreseeable future: in our country the seventy-six million baby boomers are already in the 40-50 decade and, before we ministers can get our act together on aging, will move through—like the pig through the boa constrictor—to cause an inordinate distention in the body politic at that place. To put a more benign shape to it, for the first time in history the biblical “three-score years and ten; and if by reason of strength fourscore” will become the blessing for nearly everyone.

So if this “congregation” is not going to go away but will increase, what shall the minister do? Three responses are obvious.

The first is natural: study it. This population needs as rigorous an investigation, both psychologically and sociologically, as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood to make our ministry with these segments of our congregations intelligent and meaningful. Study is important, and much has been done in the last 20-25 years,¹ but it is too late in the day for us to believe anything else than that knowledge is necessary for wisdom but is not the equivalent and does not automatically produce wisdom. And wisdom is what we need.

The second natural response is to gear up for ministry to the aging in our congregation.² And every minister worth her salt has devoted an inordinate amount of time in the last 5-10 years to ministry to the aging, and to mounting programs for the aging in which a cute name was *de rigueur* (My own modest effort in this regard was a dozen years ago in *Scotland County, NC*, where we called the group the MACs, an acronym for Maturing Adult Christians!?). There is no question but that if our population of the aging is upon us and will increase, this is what we should be about. But the question which must be addressed is why. What is our purpose? What is our goal? If aging is becoming normal in our society, what is the norm, the normative expectation of the aging person? What is good aging? Who should I be; whom should I become; what should I do? Increasingly the aging are asking these and similar questions, and it is responding to these that the pastor/preacher ought to be about. This third response is the one I want us to concern ourselves with in this essay.³

Aging is obviously something that people have been doing as long as there have been human beings, but until our generation, aging has been as rare as the ability to probe for water with a forked stick, and similarly aging persons and their contemporaries were astonished and celebrated, but regarded aging as a miracle and a peculiar grace of God. But when aging becomes the norm, the “What is expected?” and “How do I do it?” questions become expected and legitimate.

And an attempted answer from the pulpit of the Christian church is expected, and legitimately so, because the society in which the aging are aging is

urging a veritable Babel of answers for their adoption.

When trying to articulate a Christian paradigm or model for good aging, it is good to try to listen for these and jot them down in the briefest and most banal form, for when banality is dressed up and dressed out with bells and whistles, it becomes attractive to us all. Rabbit had lived by sexuality and athleticism and he embodied these in aging. How tragic/comic, how banal. But in the skillful hands of Updike we can see how much of Rabbit there is in the most pedestrian of us. Stubbornness and sheer bulldog determination seems hardly enough to build a life on, but Philip Roth makes the incarnation of these traits in his father invite the hearts of us all to say, "Well, that's the way to go!"

I will list a handful of these (in their most banal form) to alert you to their sounds in the atmosphere, to stimulate your minds to come up with your own expanded and more adequate list, and as a not so subtle prod to us all to come up with an alternative and more adequate paradigm from the point of view of the Christian faith.

1. Work giving meaning, worth, shape, and structure to life. You should work with vigor and as long as possible, for when you cease to work, you die. This is the dominant American view and the one heard and practiced most often by those who we are and those with whom we associate.

2. Work is a burden and onerous. It is good and necessary, but our higher calling is to leisure. Leisure is the cultivation of our higher and more cultured faculties and gifts. This view goes at least as far back as the Greeks who believed that work was for the body and natural to slaves, but leisure was truly human and was the calling of the free and to be expressed in the public life of the *polis* (and in Plato exemplified in the philosopher king of the *Republic*). In modern form it is found in probably the most widely read book on aging, Paul Tournier's *Learning to Grow Old*.

3. The American version of the leisure view is that we are to work for forty years in American industry, then retire, move to Florida or Arizona, and play golf the rest of our lives or fill our time with the "3 Bs," as one of my friends said: Bridge, Booze, and Birds. This is sometimes called the sandbox approach to aging (we play in a sandbox as a child and the sand trap of the golf course when we are old). It is the trivialization of aging.

4. The therapeutic version of the "true life is leisure" view may be called the self-actualization paradigm. It pictures the time of work as not a time when one develops and expresses one's being as a human being, but one in which many dimensions of the psyche have been reined in, tramelled, sublimated, or repressed, but at retirement one has the opportunity and challenge to "Be all you can be." Self-actualization can take on the color of the leisure advocates but more often emphasizes the expression of feelings, the realization and expression of one's "being."

5. Many have thought of aging as decline and loss, disability and chronic disease, but we have discovered that the aging are really still young and vibrant and should look and act that way—affirm their youthful vigor. This is the basic position of the AARP, which has thirty million members, and this is the editorial position of its magazine, *Modern Maturity*. This view, of course,

is the chief instrument used to combat ageism in America, without the awareness that in the process it reinforces ageism against those who are not young and vigorous but are rather feeble and chronically ill. Presumably they do deserve to be treated as non-humans!

6. Life is only biological; health is the highest form of life and should be enhanced as much as possible. Biological vitality should be maintained as long as possible at however minimal a state, for to die is the defeat of existence. This is the position of the medical establishment and the unofficial credo of most Americans.

This is enough and should provide you with enough stimulation to get you to prepare your own more complete list.

Well, perhaps one more. We live in an age of pluralism, and the aging are as different from one another as all the rest of us are different from one another. Therefore, each should set his/her own individual norms for aging. The command is "Do your own thing." This is a capitulation to privatized individualism and is tantamount to ignoring our responsibility in this matter. For the problem in the first place was that the aging were on their own, doing their own thing, and could not figure out what "thing" to do. It will hardly bring them comfort when their problem is proposed as the solution.

So here we are. Aging adulthood is becoming normal; everyone is beginning to see that most of us will live through an era of aging just as we have lived through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, each with its particular challenges and tasks. And they are asking, demanding of us, that we articulate the tasks of the era of aging and what the Christian faith is proclaiming as a paradigm for a good aging process.

So what answer shall we give them? What paradigm for aging should we proclaim?

Let me answer briefly, and then the remainder of the essay will be an effort to flesh out the model. It consists of two parts.

1. The aging, like all of us, are called to live a life of increasing love of God and love of neighbor.

2. Such a life is to be lived in the context of the major challenges and tasks of aging which include the following in words that might be used by an aging person:⁴

— "What has been the meaning of my life after all?"

— "Now that I have retired from my role in society and life (work), how does my continued life have worth?"

— "How can I live with declining health, diminution of powers and loss of independence? Am I losing myself?"

— "How can I face death?"

Let me now put some shape and texture to these two.

1. The aging, like all of us, are called to live a life of increasing love of God and love of neighbor. We must begin with God. We Christians, as a people, are called by grace to participate in the history of God, the history of the triune God. The Trinity is the Christian's way of talking about the nature, the character of God, and the activity of God which expresses that character.⁵

To talk about God in trinitarian terms says we believe that God is a com-

munity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each with separate existence, but a community of love and mutuality. It says we believe that this triune God, through the participation of all three persons, in gracious, outflowing love, suffering love, self-giving love, created the world through struggle with nothingness, chaos, and death and created humans for community with one another and to participate in the community of God and to reflect the character of God toward the creation of fellow creatures.

It thus says that we believe that the existence and worth of human beings is a gift conferred upon humans by a gracious, suffering, loving God. They are called to exercise under dominion, that is, to “rule” the world, under God, in the same way God has ruled and is ruling in God’s creating: through gracious, outgoing, suffering love and care for the building of community and the care and nurture of the world.

It says we believe that humans did and are distorting this existence and this domain, using it to create our own idolatries, to protect and aggrandize ourselves, to destroy and conquer our fellows and our world, and that this triune God in gracious, outgoing, suffering love does not leave us to our own device but comes to us seeking and bringing about reconciliation and community.

It says we believe that God the Father has delivered the Son over to the cross, the Son submitted himself to the cross, and the Holy Spirit was the love between them expressed in the cross to reconcile humanity and the world to God’s self. Both the Father and the Son go out from themselves for others in suffering for reconciliation. And the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit of suffering because the Holy Spirit is the love of the Father and Son, and the Holy Spirit works in us to give us the kind of restored life that has been demonstrated to be the nature of God’s life in Christ—sacrificial, self-giving, outgoing love for reconciliation to community.

It says we believe that this triune God has graciously called us into community—community of and with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We belong to God’s community, and we share it.

It says we believe that this triune God has graciously called us into the community, not only with the triune God, but with our fellow creatures and creation and that we are to live with them, reflecting the character of this triune God, whose nature is outgoing, suffering love, to create community and mutuality.

It says we believe that this triune God, whose outgoing, suffering love has and is struggling to overcome chaos and death to create the world and us for community and whose outgoing, suffering love has redeemed us for community, is not only making the community possible, through the Spirit, in partial, broken but real ways, but that such love will finally create a shalom community at the end of the history of God.

2. Let us now relate this picture of what life is about, from the Christian perspective, to the specific challenges and tasks of aging, again in words that might be used by an aging person.

— *What has been the meaning of my life after all?* “I am a member of the community of the triune God, reconciled to God and my neighbors by the self-giving, gracious love of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit, receiving the for-

givenness of my sins, renewal of joy, and the sustenance of manna in my life journey. As I come toward the end of life I spend a great deal of time remembering, retelling my life story, recapitulating. I am trying to see how it hangs together; I am looking at those significant events where I succeeded and where I failed, where I abused others or my calling of God, where I was abused. In the context of the salvation story, this tale of success, failure, sin, misjudgment can receive meaning from the forgiveness, grace, and providence of God that has sustained me, enabled me to be forgiven those things I have done to distort my life and enabled me to forgive those who have abused me."

— *Now that I have retired from my role in society and life (work), how does my continued life have worth?* "I am created by grace, and I am redeemed by grace; God's grace is sufficient for my life. Life is a gift. In the final analysis, I have nothing; everything is a gift. When I no longer work, I may be able to see for the first time that I bring nothing, that my worth is not determined by my work, but because God's grace has conferred worth upon me. I can see now that the only calling I have ever had is to life by the grace of God, which for a time in my life was expressed in my work, but now that time is passed. Now I am to continue to live by the grace of God and to live an active life of gracious living consisting of self-giving, suffering, love and care for the community of God and the earth. Perhaps I can do things that others do not have the time to do; perhaps I can care for others by sharing how the grace of God has worked in my life and can work in theirs."

— *How can I live with declining health, diminution of powers and loss of independence? Am I losing myself?* "It is a sore temptation to believe that I can have a self only by trying to preserve myself, trying to be independent, autonomous. But I have learned that God's being is not characterized by autonomy, independence, protection of dignity, but that the being of God is giving, is letting go. I have discovered that the weaker I become, the more dependent I become, the more I realize I am sustained by grace and become strong enough to give myself away rather than protect myself. I have learned that I am dependent upon the care of others and that I can care for them in their caring; I have something I can and do give to those on whom I depend and who care for me."

— *How can I face death?* "I participate in the history of the triune God who created me out of love, gave me life, redeemed me out of love, gave me new life in the community of God's people, and through the power of the Holy Spirit will bring my life to an end in death that I may participate in the eternal banquet with the triune God and my redeemed brothers and sisters. Life, death, resurrection, all are gifts of God which express the character of the God I have come to know through participation in the history of the triune God."

This paradigm of good aging deserves serious study and discussion in various contexts of the life of the congregation, and I have listed in the footnotes below some books I think will be of assistance in the task. But first and last, it is a vision that must be proclaimed from the pulpit.

NOTES

¹ A good summary of these studies and a balanced treatment is Robert C. Atchley, *Aging*:

Continuity and Change, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987).

² Helpful manuals are becoming available. The following are good: *Older Adult Ministry: A Resource for Program Development* (Atlanta, GA: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1987); Paul B. Maves, *Older Volunteers in Church and Community* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1981); Donald F. Clingan, *Aging Persons in the Community of Faith*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publications, 1980).

³ The three best books I have found on this aspect of the issue are as follows, and I am deeply indebted to them: Thomas R. Cole and Sally Gadow, eds., *What Does It Mean to Grow Old?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986); K. Brynolf Lyon, *Toward a Practical Theology of Aging* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); Stephen Sapp, *Full of Years: Aging and the Elderly in the Bible and Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987).

⁴ cf Lyon, 87ff.

⁵ I hope it is clear from the following that I am indebted to the theology of Jürgen Moltmann, particularly *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), and *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985). I am also grateful to the recent effort of M. Douglas Meeks in *God the Economist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) to imaginatively relate Moltmann's doctrine of the Trinity to political economy. It has emboldened me to try the same in relation to the subject of aging.