Sunday, April 14, 1991
THE SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE OF LONGER LIVING
Luke 8:4-8

On Friday, April 12, I observed my 60th birthday. In most respects, it was an ordinary day, but there were some wonderful touches. There was a birthday dinner attended by most of my immediate family and a number of friends. There were gifts, delightful cards, hugs, and some surprises. I realize there's nothing unusual about one's 60th birthday. Why should it be any different than one's 59th, 50th, or 40th for that matter? Yet, birthdays, some more than others, can cause one to be more reflective. So it is today that I invite you to reflect along with me as we consider "The Spiritual Adventure of Longer Living."

Too often, we talk mostly about the physical adventure of longer living, and much of that can be negative, as we think about heart failure, cancer, high blood pressure, loss of physical stamina, and more. We need to admit, of course, that there are some physical and even mental negatives to longer living.

On the other hand, there are a lot of positives to longer living, especially from a spiritual point of view. We need to begin by replacing the picture that portrays life as a graph that goes up and up to some point and then goes down and down to the bitter end. As followers of Christ, we can affirm that life can be filled with creative power and adventure until the day we die. There is no limit to our continued spiritual growth. In fact, I believe that we are more conducive to spiritual growth as we live longer. Remember the poem by Robert Browning:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half: Trust God; see all, nor be afraid!"

What, then, are some of the spiritual positives, the gifts, that can come from the adventure of longer living?

One gift of longer living is perspective. It's not automatic, yet it's something that only years can give. One cannot have much perspective at age 20, simply because one has not lived long enough. I had a small glimpse of perspective at age 35, a bit more at 45, and at age 50. At 60, I'm beginning to count on it, and I can almost imagine what it might be at 70 or 85. Perspective is knowing that nothing is as simple as it seems. It's knowing that good and evil are always mixed. It's knowing that our motives and the motives of others are never pure. Perspective means no longer being completely surprised when sometimes others let you down. Perspective is knowing in good times that they won't last forever and in bad times that "this too shall pass."

Most of us can remember the confidence we felt as young people when it seemed that we had clear and certain answers to almost everything. But the longer a person lives, the more mysterious life becomes — or at least it should. We sometimes say to a young person that when they grow up, they will know more, but that is only a half-truth. In general, an increasing experience of life only deepens the sense of mystery and uncertainty.

A professor at Harvard tells of receiving from one of his young, bright students a manuscript with an accompanying letter in which the youth said that he intended to write several books, and that this was only the first of them, in which, wrote the youth, “I have explained the universe.” You see what it would mean to tell such a young person that when he grows up, he will know more. It really means that when he grows up, he will know less. He will discover, hopefully, if he gains any wisdom at all, that life is set in a limitless sea of mystery.

Here’s a personal example of the gift of perspective. When I began my professional ministry 34 years ago in a southside suburb of Chicago, fresh out of seminary, newly ordained, like many young ministers, I thought I could change the world. After all, I had been trained in one of the best seminaries in the country. It was 1957, I was 26 years old, and I was sure that any problem could be solved if only enough effort was put forth.

Now at age 60, I know that’s not necessarily so. It’s a difficult lesson to learn. But there comes a critical moment in the human process when the idealism and energy of our youth and young adult life collides head-on with the complexities of the real world.

This does not mean that I’m no longer idealistic or that I’ve given up in any way, but my idealism is tempered with realism — that’s perspective. As I said in another sermon, I’ve learned to trust everyone, but to cut the cards. I’m still very optimistic, but I also know that pure effort in and of itself does not solve all problems.

That’s why the parable of the sower that Jesus told has come to mean more and more to me. Some of the seed we sow, some of the effort we put forth, always goes to waste. Some of the seed falls on the path and is walked on or the birds eat it. Some falls on the rocks and withers away where there is no soil for it to take root. Some falls in the thorns and is choked out. But some seed falls into good soil, and it yields a hundredfold. We who sow the seed do not always know what is good soil and what is not. The successful door-to-door salesperson who makes 100 calls a day cannot tell in advance where the good sales will be made and where none will be made. Life is filled with surprises. But experience has shown that if the calls are faithfully made, there will be good results.

This, then, is a parable of both failure and success. Sometimes three out of four seeds we sow do not make it, but one does, and it yields a hundredfold. Perspective means we’ve learned over the years that if we do our work faithfully and to the best of our ability, all of the effort will not go to waste. No one is successful 100% of the time. No one bats 1000. I don’t have to bat 1000. If I bat 300, that’s very good. Things in life do not have to be perfect to be good. Perspective is learning not to be cynical when some of our effort comes to nothing and not to be cocky with success.

There’s an old saying that goes, “Nothing succeeds like success.” Gaining perspective, however, tells us that the opposite is also true—"Nothing succeeds like failure.” No one likes to fail, yet no one is likely to escape the experience. Losing a job, a broken marriage, a low grade in school, a wayward child — the list goes on and on. But as painful and difficult as failures can be, they have a peculiar power. Failure can liberate us to take risks we might not otherwise have taken or even seen.

But reaching the point where we see our failures as something positive is not always easy. For that to happen, we have to see failure for what it was — an experience that happened to us and is now past. Whether we regard the failure as our own fault or that of someone else doesn’t really matter. It’s over now, and it’s time to get on with our lives. The perspective of

longer living can put failure in its proper place. Without perspective, we live as if our whole life's success or failure were absolutely tied to one particular event or one particular goal.

The perspective that can come from longer living is recognizing that though we have failed, we ourselves are not failures. We are simply normal people who will from time to time experience failure and success.

Perspective can also keep us from being too cocky with success. There's a verse in Deuteronomy in the Old Testament which all of us should commit to memory: "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you power to get wealth." (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)

Jesus also told a story about a rich, successful farmer who was so prosperous and had so much money that he patted himself on the back for all of his skill. He then decided that the only thing to do was to make more money and build bigger barns to store all of his wealth. In the story, God calls this man a "fool." He is a successful fool for two reasons — first, because he took all the credit for himself for being so rich, and second, because he was so stingy and thought he could keep it all to himself. According to the story, God said to the rich, successful farmer, "Fool, tonight you are going to die, and then who is going to get all of your wealth?"

Perspective — it's a gift that can be part of the spiritual adventure of longer living, but it's not automatic. Some people, as they live longer, become stingy, stop growing, stop thinking, become set in their ways, lose perspective, and as a result, no longer grow spiritually.

In addition to perspective, a second gift of longer living can be gaining a sense of continuity. It's knowing that I am the same person I've always been, yet always changing. As Eric Hoffer said when they toasted his 80th birthday, "I don't feel like an eighty-year-old, I feel like a nineteen-year-old that something happened to." Continuity is having a whole shelf full of memories instead of only one or two volumes. It means having loves and friendships that are measured not in years but decades.

The gift of continuity as part of the spiritual adventure of longer living means that we become more interested in history and in the genealogy of our own family. It means having a deep appreciation for all that has gone before us, and it helps set our own brief life in perspective. A true appreciation of continuity leads to humility.

A by-product of the gift of continuity for the longer living is happiness. Happiness comes from an ongoing relationship for many years with the same people in your life. A major plus in my life has been the fact that we have lived here in Lincoln for almost 20 years now and that I've been privileged to be the minister with the same congregation. Day after day, I deal with people that I've known for almost 20 years. Soon I'll be baptizing the children of those children that I baptized 20 years ago. I've been officiating at marriages of young adults who were in the confirmation classes that I taught years ago. That's continuity.

A third gift that can come from the spiritual adventure of longer living is "contingency." That's a big word for "iffy." It means knowing that everything is finite. It means knowing that nothing in this world will go on forever except God. Everything is fragile, including our own existence. People at any age may suddenly cease to exist, but from age 60 on out, it becomes commonplace. You begin to read the obituaries more carefully.

An important element of the gift of contingency, which is part of the spiritual adventure of longer living, is that you hopefully learn the art of relinquishment or renunciation. It is the art of "letting go," of knowing what's important and what's not important. Most of what we are taught in life is how to get things — how to make friends and influence people, how to hold onto things. Thus, most of us are much better, more skillful in acquisition than we are in letting go or giving things away.

Relinquishment is relaxing the grasping hand. It means being less possessive, not giving eternal value to the things we own, the people we know, the plans we have, and the successes or failures we collect. All things go away. Nothing is eternal except God. That's why Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Relinquishment is part of the gift of contingency, which is part of the spiritual adventure of longer living. It is the taking into account that one day each one of us will die. We will have to leave this world behind. We brought nothing into this world, and we will take nothing with us. Is the knowledge of that contingency a gift of longer living or a curse? I conclude it is a gift, for it makes life itself a gift instead of an entitlement. "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Some time ago, I read in a book something an 85-year-old man had written when he learned he was dying. He said, "If I had my life to live over again, I'd try to make more mistakes next time. I wouldn't try to be so perfect." I thought to myself, "That's right. What difference does it make if you let people know you are imperfect? They can identify with you then. Nobody can identify with perfection."

He went on to say, "I'd relax more. I'd limber up. I'd take more chances. I'd take more trips. I'd climb more mountains. I'd eat more ice cream and fewer beans. I'd have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones." And he's right. Ninety percent of what we worry about never happens anyway, yet we go right on worrying about everything.

There's yet one more gift in the spiritual adventure of longer living. It is the gift of faith. Someone once defined faith as "believing that the unknown will turn out to be loving." At age 60, I'm beginning to understand that. The future is seldom as good as our highest hopes, but never as bad as our worst fears. As we live longer, we should take more time for exploration of our inner world, for the joys of contemplation, for probing the mystery of God, for the deepening of our spiritual lives. Then indeed, longer living can continue to be a growing, illuminating, deepening spiritual adventure. Amen.