

Sermon

I had a rather big event happen to me this year, I turned 40! I guess I'm finally old enough to be a minister! And two memorable things have happened since that date. First, I got my first birthday card that made fun of my age. Second, I went to the hairdresser last week, and when I asked her to take of a couple of inches, she said "Good for you! It'll make you look so much younger!" That's the first time a hairdresser has ever said that to me! I ran home and looked in the mirror. Did I have any new lines? Had my crow's feet gotten larger!

Age, we give it so many different meanings.

As a young girl, age seemed a mystery to me. I knew that for me, that getting older meant that my life got better. I grew taller and stronger. I could run faster, throw a ball further, and I read and write better. I also got new responsibilities and freedoms, so getting older was an exciting thing that came with clear rewards. That didn't seem to be as true for adults. My aunts and uncles seemed to be pretty much the same from year to year. My mother would be the same height at 31 that she'd been at 29 and that she'd been at 28, so I wasn't sure what age meant for adults.

Then there were those I saw as really "old". They did change year to year, but in a very different way. When I was young, my father regularly sang in the nursing homes in our town. All the churches worked together to ensure that every nursing home had a worship service every week of the year. My dad was part of this, and every time he had a nursing home commitment, he made us kids go with him. And I can tell you in all honesty, I was always scared to go. I felt so uncomfortable and awkward. The residents would try to talk to us, and I never knew what to say. They seemed so happy to see us. But to my young eyes, I couldn't understand what they had to be happy about. To my young eyes, time was taking everything away from them - their bodies, sometimes their minds, and their freedom. It was impossible for me to imagine that once they had been young like me. It was more impossible to consider that someday I would be just like them.

I would go home with a sense of pity and deep sadness and find myself having nightmares, that's how shaken and uncomfortable the visits left me. But even though I complained and tried to beg off, my dad insisted that I keep going that it didn't matter if I didn't like it. So month by month, I would go with him, and gradually he had me do more and more for the music. He had me singing at a very young age, and when I was old enough, when my age had brought me to a place where my skills were accomplished enough, I accompanied him on the piano. And I continued to fail to understand why he kept making me go.

We live in a society that is fragmented by age. We tend to hang out with people who are our own age and it feels so normal we think it always was this way, but truth be told it's a pretty modern thing. In the past, Mom and Dad didn't sell their home when they retired and move into a condo in a senior's community. You didn't put Grandma in a nursing home when she forgot to turn off the stove. Grandma moved in with you. Young families didn't always move into their own home after marriage. You lived with the parents until you could strike out on your own. It wasn't unusual for three, four, even five generations to be living under one roof. You didn't have to go into a nursing home to see "old people". You went downstairs for breakfast! It was very common to experience death and birth literally in your household.

This pattern didn't really change a lot until the 1950s for middle class people, and for the urban and rural poor, it changed much later. This change is what sociologists call the emergence of the nuclear family which consists of a mom, dad and kids. You know how the religious right parades the nuclear family around as the natural structure of the family, given to us by God? Not so. It's the structure of the family given to us by modernization and industrialization. When you look at studies of family structure over the last 300 years, you see that as we move from agriculture being the center of the economy, to manufacturing, and now to the service industry, that the intergenerational family has fragmented into the nuclear family. Every generation now maintains its own household.

So now we're in this place where we are divided by generation and it feels like it's always been this way. At least that's how it is in the west. You should ask people who emigrate from countries still dominated by multigenerational families, what they see when they look at us. They will say that we are isolated, that it's like we live in silos. You know what silos are? Silos are tall circular cement tubes, often two or three stories high where farmers store feed for their livestock. A silo is separated from everything around it. When you're in a silo, all you see is it's inside walls and a circle of sky above. Many of us live in these silos when it comes to age.

When I was preparing this sermon I asked the people around me, in person and on facebook, to tell me how they experienced their age. It didn't take long for the responses to come in. One young woman shared that she had to work twice as hard as a man or an older person for her ideas to be valued. A young mother felt judged by older women for her child-rearing choices, and as a teacher she was questioned by parents more frequently than the older teachers. A friend shared of a time he expressed his thoughts to a very welcome audience at work, but once he shared his age, many dismissed him. Younger people shared that they felt belittled when told "You're wise for your age," or "You'll understand when you're older." One young woman was told by an older woman, "You have nothing to offer me because I've experienced everything you've experienced. Our relationship could never be equal. I have lots to teach you, but I don't think you have anything to teach me."

Then there were the sharings of those who experienced themselves as old or getting older. One shared that she was becoming more invisible the grayer she got. People just didn't see her. Another talked about looking at her body with its emerging varicose veins, age spots, and crow's feet, and wondered, is this really me? Who am I becoming? A man in a nursing home shared that everyone became falsely cheery when he moved there, as if his fragile body indicated a fragile mind. Didn't they think he could manage his new life, or hold an intelligent conversation? An older gay man shared his fear of becoming irrelevant in a community that reveres youth and a perfect physique. He goes to the gym obsessively to try and keep up. Will anyone desire him when his body can't fight time anymore?

These are the silos that separate us from each other and in those silos we make assumptions about age that belittle, marginalize and devalue. Those silos hold up some truths as truer than others, and some wisdom as more wise than others. There are also patterns in those silos that reflect other prejudices, like sexism. Younger women felt devalued more often than younger men. Older women experienced more judgment of their age than older men. Older women were more threatened by younger women than younger men, and younger women felt more devalued by older women than older men. It seems to me that the generational divide is often nastiest between women. Our society judges women by their appearance and age much more than it judges men, so we often turn against each other in vicious ways, which happens within discriminated groups. We've internalized the discrimination that we resent.

It seems clear to me that our silos aren't working. None of us feel entirely at home in our age which means that we aren't at home within ourselves or each other. I don't think the answer can be to go back in time. I'm not gonna tell you to bring Gramma home or to live with Mom and Dad until after your first two kids. But there does need to be a way to move beyond the divisions that we are asked to see as normal, and I think that we move beyond them by understanding what gives those divisions so much energy.

What is a man who habitually ignores the insights of younger coworkers protecting himself from? When a daughter walks into her father's room with a fake smile on her face, what is she protecting herself from? When women and men of different ages discount each other's experience, what are we protecting ourselves from? When you dye your hair, what are you protecting yourself from?

How many of you know the story of what set the Buddha onto his path of enlightenment? The whole religion of Buddhism emerged because Siddhartha Gautama[^] saw an old man. When Siddhartha Gautama was born, several wise men told his father that he would become an ascetic, meaning one who intentionally suffered for the purposes of gaining wisdom, but only if he laid eyes upon age or pain. His father wanted him to be a King, not a suffering holy man, so he surrounded his son with beauty, youth, and health. When Siddhartha travelled, the King had the roads swept of anyone old or ill. Siddhartha grew up without the knowledge of suffering. But one day while traveling, he caught sight of an old man that his father's people had missed and the whole understanding of life he had been presented with fell apart. He was devastated, wished he could wipe the image from his mind, but, he'd left his silo and couldn't go back.

Foremost in his mind were two questions: Why do we suffer? And how do we cease to suffer? Siddhartha tried all kinds of ways to figure out the answer. He studied, he went into solitude, he deprived himself of food and water, all to no end. He was no closer to the answer, until he sat himself under a Bodhi[^] tree, determined to stay there until he figured it out. As he meditated, four noble truths came to him. 1) suffering is universal 2) the cause of suffering is attachment to selfish desire 3) the solution to suffering is detachment from that desire and 4) the way to overcome suffering is enlightenment through loving detachment.

What are we attached to when it comes to age? What selfish desires fuel the silos? I think we're attached to the idea that our wisdom is truer than someone else's and the deeper attachment behind that is that we are only valuable if we have a higher status than someone else. If someone younger than us can be wise, what do the years of our lives mean? Are they somehow worth less? If someone older than us has experienced things that we are experiencing for the first time, does that make our experience less special and unique? I don't think we're actually attached to smooth unblemished skin, and hair without a strand of gray, we're attached to what they mean. What they mean, ultimately, is that we are far from death. What we're attached to when we separate ourselves by generation is the selfish hope that we will always remain closer to our births than to our deaths. Judging those younger than us is about our resentment that they are further from death than we are. Judging those older than us is about distancing ourselves from their closer proximity to death. Whichever direction, ageism is about fear of death. Ageism is about a selfish attachment to immortality.

We are a death phobic society. When our multigenerational family structure fragmented into the nuclear family we became separated from the cycles of life and death. Birth now happens in a hospital room. Death happens in a hospital room. These monumental passages of life are institutionalized, hidden from view, separated from the places we live. Ageism is a function of this disconnection.

So why did my father make me go to those nursing homes? He was trying to bridge that disconnection. To use Buddhist terminology, he was trying to move us beyond a selfish attachment to immortality. He wanted us to see beyond the age and infirmity of those who came to our worship services, to see them as simply human. He modeled this to us month after month. After a worship service the last thing on his mind was getting out of there. He would spend time with everyone who wanted to speak to him and in him there was no pity or condescension and no fake smile. He knew many of them by name and for him his time was about honoring them and their life experience, and cherishing his friendships with them, and giving them the space to give something back, so that it was a mutual relationship. That's what he wanted to teach us.

May we be humble enough to learn and may the spirit be with us on this journey.

Links for learning from this sermon:

<http://buddhism.about.com/od/lifeofthebuddha/a/buddhalife.htm>

<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/india/bodhgaya-bodhi-tree>

A note about this font-face (Century Gothic), it may reduce ink usage by about 30%.