

Sunday, November 2, 2014

Life Cycle III: Maturity

Scripture: Ephesians 4:11-16

Sermon: Second Half

So many gifts this morning, another good testimony—isn't our church full of wise people? (a baptism of young Elizabeth, reminding us all how we're supposed to be before God). The Lord's Supper to come and beginning to turn in our pledge cards. Once again no time for a long sermon. I don't expect anyone to complain.

This week's focus in our life cycle series is maturity. Middle age. The time when we know who we are, and we have the most to contribute. We simply would not have a church without folks near or just past retirement who have time and wisdom to lead. I've heard it argued that the sweet spot in life is age 55. Your body still mostly works. And you're not a fool anymore, you've paid the stupid tax and know who you are. Those of us who are young with *unhealthy* bodies, or old and still foolish, might object. Because maturity is not just a matter of time spent breathing. In maturity, at our best, we know who we are. We know how to be gracious with others. We know how to work across difference and either reconcile or agree to disagree. And in maturity you know that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. It really doesn't hurt to be kind.

I want to show you this icon I got in Jerusalem. It's the reconciliation of Peter and Paul. You don't remember this story? Of course you don't, it's *not* in the bible. In the bible Paul tells the Galatians he opposed Peter to his face. Told him he was wrong. Gave him the what's what. And then the story ends. No reconciliation. But the church in her wisdom has figured these two leaders must have reconciled at some latter point. These two are *used to* being right--I mean they wrote books *of the bible*-- it's not surprising that they clash. What's amazing is that the bible *records* their disagreement (the bible is never afraid to make God's people look bad). And the church assumes they must have made amends at some later point. This is not wishful thinking. it's the best hard-headed gospel realism. We only argue in order to reconcile. That's maturity. We can argue passionately *and forgive more passionately still*. Hear this word from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Eph 4:11-16

11 The gifts [God] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. 14 We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. 15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

This is the word of God, for the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Talk of maturity reminds me of a bit by the comedian Louis CK when he turned 40. I turned 40 this year, so I'm a little sensitive. When you're 40 you don't get any credit for doing anything well, 'you did that and your only 40?' No—people just expect you to do your job. Nobody feels sorry for you either, 'I feel so good about myself, I helped a 40 year old across the street.' When you're young and you get injured they grow you a new body part out of a test tube. When you're my age and you have an ailment they say 'well it's just crumby now.' Really, you can't do anything? Well, one day, you and your crumby ailment will both die. *Thanks!*

Paul writes to the Ephesians with a wish. That they would be mature. That they would *grow up*. "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about . . . But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." This sounds a little different than what we hear Jesus say. "Unless you change and become like little children you shall not enter the kingdom of God." (Little Elizabeth Mann whom we baptize today has a head start on the rest of us on the kingdom.) How can both these things be true? That we should both grow up *and* grow down? Whatever Jesus means and whatever Paul means, we can say this. *Being childlike doesn't mean being childish*. We have to mature in our faith. To know who we are, who God is, and the right way to live. Surely it's possible both to have the wonder of a child and the wisdom of a sage, isn't it?

I've read the complaint that we don't have grownups in our movies anymore. I see older movies, with Humphrey Bogart or Gary Cooper or Gregory Peck, and think, ok, yeah, Hollywood had real men back then. Our movies have what someone calls "toddler men." Poor Leo. They're mature in age but not in anything else (I'll just pick on my own gender here). This may be because our culture doesn't know what it means to grow up. This isn't just true in Hollywood. The real sign of being a toddler man or woman spiritually is the inability to disagree without vilifying the other person. We have toddler women and men running for office in our state—can you tell what any of our Senate candidates is *for*? All they do is say why the other is evil and stupid. I shudder to think we may get the politics we deserve.

I'm grateful that our church has some actual adults in it. John Thomas is one. Former chancellor at Appalachian, lawyer, engineer, worked for NASA. Not many people in our congregation have a *building* named for him. But John doesn't present himself like he's a big deal (most of you probably don't know who he is). I was speaking with John about the criticism any leader gets. As much as we pastors get criticized, university heads get vastly more. And John said this, 'On any given day half the faculty couldn't believe I managed to wander into the correct office that morning.' In other words, this giant of a man could only please half his people at any point in time. I thought, gosh, if *one* person is angry with me I lose sleep. Another is Bobby Sharp, also works at the university, I tease him by calling him the bishop, the real spiritual authority around here. Bobby says this often, "There is no waste in God's economy." Every time I think I've lost at something I care about, every time we suffer a loss as a congregation I remember those words and think, no, God can turn a cross into a resurrection. What can God do with this? There is no waste in God's economy.

Richard Rohr is a Catholic priest and spiritual writer I admire. He writes about the two halves of life. In the first half of life you strive to achieve. To make a name for yourself. To conquer.

To defeat those who stand in your way. This can be good—to achieve you have to get over your natural desire for money, sex, and power, or those will destroy you. Many who remain childish are still stuck on money sex or power, and often people who are quite old in years never get past those traps. Then the second half of life comes. And if you're wise you realize you don't have to achieve anymore. You've hit a mountain top or two, and there's more to life than that. You can grow gentler instead of greater. And you realize your life isn't for you anyway. It's for others. You can turn your needs and attention from *your* conquest, *your* acquisition, *your* success, to those who are needy, the poor, young, old, the forgotten. Some of you in the second half have a sort of joy about you. You're not fighting any more battles. You know you've learned more when you've lost than when you've won. And whenever you can, you spend yourself on other people. Serving them, loving them. That's how we love God. The two halves of life don't coincide with age. I'm not there just by turning 40. They're two stages of maturity. And however old you are, friends, let me invite you to step into the second half of life. And I can't help but wonder if the threshold we step over into the second half isn't failure. I wonder if how we mature is by failure.

I heard of a man once who failed to take this step. He was a highly regarded pastor, a favorite to have the highest position in his church, the equivalent of CEO, partner of the prestigious firm, an endowed chair, the business woman who retires at 40 and buys an island. And he was passed over. Didn't get it. Now you would think if you shoot for the moon and miss you're still among the stars, right? But this man couldn't get over it. He lost most of his faith. If he'd go to church he'd sulk in late, sit in the back and grumble to himself, nursing entitlement and resentment. Why couldn't he take the puncture of that dream and use it to serve others? He just couldn't. *His* accomplishment was more important than the church's thriving. He stayed in the first half. Immature. Self-serving. Childish rather than childlike.

James Lorello, one of our most important lay leaders already at age 26, all but wrote my sermon for me this week over breakfast by the Sea of Galilee. We didn't have broiled fish like Jesus and the disciples but we may as well have. I asked him about maturity because he's an old soul and he said this, "Nothing in Christianity says you have to accomplish anything." That's true! Salvation is all grace, it's not our doing. It's why the church honors the aged, the newborn, the handicapped, the prisoner—they make clear grace *isn't* what we earn. Grace is what God showers on the *undeserving*. Our lives have merit because of Christ's conquest, not ours. Our desire to conquer in the first half of life can mean we act like we don't need Jesus. I told James about the clergyman and he said, "Sounds like some idolatry going on there." Only false gods ask what we've achieved (say that with me). When we worship the true God, Jesus Christ, we know our life is more than *our* accomplishments, *our* beauty, *our* image. Our life and death is *Jesus*. None of us by doing anything can make God love us one whit more. What else in life matters besides that?

One thing I love about this church is that we have some accomplished folks in here. Folks who don't need the church to stroke their egos. When y'all speak it's *not* because you need to hear your own voices. You've built buildings, businesses, families, you're far past needing the church to tell you how great you are. When you speak you're saying what you really think, I love that. That's second half stuff.

As for the first half, it's really hard to figure out what to do with ambition. Ambition can be a good thing. If God has given us gifts to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, or teachers we should do that with all our hearts. But ambition can be poisonous. And if I can speak a little out of turn to the baby boomers out there I'd say this. You've done so much. You built America's post-World War II economy. You won the Cold War. You changed the world with the Civil Rights movement. And now it's really hard to step into the second half of life. You've conquered so much it's hard to set that aside. Lots of boomers are *still* trying to conquer the world. Still trying to find a soulmate in their 60s, not realizing there *are* no soulmates, there are only the other people as ordinary as you to whom you've made promises that are good to keep. You don't have to achieve. Nobody has to conquer. Jesus has already done all that. All we have to do is give thanks. And bless other people.

So here's a question. When were you most insecure in your life? Most out of sorts, awkward, afraid? For many of us stereotypically that's our teenage years. The enormous yawning pit called the school lunch room with no obvious place to sit—we don't fit in anywhere, not with the jocks, the geeks, the cool kids, where do we go? Don't know. For others it's young adulthood. Trying to figure out new pressures of job, family, making ends meet without parents to help. For others its middle age, with the much fabled mid-life crisis. When is it for you? Think of it. I'm tempted to have you write it down. Now do this. Imagine you could have a conversation with that younger self. What would you say? I bet if you could talk to your frightened younger self you'd say something like this, "It will be ok." It will. It gets better. Maybe not as fast as you'd like, or the way you'd like, but it will. Everything will be alright, as Keith Tutterow told us all two weeks ago. Don't we wish as more mature people we could reassure our less mature selves?

Paul seems to think we can. Paul imagines growing up not as an individual matter alone. Growing up is something for the whole church to do. And it's our task #1. "We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, in whom the whole body is joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped." The goal isn't just for us to grow up as individuals. It's for the whole church to grow up. That we would all be both wise and childlike. That we would know our value comes from Christ and no one else. This is so important friends. I love our church, we have done so much in our community, we have so much more to do. But our value comes from Jesus' work for us, not from our work for him. That's one way to grow into the second half of life, to ask what our *church* needs to become mature, *not* just what we need as individuals.

Look again at this icon, these two bull-headed enemies reconciling. They're probably about to celebrate the Lord's Supper. When we come to this table we make amends with those we've hurt and who've hurt us. We mature by saying, "I love you. I forgive you," and kneeling together. Not because we want to or like it, but because Jesus commands us. Lord make it so, amen.