

Being the Church at Brentwood

Aging in Grace

Ps 138 & 2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

June 10, 2012

300/303, 609, 611, 620

There is a truth about human existence
that must be faced honestly and accepted
if we are to live truly flourishing lives.

The truth is this:
The bodies in and with which we now live
will eventually die.
That's how human beings are made.
The physical parts of our beings,
our material bodies,
undergo a process of aging and decline
that eventually leads to their death.

This often happens slowly,
as we gradually experience
the aches and pains and wanderings and confusions
of our aging bodies.

Sometimes it happens suddenly,
when a disease or an accident
robs us of our physical capacities.

If that is all we see and know,
if that is our view of how life ends,
then we will probably age in fear and despair.
We will see our physical decline
as the only story line there is.
We will become despondent and depressed
as our physical energy slips away.

And we will add to our despair
if this is our view of aging
as we watched this process happen in our loved ones.

I first really had to confront this view of aging
in a conversation with my father after his first heart attack.
I was home in Niagara Falls visiting him.
My mother had died a few years earlier.
Both Mom and Dad had been very active in our home church,
Drummond Hill Presbyterian Church.
Dad had been on Session for many years
and was then Clerk of Session.

What I remember about that conversation
was Dad saying in a sad and resigned voice,
“I really don’t believe in life after death.
When I die, it will be over.”

I also remember that I did not say anything
terribly comforting or profound.
I think I was taken aback.
It never occurred to me that someone
that involved in church over that many years
would think that life just ended with death -
done, gone, finished.

I had not given it much thought myself.
I knew a lot of the theologies and theories about death,
but this conversation brought it home
at a much more personal and deeper level.

Over my years working with congregations,
I’ve had a lot more conversations
with people about aging and death.
Not as many as you might think, however.
Most people don’t talk about it.

But our text this morning does,
so let’s spend a few minutes
exploring what Paul thinks about life after death
and how we Christians might age in grace.

For Paul, and I do hope for all of us,
our own aging and the eventual deaths of the bodies we see
must be seen in the context of what God has done for our sakes
in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

What God did for Jesus he will do with us.

The physical bodies we now have –
Paul uses the image of a tent –
will be replaced by a permanent home with God
provided by God.

There are two aspects of the situation Paul faced
that are worth noting here.

He faced hatred and persecution
from both Jewish religious authorities
and Roman political authorities.

Prior to his conversion, he had himself
persecuted and executed Christians.

He also suffered from chronic illness.

We don't know what it was.

Scholars have suggested malaria, epilepsy,
or some form of neuroglia accompanied by depression.

We do know it was a chronic sign of aging.

What Paul's faith did for him in the midst of his physical ailments
was to provide the calm, the courage, and the compassion
to care for others.

His letters are filled with concern for the flourishing
of the communities of faith that he founded and nurtured.

His confidence in a life with God for all eternity
freed him from the fear and despair
that tempted him daily
and enabled him to be calm in the face of anxiety,
courageous in the face of pain,
and compassionate with others.

That, in a nutshell, is what it means to age in grace –
to deal with the truth of physical decay and disease in our bodies
with a firm confidence in what God has done for our sakes.

This is the reason we do not become discouraged for long.

God's gift of eternal life – life in companionship with the Holy Trinity –
starts here with faith and continues through all eternity
in community with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is a life full of energy and gratitude.

The secret, as Paul tells it in this passage,
is where we decide to fix our attention.

Do we focus on the temporary tent or on the permanent home?

He urges us to put our faith in the permanent home offered through grace –
a life lived in intimate relationship with God in Jesus Christ
through the loving work of the Holy Spirit.

It's a life that begins here and now,
a life focused on being an agent of the Commonwealth of God,
a life of calm, courage, and compassion
as we reach out beyond our fears and pain
to be God's grace with and for others.

I wish I had worked things through like this
when Dad talked about death being the end.
But I have let go of those regrets.
He has found the joys of eternal life with Jesus Christ
in the home God prepared for him.

And I have learned how better to put into words
my confidence in God's promise of eternal life,
of seeing the process of aging as something that can be done in grace,
done with calm, courage, and compassion.

Amen.

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