

Job 12:12, Prov. 20:29, Ps. 71:17-18, Ps. 92:12-15

My friend Kathleen and I got to visit Portugal last month, and went on Walking Tours when visiting the cities of Lisbon, Evora and Porto. We were enjoying our Italian guide Silvestro recite history and stories as we traversed the hills of Lisbon on that first tour, although I kept falling behind, and the guide was very solicitous of us. Then we realized – we were the oldest people on the Walking Tour!!! By the time we were on our last day in Portugal and touring the Palacio da Bolsas in Porto, the guide explained there were something like 50 stairs or if anyone wanted, there was an elevator. I waved my hand wildly “Elevator!” After all the walking we’d done, my left knee was still slightly swollen and not bending freely. I told someone “Original model, manufactured nearly 75 years ago, no replacement parts.”

We live in a culture that venerates perpetual youth. Older citizens, especially older women, are overlooked to the point of becoming invisible. That’s the ironic twist to Kathy Bates current TV role playing a lawyer named “Matlock”- she keeps getting away with sneaky moves because older women aren’t noticed. The actress is also famous for her one liner in the *film Fried Green Tomatoes*: “Face it girls, I’m older and I have more insurance!”

As part of the Baby Boomer generation, I grew up when advertisers and manufacturers catered to my age group. I still remember an advertising slogan – I was part of the “Pepsi Generation.” I remember laughing about the saying, “Don’t trust anyone over 30”. I didn’t imagine ever being the age of my parents... let alone the age of my grandparents. I became a Christian in my youth, in college, and since I became a minister, I guess I can say like psalm 71 that “to this day I declare God’s marvelous deeds”. But the cultural idol of worshipping youth infiltrated my attitudes even without my realizing it. Like unconscious white privilege, or unconscious male entitlement, youth gets a pass.

Looking your best, eating healthy and exercising, wearing becoming clothes, having your hair styled – those are fine. The New Testament does refer to our body as the temple of God. I don’t think being an unkempt slob glorifies God. The problem becomes when trying to stay young becomes consuming. Like any other addiction, chasing after youth can get totally out of control. In a 2012 TED talk, Cilla Elworthy, the founder of the non-governmental Oxford Research Group, addressed why we’re so afraid of getting older. She noted that the world spends \$274 billion dollars (numbers from back then) on anti-aging products, creams, face-lifts, liposuction. She claimed that amount of money could “eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, we could enable people worldwide to have access to clean water, and we could stop children dying in pain and squalor, and still have \$49 billion left over.” Instead all that money goes to efforts to retain a youthful appearance.

When Jesus asks, “Where were you when I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, where were you when I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, where were you when I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, etc.” It doesn’t seem like a valid answer to say “I was busy buying anti-aging face cream and getting a tummy tuck”. Like everything else, the gospel questions our priorities, and how we spend our time and our money. I’m pretty sure that not just looking good on the outside but actually being good from the inside is a Christian value.

I’ve been active in spiritually based Social Justice for over 50 years. I know not to take messaging about consumerism or racial-ethnic stereotypes or the “undeserving poor” from American culture. I know to hold up Biblical values of respecting people, sharing abundance, recognizing that opportunity is not equal due to social systems, and not because of God’s will. I know that our value in God’s eyes doesn’t depend on what we have or what we have achieved. I know that our value in God’s eyes doesn’t depend on the color of our skin or our socio-economic class. But somehow, the stupid cultural messaging valuing youth and de-valuing old age sunk in. I forgot to consciously check the subconscious messages filling my head about youth and age.

Like most cultures around the world, throughout most of history, both the Old Testament and the New Testament reflect a high estimation of those blessed enough to reach old age, those who were called “elders.” Valuing those who managed to make it to what we call the “senior years” was proverbial. As in **Prov.** 20:29 “The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old.” Western culture says dye that hair color, cover that gray, use expensive products or even have hair transplants if your hair thins and disappears. How surprising is it to instead consider that white or gray hair is your splendor?!!!

People who were blessed with long lives were traditionally regarded as having gained wisdom and understanding from all those years of life experience. **Job** 12:12 “Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?” When the Apostles founded faith communities in the 1st c. AD, they left behind “elders” to be in charge of things after they left town to bring the gospel to yet another city. For the first 30 years of my ordained ministry I was a Presbyterian. It’s a weird word, one that goes back to the New Testament Greek word “*presbuteros*” – which meant “elder” or “aged one.” To use an expression from my youth, it “blows my mind” to think of myself as valuable precisely because I am now an aged one. And yet, that’s the affirming message about growing old in scripture.

Sister Joan Chittister, who in 2008 published a book on: *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully* questions the idea that there is only one life to live, because, she explains, “The fact is that every life is simply a series of lives, each one of them with its own task [and] . . . its own plethora of possibilities.” In our later years, Chittister sees God inviting us to discover new ways in which we can live out our responsibility “to give the world back to God a bit better than it was because we were here.” This meshes somewhat with Erik Erikson’s theory of human development, which postulates that the task of later years is “Generativity” – passing along a legacy to future generations. According to Sister Joan, we discover the grace of getting old by “embracing the blessings of this time and overcoming the burdens of it.” Just aging isn’t enough, the goal is to age well. She says, “That’s the great blessing, because the rest of yourself is waiting to be discovered by you. You’re the only one who can discover it, and you may have 25 years to do it; that’s another whole lifetime. Realizing that can be a great moment.”

Chittister views the “fully spiritually alive person” as the *socially* alive spiritual person in the society in which they live. Where Erikson’s last phase of human development is “integrity,” Chittister talks about the need to “bring our souls to fullness of life in the way we live our lives.” A grace of getting old can be to exhibit more consistency in “talking the talk and walking the walk.” Although we can make space for self-reflection and evaluation at any point in our lives, our senior years provide us with a natural spaciousness that is an encouragement for self-

evaluation, for re-thinking, for change and transformation – finding freedom even from long-held beliefs and ideas that have held us back or tied us down.

In old age, as Sister Joan quips, “We’re down to essentials now. We don’t have time for the little stuff.” Old age doesn’t have time to nurse regrets and hang on to old grudges. The essentials are things like making peace with ourselves, with our lives, with our circle of friends and family, and extending peace out into the world. The essentials are things like truth telling. Instead of politely stifling ourselves as we maybe did when younger, to take advantage of old age to say what we really think. The essentials are things like not just looking for love as something we want to **receive**, but looking for people and places to share love as something we want to **give**.

The grace of getting older really depends on God’s grace, on being planted in the house of the Lord - as Psalm 92 metaphorically describes. Old age involves necessary losses... of youth, of health, of employment, of friends and family members who have died before us. Many of the changes of old age are unwanted, even if expected. Chittister remarks that “the burden of aging is that you *have* to keep recreating yourself.” The self you used to be in your 20s, your 40s, your 60s, those get left behind. But through all the changes of life, even the weaknesses and limitations of old age, our experience can be one of life filled with grace... as long as our spiritual footing is on the Lord, our rock. Hannah’s prayer in Samuel 2 says “There is no one holy like the Lord ... there is no Rock like our God.” The grace of getting old is getting nearer to God. And the enlightenment that comes from the awareness that God has always been near to you, from birth to old age, God is with us.