

STILL GROWING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

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June 10, 2018; 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Isaiah 45:20-46:4; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

***“Even though our outer nature is wasting away,
our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”***

2 Corinthians 4:16b

I entered her nursing-home room quietly (I thought she might be asleep).

The light was low. All I could see of her was the crown of her head, with its wispy white hair. As I drew closer, I could see that she had the covers pulled right up to her chin.

At the sound of my footstep, she stirred, and greeted me with a smile. We talked; we visited; we laughed. And then, after a time, she said, “You know what one of the most difficult things is?”

“No,” I said; “tell me.”

“It’s feeling like you’re still fourteen years old, but you’re trapped inside this body that doesn’t work.”

And in that moment, in my mind’s eye, I glimpsed her as a teenager: maybe wearing one of those long, calf-length dresses that were the fashion, back in her day. She was running, running and laughing through a field of tall grass, several friends by her side, a little dog yapping at her heels. The sun was shining, the wind

was rustling her hair; God was in heaven, and all was right with the world.

Problem was, that scene existed only in memory: for on this late-winter day, as the afternoon shadows grew longer, the little dog was no more, the friends were no more, and the only one left was this ancient woman, bedridden and frail — replaying, over and over, her precious recollections of days gone by.

“Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” So writes Paul to the Corinthians. That “inner nature” he’s talking about is very similar to the sense my elderly friend had: that, deep inside that tired old body of hers, laughed and danced a very young woman.

It’s those older people who have no sense of the youth within them that I worry about — and those younger people as well, who seem so old before their time: set in their ways of thinking, established in their utter conformity to the desires of their parents, cynical in their conviction that they’ve already seen all that life has to offer.

My message today (if you haven’t already guessed) is about something that’s common to all of us. It’s about aging — but don’t think I’m talking only to those who are “up there” in years. You’ve heard the old truism, I’m sure, that all of us have been dying since the day we were born. The same is true of aging. As a

baby goes through the process of learning to crawl, then to walk, she's aging. As a teenager claims the keys to the car for the first time, he's aging. As a couple gets married, raises children of their own, and moves on into retirement, they are aging.

When it comes to aging, we have no choice in the matter. But we can choose to swim *with* the current, rather than against it. There's such a thing as positive aging — and that, I believe, is what Paul's calling us to, as he talks of the “inner nature” being “renewed day by day.”

Paul is the second most important person in Christian history, with the exception of Jesus himself. It's strange, though, that we know precious little about him. Here's what we do know. The book of Acts tells us all about his remarkable conversion, from persecutor of Christians to preacher of the faith — and here and there we get little personal details, like his skill as a tentmaker — but still, there are mysteries about him.

One of the greatest mysteries is something Paul calls his “thorn in the flesh.” He complains of it in this very same letter: chapter 12, verse 7....

“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me....Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’”

Many scholars think Paul is speaking of a physical illness, an infirmity that troubled him night and day. It could be that he lived with constant, nagging pain....or an untreated neurological condition, like epilepsy....or a disability, like failing hearing or eyesight. The specifics aren't really important; like many middle-aged and elderly people, Paul certainly had his share of physical complaints.

The truly interesting thing, in light of all this, is what he writes here in chapter four: "...our inner nature is being renewed day by day." Paul has a truly positive outlook on the whole aging process: he sees it not as a dismal decline into death, but rather as a journey — a passage through some difficult spots, to be sure, but one which leads ultimately to a renewed quality of life (or, in his words, "an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure").

I'd like to suggest to you, today, several features of positive aging: practices you and I can aspire to follow. They are: imagination, enthusiasm, nurture and faith.

First, imagination. The story is told of two elderly men, roommates in a nursing home. One had recently gone blind, and was living in quiet despair. He felt that life held little for him. He wanted only to die.

His roommate could see just fine, but he had trouble getting around. He rarely left his bed, which was next to the window of their room.

Neither one could remember how it happened, but one day the man who could see began describing to his roommate what was going on in the world outside their window. He told him of the mail carrier making his rounds; of neighbors walking their dogs; of the teenage boy and girl who passed the window every day after school — who first held hands, then embraced, then had an argument, then reconciled once again.

As the days went on, the blind man came to live for these updates from the outside world. His friend seemed to take such joy in it, and had a real gift for describing what everything looked like.

Then one day his friend — who was much sicker than he had imagined — died. A new patient was wheeled in.

The blind man asked his new roommate if he would let him know what was happening outside the window.

“I’d be glad to,” said the roommate, “but I don’t know how I could do that. There’s nothing outside our window but a solid brick wall.”

The blind man was bewildered for a moment. He felt betrayed by his former friend — had he been playing him for a fool? But then he realized, in a flash, what

a precious gift his friend had given. He had spun, out of nothing but the stuff of his imagination, an entire world. He had dreamt up the mail carrier, and the neighbors, and the pair of teenage lovers — and he'd made those characters as real as if they had lived outside that window, every day.

In that moment of revelation, the man realized there are things worse than having no sight. It is far, far worse to have no imagination, no inner vision — no inner nature that is being renewed day by day.

“Imagination,” writes the Nobel Prize-winning poet, Czeslaw Milosz “...can fashion the world into a homeland as well as into a prison or place of battle. Nobody lives in the "objective" world, only in a world filtered through the imagination.”

So, imagination is one feature of a healthy aging process. A second is enthusiasm.

Originally, the word enthusiasm” comes from the Greek: “en Theos” — “having God within.” An enthusiast, in the oldest meaning of the term, is one whose life plays host to God, one in whom traces of the Creator’s hand can be seen.

We’ve certainly cheapened that idea, in our culture. An enthusiastic person,

to most minds, is one who smiles a lot....who extends a firm handshake...who's always ready with a good thump on the back.

I remember, years ago, how we had a couple of photocopier-machine salesmen visit our church office. They spoke with our office manager and myself. These guys were evidently new to their work — or maybe one was the trainer, the other the trainee, I can't be sure. Both had clearly earned top grades at salesman-school — or wherever photocopier-machine sales people learn to do what they do. Their wardrobe and grooming was impeccable, they talked fast, they smiled, they joked, they had their facts at their fingertips.

The center of their presentation was taking us through a series of laminated pages in a three-ring binder. They showed the pages to us as they spoke. They flipped over the cards in their binder, demonstrating how their company was on the cutting edge of copier technology.

But there was something lacking. They were too dependent on the notebook. They were cheerful and articulate enough, and they communicated what was on the page — but never did we get the sense that they were speaking from the heart. They were passing along what they'd been taught to say. What they themselves truly believed was a mystery.

Just a few verses earlier in 2 Corinthians, Paul demonstrates this different

sort of enthusiasm — and it's not entirely cheerful —

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.”

Can you imagine our copier salesmen using language like that? No way! If you're going to sell office equipment, you've got to accentuate the positive. You've got to list all the wonderful things your machine will do — the labor it will save, its ergonomic design, its speed, its ease of operation. You don't say, “The paper sometimes jams, but we triumph over it.” You don't tell your customers, “This contraption will frustrate you from time to time, but you'll be a better person for it.”

Yet that's exactly the sort of thing Paul is saying, in his sales pitch for the Christian faith. Go figure!

The reason Paul can do that, and still speak convincingly about Christianity, is because his enthusiasm is an enthusiasm of the heart — not merely of the smile

muscles on his face. Paul's enthusiasm literally bears witness to the truth of God-dwelling-within — despite the difficulties fortune casts in life's path, despite the thorn in the flesh that troubles him.

So, too, as we age, our enthusiasm is related less and less to life's circumstances — whether we're healthy or sick, in community or alone, happy or dejected. Enthusiasm is, rather, a state of mind we carry with us, a positive attitude we cultivate, a basic orientation toward God. It echoes something Paul says in another of his letters, the letter to the Philippians:

“I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it means to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

The root of enthusiasm is not the outward circumstances of our lives, but rather the fire within. True enthusiasts are fighters. They have fortitude. They face their problems directly. They triumph over what they can change, and stoically accept what they cannot.

A third quality of healthy aging is nurture. By that, I mean not so much

being nurtured, as doing the nurturing.

Now that may seem difficult, at first glance, for some older people to do. Who, after all, are they to nurture — especially if they have no children or grandchildren nearby?

For some peculiar reason, we've gotten the idea, in our society — and even in our churches — that the nurture of children belongs exclusively to the young. There's no other culture in the world that believes that! People in our culture may retire from their jobs when they're 65 or 70, but in the church, many retire from Sunday School teaching decades earlier — generally, when their own children (if they have any) leave the household.

You've heard the phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child." Maybe that slogan's been overused, but still there's a lot of truth to it. You have to wonder, though, with so many people living in so-called retirement "villages," what children are being raised.

It so happens that the church provides a marvelous context for reversing this trend. We're one of the last institutions in society that's not age-segregated. What happens here on Sunday mornings is truly intergenerational.

When the call goes out for Sunday School teachers, some of you folks who are in the empty-nester category — even those whose nests have been empty for

some time — really could step forward and lend a hand. And do you know something? It wouldn't just be good for the kids. I would be good for you, too.

I've spoken to you today about three aspects of healthy, positive aging: imagination, enthusiasm and nurture. Yet all of these are as nothing compared to the fourth and final spiritual practice: faith.

Just about everything I've said up till now could have been said by any motivational speaker. Who can argue with the therapeutic value of imagination, or enthusiasm, or helping others?

Yet, it can be awfully hard to do these things — awfully hard, that is, unless we're aided by a power beyond ourselves.

Look one more time at the language Paul uses: “our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” That phrase is in the passive voice: which means that renewal is not something you and I can do for ourselves. Rather, it's something that happens to us. Elsewhere, Paul says, “Be transformed, by the renewing of your minds.” It's the same Greek word, the word for “renewal.”

The one who's responsible for renewal, for all new life in this world of ours, is Jesus Christ. Jesus was thirty-three years old when he died. With the vastly different life expectancies of his era, that means he was at least in late middle age,

if not an old man. He came into the world, entered into the human aging process, and eventually experienced even its natural conclusion, death. Yet, that's not where the story ends. He triumphed over death on Easter morn, so we might know new life.

My friends, there's not a one of us who has the power to renew our inner nature day by day. Only God, in Jesus Christ, can do that. It's like the manna God sent the Israelites in the wilderness: there was only a day's supply. You and I have no choice in this life but to keep coming to the Lord with hungry hearts and open hands.

Only God has the power, ultimately, to gift us with imagination, to infuse us with enthusiasm, to inspire us to reach out to others as nurturers.

There's no cure for aging — it's part and parcel of this God-given human life. But the good news is this: even aging can be transformed into something life-giving, if we follow the example of Jesus and give of ourselves. A lifestyle of giving leads, naturally, to an abundance of receiving....and growing....and — in the end — new life, for the giver.

Let us pray:

**Lord, it's a mystery to us why life on this earth
doesn't go on forever.**

**At the same time, it's a marvel to us
that you invite us to hope for, and believe in,**

**a life on the other side of this one
that goes on forever, eternally.
As our own years accumulate, keep us attentive
to signs and markers,
hints and promises,
of the life to come,
in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.
May we live in this life as though that eternal realm
is not just coming, but already here. Amen.**

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