

Preaching to an Aging Congregation: A Good Word about Gray Hair

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There is a revolution going on, and you may have missed it. There were no bullets fired, no big demonstrations, no protests, no governments overthrown. It has been a quiet revolution. But it has been a revolution, nevertheless. Dr. Robert Butler, professor of geriatrics at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, says, “We are living through one great success story, the longevity revolution, a 26-year gain in average life expectancy. In order to understand the magnitude of the revolution, you have to understand that in a little over 80 years, we have made longevity gains that equal what has been attained in the preceding 5,000 years of human history.”¹

These numbers are mind-boggling. In the next thirty years the number of people in the United States aged sixty-five and over will double, from thirty-five million to seventy million. This growth of the population sixty-five and older has affected every aspect of our lives, presenting challenges and opportunities to politicians, to families, and to the church of Jesus Christ. Think of the political battles! Every time there is a major national campaign, what are we talking about? Social Security and Medicare—is there enough? Families are affected, health care providers are affected—and so is the church.

It is a phenomenon that is evident in most congregations. In the mid-size congregation that I serve, I noticed one day that we had sixteen members over the age of ninety. Remember when it was remarkable to honor one person who had celebrated a ninetieth birthday? This year in our congregation we celebrated a seventieth wedding anniversary for a couple both of whom are in their nineties.

Congregations need to factor the longevity revolution into our plans. If we have staff for youth programs, we should also provide leadership for programs to support older members. The response to this revolution throughout the country has not always been positive. There are those who say there is not enough—not enough money, not enough health care to provide for so many elderly. Dr. Butler says that the purveyors of gloom suffer from a failure of social imagination.

However, I think the problem is more serious than a lack of staff and programs. The problem is theological. Our faith vision is limited. Preaching to an aging population requires that we as ministers get our own vision checked. Helen Keller was asked if there were anything worse than losing one’s sight. She thought for a moment and then replied, “Yes, losing your vision.”

Personally, I began to ponder the issue of aging more seriously when I turned sixty. I began to wonder what resources I had, what resources my faith provided me, for what was taking place in my life, the life of the congregation I served, and the life of the culture. Like any biblical theologian worth his or her salt, I turned to the Bible to renew my vision. In Proverbs 20:29, I found these words: “The glory of youth is their strength and the beauty of the aged is their gray hair.” As a bald sixty-year-old, I did not find that reassuring! I took it personally!

I found some other words in the 46th chapter of Isaiah that offer theological vision

to guide us in the face of aging. During the Babylonian captivity, the imagination of God's people was paralyzed. They were actually beginning to believe that the Babylonian gods were the answer. In a very playful scene, the poet Isaiah asks the people to look at things with a vision of faith (Isaiah 46:1-10). The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that what is going on here is something like a parade.² The Babylonian gods are being carried on the backs of animals, as if they were riding on parade floats. As they are being carried down the street, they are about to fall off these floats. The prophet Isaiah says to God's people, "Look, there go your gods. They are tottering. How can they possibly rescue you? How can they save you?"

"Listen up!" says Yahweh. "Listen up! You may be an aging congregation. You may even be a struggling church in a decaying downtown. You may be entering into the twilight period of your life, but listen up! You were borne by me from your birth, carried by me from the womb. Even in your old age, I am your God. Even when you turn gray, I will carry you. I have made and I will bear. I will carry and will save you (Isaiah 46:4). Listen up, people! These other gods are ridiculous. They can't carry themselves, much less you. In contrast, I made you and claimed you."

What we need to accept in the challenge of the longevity revolution is the vision of a God who can carry us. But there is still a problem. Even when the Word of the Lord comes to us and says, "Even when you turn gray, I will carry you," we are not comforted. We are uncomfortable with the word "old." "Old" is a four-letter word in our vocabulary. We don't like to think of ourselves as "getting old."

Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest whose excellent writings and whose life helped all of us on our spiritual journey, describes his sixtieth birthday. He was living in L'Arch Community in Toronto, Canada—a community for people who have mental and physical disabilities. The whole community gathered to celebrate Nouwen's birthday. Toward the end of the party, with everyone sitting in a large circle, the master of ceremonies said to a young man named John Bloss, who had difficulty in speaking, "Well, John, what do you have to say to Henri today?" John, who loved the theatrical, pointed at Henri and said, "You...you...are...an old man!" Everyone burst out laughing. Nouwen remarked, "That said it all. I had become 'an old man.' Few people would say it so directly, and most would continue with qualifications about still looking young, still so full of energy, and on and on. John said it simply and truthfully: 'You are an old man.'"³

Whatever age you assign the term "old," it does not mean "good." We do not believe poet Robert Browning's poem that says, "the best is yet to be." We have seen too many people in nursing homes. We have seen too many people struggling with health problems. We need to face our own personal difficulty with aging.

The book *Tuesdays with Morrie* is the story of a young man, Mitch, who discovers that his valued teacher, Morrie, is dying of cancer. He goes every Tuesday to spend the day with him. At one point, Mitch asks Morrie, "Weren't you ever afraid to grow old?" This conversation then ensues:

"Mitch, I *embrace* aging."

Embrace it?

"It's very simple. As you grow, you learn more. If you stayed at twenty-two, you'd always be as ignorant as you were at twenty-two. Aging is not just decay, you know."

It's growth. It's more than the negative that you're going to die, it's also the positive that you *understand* you're going to die, and that you live a better life because of it."

Yes, I said, but if aging were so valuable, why do people always say, "Oh, if I were young again." You never hear people say, "I wish I were sixty-five."

Morrie smiled. "You know what that reflects? Unsatisfied lives. Unfulfilled lives. Lives that haven't found meaning. Because if you've found meaning in your life, you don't want to go back. You want to go forward. You want to see more, do more. You can't wait until sixty-five."⁴

We live in a culture that encourages us to deny our aging. One god on the float in our parade is the god of youth. To be youthful is not bad. We have wonderful young people in every congregation who contribute a lot to the life and ministry of their churches. Yet all of us know that one day we will grow older. Aging is a process that affects everyone. All of us are going to be introduced to the God who says, "Listen up! I carry you. Even when you are old, I will be there. When your hair turns gray, I am the one you can count on." That speaks to our deep-seated fears. We are fearful people who are afraid of an uncertain future.

Fear enables our society to manipulate us with threats and false promises. "If you don't buy this, if you eat this and not that, if you don't exercise properly, take care of yourself, there's no telling what will happen to you." What can we preach to those afraid of aging? Aging is the way God made us. The God who created and calls us into community is asking us to reach beyond our fears. We are being invited to believe in One who loves us and will never let us go.

It is a matter of believing in the promise of baptism. As I read the words from Isaiah, "I will carry you," I think of the baptism of a little child—how the minister takes the child from the parents and carries the child down the aisle. In a symbolic way we are saying to the child, "You are not alone. This congregation is the body of Christ and will carry you as a community of faith." That is our pledge as a congregation—to teach Sunday School and serve as advisors to our youth. And that promise does not end when the child grows up. Someone has said, "Baptism promises have no expiration date." The promises made to us at baptism have no expiration date. They are forever. In the baptism liturgy, we encourage the congregation to "remember your baptism." Remembering our baptism can free us from fear to enjoy our later years and make productive contributions to the lives of others.

The longevity revolution is challenging us as pastors and as congregations to renew our own vision of the trustworthiness of the God who has called us into ministry. Do we believe this God can carry us? Are we willing to trust the familiar words Jesus spoke to Simon Peter: "When you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will carry you" (John 21:18)? It is an invitation to admit our dependence—a dependence on a God who is sufficient. Jesus concludes these remarks to Peter with the familiar "Follow me." Jesus knew about dependence. Born in complete dependence on those around him, he lived by the love and support of parents and friends. He even died dependent. He had to ask someone to carry his cross up the hill. Listen to what this one who knows what it means to be dependent says to each of us and to those in our congregations: "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1).

In other words, we can claim the promise of our baptism. God has claimed us and wants us to live lives of dignity and fulfillment, even in our old age, even when our hair turns gray. We can leave our future in God's hands, so we are free to continue to live, to grow, and to contribute. Retirement does not mean life is over. It does not mean the future is closed. It means we have time to do new things, time to discover other gifts and use them in new and different ways. The older members of the congregation I serve are my teachers. I continue to gain valuable insights from them about life. They share gifts of wisdom and courage in facing the challenges of growing old.

The story is told of Winston Churchill on the occasion of his eighty-second birthday. A young photographer was asked to make a special photograph of him. Afterwards, the photographer said to him, "Mr. Churchill, I hope to return and do this again when you are one-hundred years old." Churchill responded, "Young man, I see no reason why you shouldn't if you take good care of yourself." That is the kind of spirit and spunk that I think our baptisms should encourage each of us to exhibit.

The American writer Edith Wharton said, "In spite of illness, in spite of that archenemy sorrow, one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration, if one is unafraid of change, if one has an insatiable intellectual curiosity, if one remains interested in the big things and happy in the small things."

"Listen up!" says God to us. "Even when you are old, even when your hair turns gray, I will carry you." "Listen up! Listen up!" says the God of our lives, "I know the question on your mind. I know what you are thinking. It's the words of that song by Paul McCartney: *Will you still love me when I am old and gray?*"

"Listen up!" says the Lord. "I am the One who created the universe, beautiful beyond your imagining. I am the everlasting God, creator of the ends of the earth. I do not faint or grow weary. I am the God who has overcome death by raising up Jesus from the dead. I am the God who, even in your old age, even when you are gray, will carry you."

Now that will preach! It is good news for an aging congregation. It is good news for us all.

Notes

¹ Robert N. Butler, M.D., *Longevity and Quality of Life: Opportunities and Challenges* (Paris, France: Proceedings of the Congress Worldwide Revolution in Longevity and Quality of Life, 1999). (Cited in conversation with Dr. George Maddox, Director, Long-term Care Resources Program, Duke University. I am grateful to Dr. Maddox for his insights, which have been extremely helpful in preparing this article.)

² Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 106.

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 11-12.

⁴ Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 118.