Sunday, October 27, 1996
THE GIFTS OF LONGER LIVING
Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Thirty years ago in the 1960s, there was a popular saying among certain groups: “Never trust anyone over thirty.” Times have changed. I don’t hear that declaration as much as I used to. Maybe that’s because the fastest-growing segment of our population is made up of those over 65. People are living longer and healthier lives. In less than one century, there has been an astonishing 50 percent-plus increase in longevity. Centenarians are the fastest-growing segment of the population percentage-wise. By some accounts, the life expectancy of a child born today is expected to be well over 90.

For the first time in history, four-generation families are becoming commonplace. When the baby-boomer generation begins to hit retirement age, the percentage of the population over 65 will swell from 12.5 percent to 21 percent. The gift of longer life is being given to more and more people. We even have new words for describing people who are living longer — senior citizens, the golden years, and, not my favorite, “chronologically advantaged.”

Robert Browning’s poem may become popular again:

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!”

Certainly, the Bible has no prejudice toward older people or longer lives. Moses is a good example. During his youth, Moses lived as an Egyptian, pampered and privileged in Pharaoh’s house. In midlife, Moses worked hard, tending sheep, raising a family, being a member of a busy community. Not until he had appropriately aged did God call Moses into his most active service. In his third stage of life, Moses became the servant of God, unlike few others ever known.

To underscore the point, the book of Deuteronomy says about Moses, who was purported to be 120 years old when he died: “His sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated.” How would you like that to be said about you at age 120?

Today, as we remember Moses, and as the church observes All Saints’ Day this coming week, celebrating the wisdom and longevity of the church, it’s also a time to celebrate and remember the positive dimensions of growing older — the gifts that can come from longer living.

Too often, we focus only on the negative aspects of growing older, and there are some. Physically, we worry about high blood pressure, heart failure, cancer, loss of stamina, and more.

On the other hand, there are many gifts that can come from longer living, especially from a spiritual point of view. How can we become more aware of these gifts?

First of all, we need to begin by replacing the notion that life is like a graph that goes up and up to some imaginary point and then goes down and down to the bitter end. Life need not be that way.

Our faith testifies that life can be filled with creative power and adventure until the day we die. That's what the story of the last period of Moses' life describes. As his life neared its end, Moses had struggled and worked to lead his people into the promised land. God took Moses to the top of Mount Nebo, showed him the promised land, but told him that he would not live to enter it — he could only see it. For Moses, that was enough. He knew that his work had not been in vain, and he could die in peace.

That's true for most of us. We may never live in all the promised lands of the future because none of us is immortal. But if we keep our spiritual and mental life growing and expanding, we will be able to see many of the promised lands of the future, and we will know that our struggles have not been in vain.

The story indicates that Moses' long life didn't peak and then decline for many years. Instead, when he died, "his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated." This is the Bible's way of saying that Moses remained a man of vision and dreams, continuing to grow mentally and spiritually until he died.

There is no limit to our continued mental and spiritual growth. In fact, I believe that we are more conducive to this kind of growth as we age. However, it's up to us. That kind of growing is not automatic.

A friend of mine in her late 60s attended a conference when a younger woman in her 30s asked, "What are you doing here? You're so much older than the rest of us." Periodically during the conference, the young woman repeated the question. My friend always replied, "I want to keep growing."

The younger woman hadn't considered that one could keep growing and learning at any age. Later, she asked, "Do people your age have fun anymore?" It became clear that the young woman was afraid of growing older, a fear she revealed through her questions.

A fear of aging is present in our culture. Society often looks upon older age as something shameful. But what is old age? Who can precisely define it?

Whether or not we feel our life has peaked and is now in decline depends a lot on how we act or react to what happens to us as we age.

Here is an individual who realizes that he has taken the wrong road in life. Gifted artistically, but under pressure from family and for security, this person chose a safe career. Now he feels bored, guilty, and limited, and feels it is too late to change. He acts as if his life is over.

Here is another person who realizes that she may not attain a lifelong goal. She is on a plateau and feels like the rest of her life is downhill. She feels old and acts that way.

You can also feel old if you don't know how to accept and learn from failure. Sometimes we live as if our life's value is absolutely tied to one particular event or goal, and if that fails, our life is a failure.

Even prosperity or success can bring on a kind of premature old age. I see people cave in the moment they achieve the goal they set for themselves and act as if life is finished.

When an individual stops thinking, stops growing, stops searching for new interests, and becomes inflexible, they are already old — sometimes even at age 40 or earlier. Most of these things are a matter of choice.

What, then, are some of the gifts of longer living that are available if we choose to take advantage of them?

One gift of longer living is perspective. It's not automatic, but it's something that only time makes possible. You cannot have much perspective at age 20 because you haven't lived long enough. Perspective comes from learning from life's experiences, both good and bad. Some choose to learn from experience; others do not.

What is perspective? Perspective is knowing that nothing is as simple as it seems. It's no longer being surprised when someone lets you down. It's knowing that good times won't last forever, and bad times won't either. Perspective is learning not to be cynical when your best efforts fail and not to be cocky with success. It's knowing that life is like the baseball season — where even the best team loses a third of its games, and even the worst team has its days of brilliance. Perspective is knowing that things in life don't have to be perfect to be good. It's learning that the future is seldom as good as our highest hopes, but never as bad as our worst fears.

Perspective is knowing, as Einstein said, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

There's an old saying, "Nothing succeeds like success." Perspective, however, tells us that the opposite is also true: "Nothing succeeds like failure." No one wants to fail, but no one is likely to escape that experience. Losing a job, a broken marriage, a low grade in school, a wayward child — the list goes on. But as painful as failure can be, it has a peculiar power. Failure can liberate us to take risks we might not have taken otherwise. Sometimes this perspective only comes late in life, but whenever it comes, it's a gift.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story of being at the bedside of a congregant who was dying. Kushner asked if he wanted him to pray for him or if he was too angry at God for what was happening. The man replied, "No, I'm not angry at God. There were plenty of times when I thought I'd done so many things wrong that God had given up on me. But lying here in the hospital, I've felt God's presence in this room."

He continued, "When I was young, I thought I had to be perfect for people to love me. I thought that if I ever did something wrong, their love would be withdrawn. So every time I did something wrong, I'd make excuses, lie, or try to find someone else to blame. I didn't realize what an unpleasant person I became when I acted that way. I thought it was my imperfection, not my defensiveness, that turned people off. But lying here, sick and cranky and dying, yet feeling God's presence in the doctors and nurses who help me, in the friends and family who visit me — I've finally learned that I don't have to be perfect to be worth loving. I only wish I had known that sooner."

Perspective is a gift that can come with longer living, but it's not automatic. Some people, as they live longer, become stingy, stop growing, stop thinking, and become completely set in

their ways. They lose perspective. They are not like Moses, who had new visions up to the moment of his death.

Another gift that can come from longer living, which is related to perspective, is gaining a sense of “contingency.” That’s a big word for “iffy.” It means knowing that everything except God is finite. It means knowing that nothing in this world will last forever except God and God’s love. Everything is fragile, including our existence. Moses had to learn that. Even though God showed him the promised land, he would never enter it.

An important part of the gift of contingency is learning the art of relinquishment — the art of letting go. Most of what we are taught in life is how to get things, how to hold onto things. Thus, most of us are more skilled in acquisition than in letting go or giving things away. Relinquishment means being less possessive, not giving eternal value to the things we own, the plans we make, or the successes and failures we collect. We brought nothing into this world, and we will take nothing with us.

There is yet one more gift that can come from longer living — the gift of faith. Someone once defined faith as “believing that the unknown will turn out to be loving.”

As we live longer, hopefully, we will take more time for exploration of our inner world, for the joys of contemplation, for probing the mysteries of God, and for deepening our spiritual lives. Then indeed, longer living will be a growing, illuminating, and deepening spiritual adventure. Amen.