

*Is Fifty Nifty?*

Sermon by Rev. Edmund Jones

May 5, 2013

Strange things happen in CA. Douglas and Dana Ridenour lived in Anaheim. They had been happily married for 22 years, and they could have been married for another 22 years, except that they had decided to take their own lives in a suicide pact. They succeeded. In a videotape they said they were afraid of growing old. Douglas and Dana Ridenour were 48 & 45 years old.

None of us like to feel that we are growing old. If the worst comes to the worst we describe ourselves as middle-aged. Ogden Nash described middle age as the time when you've met so many people that every new person reminds you of someone you already know. Yet we all grow old at the same rate - one day at a time.

The Bible honors old age. Listen to Lev: "You are to honor old age and respect your God. For I am the Lord". Actually the verse says that you are to stand up in the presence of grey hairs. It doesn't say what you are to do in the presence of someone who doesn't even have grey hairs. I would imagine it is to bow down. Let's practise that! Listen to Proverbs: "Do not despise your mother in her old age". Listen to Paul: "Do not speak harshly to a person older than yourself".

And the Bible proudly announces the ages of its great heroes. "And the days of Noah were 950 yrs... And Sarah was 127 yrs and she died...And all the days of Methuselah were 969 - and he died. If you ask me not a moment too soon!

In the old world age is honored. In the new world age is a misfortune. Some people try to deny it. They dress younger than they are or they buy expensive skin creams to do away with wrinkles. Other defiantly resist the passing of the years. They go back to college when they are 80 years old, or they start a new career when their contemporaries are occupying the rocking chair. Or they become feisty like Jenny Joseph who famously said: "When I am an old woman I shall wear purple/with a red hat that doesn't go and doesn't suit me/I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves/ and satin sandals and say: 'We've no money for butter'. I shall sit down on the pavements when I'm tired/ And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells/And run my stick along the public railings/ And make up for the sobriety of my youth/I shall go out in my slippers in the rain/ And pick flowers in other people's gardens/ And learn to spit".

We can deny old age in ourselves or we can be defiant about its effects. Or we can demote it. We can say it really doesn't affect anything. We reel off facts like G. B. Shaw writing plays at 93, de Valera becoming President of Ireland at 91. We remind others that Verdi composed "Falstaff at 80, and Pablo Picasso was painting nudes at 92.

The list of old age achievers can stretch all the way from Michelangelo to Schweitzer, from Frank Lloyd Wright to Graham Bell. There is only one problem with it. Our name is not there. We've too often watched people slip into the slow relentless twilight of Alzheimer's disease or dementia - and we pray to God that we'll be gone long before it happens to us. We've too often seen the old neglected in poorly run nursing homes. And above all we know that the body just doesn't move as

fast as it once did - or the memory retain things as it once did. "All the world's a stage/ And all the men and women merely players/ They have their exits and their entrances/ And one man in his time plays many parts// Last scene of all/ that ends this strange eventful history/Is second childishness and mere oblivion/Sans teeth/ sans eyes/ sans taste/ sans everything".

From the dawn of history people have cried out against the indignities of old age: "Rage, rage against the dying of the light". Benjamin Franklin caught the dilemma very well when he wrote: "Everyone wants to live long, but no one wants to grow old".

There is a wonderful picture in the book of Zechariah where the prophet is looking forward to the re-building of Jerusalem. He says that in that day the old men and the old women will sit in the streets. And the boys and girls will play in the streets. For him contentment is the old sitting and reminiscing while the young run and shout for both are part of the happy community. Not the old shut away out of sight in gated communities. I remember a time in my childhood when my grandmother was part of the household. She had her little jobs to do and she was kind of special to everyone especially the grandchildren. We quickly learned that you can't get everything you want in life unless you ask Grandma! Two friends were talking about the older generation. One said: "my grandmother was remarkable. Two years ago at 90 years of age she started to walk 5 miles a day. "Absolutely marvellous" said his friend. "And how is she doing now" . "Well we're not sure. We don't know where she is".

There is a touching moment in Shakespeare when Mark Anthony has lost his last great battle. He feels his age and for the last time he takes off his armor: "Unarm Eros: the long days task is done". It is just a matter of waiting for the end.

But that is not how the NT sees it. Listen to these great words: "Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12. 1 - 2). Not laying down the armor but laying down the weights, not sadly drifting into the geriatric shadows, but recognizing the gold that really is in the golden years - not obsessed with the starter's gun but with a heart set on the crown that fadeth not away - not regretting the losses that life has brought to us all, but singing from the depths of our hearts "Great is thy faithfulness Lord unto me".

I am now part of the older adult group. But we have something that youth can never have. We have learned that youth's drive for wealth and achievement, the need to beat the clock and beat our competitors were false values all along. They brought little happiness and even less contentment. Now we know that most of the things we needlessly upset ourselves over were never that important in the first place. It's taken us half a lifetime to realize that God does not read resumes. Now we know that the good life consists in laying aside every weight - learning to be more tranquil, learning to distrust naked ambition, learning to be closer to family and friends, learning to tend the little soul that is within.

As the years pass we all carry our fair share of embattled memories and painful scars - the missteps that are part of being human and imperfect. But growing into a new person means leaving that aside. It can't be changed now, but it need no longer shape our lives. The past need have no power over us - no need for guilt, no need for regrets, no need for sadness, no need to dwell on

the minor disloyalties or the major failures because we have a God who wiped the slate clean a long time ago - as we parents do for our children. God gives our lives an infinite dignity at the very point where they seem most pathetic.

What did we learn on that journey that was so much more complex than we had ever dreamed? We learned about a love that is unwearied and a grace that is unconditional and every day we are blessed with a thousand gifts. And hopefully we also learned simpler lessons about life. As Nadir Stair said at 85: "If I had to live my life over again, I'd take fewer things seriously. I'd take more chances and I'd take more trips. I'd climb more mountains and I'd swim more rivers. I'd eat more ice-cream and less beans.

If I had to do it over again I'd travel lighter. I'd have more actual troubles, but fewer imaginary one. If I had to live my life over again I'd start barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the Fall. I'd pick more daisies and ride more merry-go-rounds. I'd pick more daisies".

Let me finish with the story of Count Helmut von Moltke, descendant of one of the great military families in Germany, condemned to execution by the Nazis in January 1945. His last letter to his wife and children read thus: "I wept a little, not because I was sad or melancholy, not because I wanted to turn back - but from gratitude at the proof of God's presence. He has gone before us all our lives, as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And in a flash He suddenly let's us see it all".

He has gone before us all our lives.

"Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand".

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