Sunday, April 30, 1972
THE PROBLEMS AND JOYS OF GROWING OLDER
Exodus 20:12; I Timothy 5:1-4

A friend of mine who was in his sixties, was attending a conference for his own benefit, when a young man in his thirties asked him, “What are you doing in this group? You’re so much older than the rest of us.” Periodically during the session, the young man continued to ask the same question. My friend’s reply was always the same, “I want to keep growing!”

The younger person seemed amazed that growing could be characteristic of aging. Later in the same conference, he asked, “Do people of your age have fun anymore?” It became apparent that the young person was afraid of aging, a fear that he continued to reveal during the con-ference by his questions. And he speaks for many thou-sands of persons.

Beyond the fear of aging of course, is the fear of death. We live in a culture that often chooses to disguise and hide from these fears rather than deal with them. A recent article in the New York Times Magazine was entitled, “Frank Talk on a Forbidden Subject,” and the article was concerned with the problems and joys of growing older.

That’s one of the first problems of growing older — it’s been a problem for centuries — how to deal with the fact of growing older?

When Buddha was still Prince Siddhartha, he often escaped from the splendid palace in which his father kept him shut up and drove about the surrounding countryside. The first time he went out, he saw a tottering, wrinkled, toothless, white-haired man. bowed, mumbling and trembling, as he propped himself along on his stick. The sight astonished the young prince. “It’s the world’s pity” cried the young Buddha, that weak and ignorant beings, drunk with the vanity of youth, do not behold old age!” He recognized his own future in the person of a very aged man, and in this he differed from many of us, for we often try to evade those aspects of aging that distress us. We even find it difficult to talk about old age, just as we often find it difficult to talk about death.

Society often looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret. There is abundant literature deal with women, with children, and with young people in all of their aspects. We’ve all heard a lot in recent years about those under thirty and we needed to hear a lot. But apart from specialized works, we don’t hear very much about those over 60. In fact, older persons are often treated as outcasts.

Part of the problem of growing older is that being considered “old” is not a clearly defined category. Who can precisely define “old age?” It varies according to era and place, and nowhere do we find any initiation ceremonies that confirms the fresh status, unless it be a “retirement party.”

Yet we know that the line which marks off-middle life from old age is quite blurred. It varies greatly as be- tween individuals and even within the individual. A person may be 60 years old chronologically, but physically he may be at a much greater or lesser age. And psychologic-ally he may be still quite young in his outlook, or he may be very old in his outlook at a very young age in years.

For some the feeling of advancing age may begin quite early — the day for example when a woman admits to herself that her chances of marrying are rapidly disappearing. Or the day a person realizes that he or she has taken the wrong road. Gifted artistically, under the pressure of the family and for security, he took an office career. Now he is bored, feels guilty, but yet feels it is too late to undertake a career in art.

Or then the time comes, usually late in the middle years, when we realize that we may not reach or realize a certain goal we have always had. We are on a plateau in our life's work and from where we are, it looks as if the rest of life is all downhill. Then we might have a feeling of ad-vanc1.ng age.

We can also feel very old if we do not learn how to accept and learn from failure and go on from there. Sometimes we live as if our whole life's success were absolutely tied to one particular event or one particular goal, and we act as if all else were but vain endeavor. This happens often to very young people — we've heard them say, "I'll just die if that thing doesn't happen."

To some, prosperity or success brings a kind of old age--premature but false. Thus, we see people literally cave 3. in the moment they achieve the goal which they had set for themselves and for them life is over. The person with an empty life is already an old person.

A man fought a certain case in court for years. His whole life's aim was to obtain justice in that particular case. But it took many years and unfortunately it became his whole life. Finally, when he won his case, he did not at all experience the sweet taste of victory which he had expected. His life became empty with no strength, no goal, no interest in anything. His god was dead! The fight for his case had so swallowed him up that it became his whole life's goal. And this he lost by his victory. To lose by winning, that happens to so many of us.

When a person stops thinking, stops growing, stops searching for new interests, new meaning, becomes set in his ways, inflexible, then he is already old, no matter what his age 18.

But we all do grow older. Life changes for us. The aging process begins when a baby is born. And without exception, the baby's death is implicit in its birth.

When I was a little boy, I was amazed and sometimes dis-tressed when I realized that one day I should turn into a grown-up. But when one is a child, the real advantages of adult status usually counterbalance the wish to remain unchanged. Whereas old age looms ahead for many like a calamity: even among those who are thought well preserved, age brings with it a very obvious physical decline.

For all the species, human beings are those in which the alterations caused by advancing years are the most striking. Animals grow thin; they become weaker, but they do not undergo a total change. We do.

So, for us there is a need to change our pace — but still we find many pretending that they are the same as they al- ways were and being mortally offended at the mention of thinning hair or shortened breath, or wrinkled skin. We seem terrified at the prospect of aging mainly because we have not worked out an adequate meaning of life and death.

Part of the problem is within our culture. Our emphasis on so-called productive work makes old age seem like the 4. end of life. Throughout the ages, people have been forced to withdraw

from productive work in later years, but now they often withdraw into a vacuum. In most societies, re-tirement from work meant entrance into the honored position of elder. One could give time to counseling the young, passing on traditions and sitting in the seats of the venerated. Life did not end with retirement but moved onto a new stage.

There is no such honored position for most of the elders in our way of life. We tend instead to honor only the new and the youthful and the more efficient. Methods change year by year and even more quickly. Many skills are no longer passed on because they are often outmoded. Thus, old age to many; has come to mean “useless” in a society that worships only the latest method and the newest invention. We need both the new and the old. There is a special kind of wisdom that comes only from age, a special kind of beauty, too, and we have to find ways to that all of put that wisdom and beauty to use so that all of our lives can be enriched. We need to restore the position of honor to our elders.

Furthermore, with our emphasis on youth and the new and with getting things done, we often despise in the process, the values which all of us need to discover and honor if ·e our lives are to have meaning as we continue to grow older.

These are the more lasting values of human relationships, of deep friendship, of loving and being loved. As we grow older, it is then that the love, kindliness and consider-ation poured into human relationships in earlier years begin to bear an abundant harvest which makes up much of the joy of gr0wing older.

And there are many other joys as well — watching others grow and learn; knowing that we do not have to be sixteen again.

It is here that our Christian faith speaks quite directly to us. Our faith has always emphasized the importance of human relationships. God became a person in Jesus Christ and entered into a living relationship with all of us. Thus, it is in our relationships with one another that we most often meet God and find the true meaning of life. Learn to live and love now at whatever age you are. It will do much to solve many of the problem of growing older and give you much joy in the process.

It is here that the community of Christians can be of great importance. There are always personal losses which are caused by the scattering of families and especially by the death of our closest loved ones. There is a real sense in which nothing in the human scene can compensate for the loneliness which follows.

Thus, sometimes on the face of the matter it seems that this human tragedy is only deepened if one bases his whole life on love and then loses his beloved. And that can be the case if there is no broader sustaining fellowship of persons in the midst of whom the loss can be borne. Here is the need of the Christian community, the true congregation. Such a community can be the saving factor in the lives of persons who have lost their wives or husbands or fathers or mothers.

The church in the best sense of the word is itself a larger family, not to replace the intimate ties of the household, but to provide a continuity of unbroken relationships with- in which grow.th toward completeness can be going on whether by households or by the solitary survivor of a household. As Christians, we bear one another’s burdens and are ministers and brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers L — , to each other.

What else does our faith say to us in the problems and joys of growing older?

It says, this moment is your life, no matter what your age, or what your stage in life. Our faith tells us that we live in the present and that this world is good. The trouble is that we often let our memories of the past or our fears of the future, rob us of the opportunity of today.

While it is true that many an aging person often suffers from physical ailments, it is just here in that present suffering that many an aging person achieves a triumph of character and out of the stuff of his or her-personal tragedy weaves a parting gift to life which surpasses in value all that he or she had ever wrought before.

Another joy of growing older is that persons often acquire an increased sense of humor. And this helps us to live in the world in spite of tragedy.

Frank Laubach, a world-famous missionary and teacher wrote some years after his 80th birthday — "I have good news for you. The first 80 years are the hardest. The second eighty so far as my experience goes, is a succession of birthday parties. Everybody wants to carry your baggage and help you up the steps.

If you forget anybody's name or forget to fulfill an appointment or promise to be two or three places at the same time, or spell words wrong you can explain that you are 80. If you spill soup on your necktie or fail to shave one side of your face, or if your shoes don't match or you take the other man's hat by mistake or carry a letter around in your pocket a week before you read it, you are eighty.

So, you can relax with no misgivings, for you have a perfect alibi for everything.

Nobody expects much of you. If you act silly, it is your second childhood. Everybody is looking for symptoms of softening of the brain. It is a great deal better than being sixty-five or seventy. At ·that time, they expect you to retire to a little house in Florida, and become a discontented, grumbling, limping has-been. But if you survive till eighty, everybody is surprised that you can walk, surprised that you can talk above a whisper, sur-prised if you reveal signs of lucid intervals. At 70, people are mad at you for everything; at eighty, they for-give anything. If you ask me, life begins at 80.

Life can always be beginning again. And the more fully and reflectively a person lives, the easier and better adjustment he makes to both aging and death. God is with us in all events.

So today, we celebrate the years; we celebrate the process of growing older. No matter what our age, there is always someone somewhere older than we, and no matter what our age, we are growing older. We need to recognize ourselves in the old.

Our Christian Faith reminds us to honor our fathers and mothers, and by this is meant not only our biological parents, but all who are fathers and mothers to us, all who are our elders in the faith. Amen.