Book 32

Sunday October 27, 1996

THE GIFTS OF LONGER LIVING

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Thirty years ago in the 1960's, among certain groups of people, there was a popular saying, "Never trust anyone over thirty." Times are changing. 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 gifts of longer-living are 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 again become popular:

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 stories have no prejudice toward older people and longer living. 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 in the Old Testament 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 this coming week the church observes All Saints' Day, a day that celebrates the church's getting older and better, and also celebrates the age and wisdom of the church, it's time also to celebrate and remember the positive dimensions of growing older, the gifts that can come to us from longer living.

Too often we talk only about the negative dimensions of longer living and there are some. Physically we are concerned about high blood pressure, heart failure, cancer, the loss of physical stamina and more.

On the other hand there are a lot of gifts that can come to us through 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 picture which wants to portray life as 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.

It is the testimony of our faith that life can be filled with creative power and adventure until the day we die. That's what this story of the last period of the life of Moses describes. In the last period of Moses' life he had struggled and worked to lead his people into the promised land. As his life is nearing its end, God takes Moses to

the top of Mount Nebo and shows him the promised land but also tells him that he will not live long enough to live in it, all he can do is see it. For Moses that was enough. He now knew that all of his work was not in vain and he could die in peace.

That's true for most of us. We can never live in all the promised lands of the future because no one 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.

As the story indicates, the long years of Moses' life did not reach a peak and then for many years decline. Rather the story underscores the fact

that when he died, his vision was still strong and his vigor had not abated. I'd like that to be able to be said at my funeral. This is the Bible's way of saying that Moses continued to be a man of vision, of dreams; he kept growing 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 grow older. The choice however is up to us. That kind of growing is not automatic.

A friend of mine who is in her late 60's was attending a conference for her own benefit when a younger woman in her 30's asked her, "What are you doing in this conference? You're so much older than the rest of us." Periodically during the

conference, the young woman continued to ask the same question. My friend's reply was always the same. "I want to keep growing."

This younger person had not considered the fact that one could keep growing and learning at any age. Later in the meeting the young woman asked, "Do people of your age have fun anymore?" It became apparent that the young woman was afraid of growing older, a fear that she continued to reveal during the conference with her questions.

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

Whether or not we act as if our life has reached its peak and is now going downhill depends a lot on how we act or react to what happens to us as we grow older.

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

Here is another person who realizes that she may not attain a goal she has always had. She is on a plateau in her life and from where she is, it looks as if the rest of her life is all downhill. She feels old and acts that way.

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

To some, prosperity or success brings on a kind of old age-- premature and false. I see people who cave in the moment they achieve the goal which they had set for themselves and for them they act is if life is finished.

When an individual stops thinking, stops growing, stops searching for new interests, becomes inflexible, then he or she is already old and this happens to some at age 40 or earlier. Most of these things are matters of choice.What then are some of the gifts of longer living which are there

if we want to choose them and take advantage of them?

One gift of longer living is perspective. It's not automatic yet it's something that only longer living makes possible. You cannot have much perspective at age 20 simply because you have not lived long enough. Perspective comes from learning from our life's experiences, the good and the bad. That too is a matter of choice. Some choose to learn from experience and others do not.

What is perspective? Perspective is knowing that nothing is as simple as it seems. Perspective means no longer being completely surprised when someone lets you down. Perspective is knowing that good times will not last forever and

bad times will not last forever. Perspective is learning not to be cynical when some of our best efforts fail and not to be cocky with success. Perspective is knowing that life is like the baseball season, where even the best team loses at least a third of its games and even the worst team has its days of brilliance. Perspective is knowing that things in life do not have to be perfect to be good. Perspective is 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 that goes, "Nothing succeeds like success." Perspective however tells us

that the opposite is also true, "nothing succeeds like failure." No one wants to fail, yet no one is likely to escape that experience. Losing a job, a broken marriage, a low grade in school, a wayward child and 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 seen. Sometimes this perspective only comes late in life, but whenever it comes it's a gift.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells about being at the bedside of a member of his congregation who was dying and Kushner asked the man if he wanted him to pray for him, or was he so angry at God for what was happening that prayer would only make him feel worse? The man looked at Kushner and said, "No, I'm not angry at God.

There have been plenty of times when I felt that I had done so many things wrong, I figured God had given up on me. But lying here in the hospital, I've felt God's presence in this room."

He went on, "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 would make excuses, I would lie, I would 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 defensivenes, that turned people off. But lying here in the hospital--sick and cranky and dying, yet feeling God's presence in the doctors and nurses who try to help me, in the friends and family who come to 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--it's a gift that can be part of 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 up to the moment of his death still had new visions.

Another gift that can come from longer living and 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 go on 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 for his people, he would never enter it.

An important ingredient of the gift of contingency is learning the art of relinquishment. It is 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 much better, more skillful in acquisition than we are 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 and the successes and failures we collect. We brought nothing into this world and we will take nothing with us.

There's yet one more gift that can come from

longer living. It is 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, for the deepening of our spiritual lives. Then indeed, longer living will be for you and for me a growing, illuminating, deepening spiritual adventure. Amen.