

Sermon for Sunday, March 4, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"LEARNING TO LIVE WITH THE YEARS"

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

Text: "Remember also our creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" Ecclesiastes 12:1

Today is the fourth in a series of five sermons on the subject of learning to live. Our first sermon dealt with the subject of learning to live with ourselves. Until a person learns to live within the framework of his own limitations and is at peace in his own heart, life can never be lived very well. Our second sermon dealt with learning to live with God. The deepest realities of life are spiritual and until a man learns that he cannot live by bread alone, he cannot live at all in the true sense of the word. You see there is a profound difference between being alive and truly living. Then, last week we dealt with the subject of learning to live with others. Ultimately life has to do with inter-personal relationships and until we can relate meaningfully and well to others, life can never fulfill its potential.

This morning and next Sunday we will sort of shift gears. The first three sermons dealt with personal relationships--to ourselves, to God, to others. The last two will deal with two of the most significant issues that a person must face--the fact that he grows old and the fact that death comes to those whom he loves the most.

Our topic today is, "Learning to Live with the Years". Every one of us this morning has, on an average, a life expectancy approaching 70. This is the highest life expectancy not only in the whole world, but in the entire history of mankind. Since 1970, 10% of our population was over 65 and the percentage will continue to increase. Through the advances of medical science we are simply living longer and with better health. Undoubtedly this life expectancy will continue to increase with further medical discoveries and advances. The only real question that faces us is whether or not living longer will really be worthwhile. That is, will we really want to live longer.

Actually, how long you live is a relative thing. I know some people who at 35 are old people and I know some people in their 80's who are "young" in spirit. Some time ago I stood in the hospital room of a young girl who had attempted to take her own life. As we talked about it, she said with a look of tired despair in her eyes, "Life just seemed so intolerable. I could not bear the thought of facing another day." On the other hand, when my grandmother was past 75--ill and crippled--she said to me one day, "Every morning when I wake up, I turn over and look out my window at God's beautiful world. Then," she said, "I thank him for letting me stay in it one more day." So, how old we are is a relative thing. What is really important is what life means to us.

You know, we live in a society that puts a premium on youth. We are probably the only country in history that has worshipped youthfulness. In our day it is almost a sin to grow old. Our retirement age keeps dropping and before any of us realize it, we will be retired and put out to pasture. One reason we prize youth is simply the physical vigor it has. One study by the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare shows that a person has reached maximum physical efficiency and ability by the age of 25. The report goes on to say that by this time, most sensory equipment and physical reactions are at their peak or are declining, slowly at first, but appreciably decade by decade. One of our poets, who incidentally, lived to be 88, put it this way:

"Sad in our youth, for it is ever going,
Crumbling away beneath our very feet;
Sad is our life, for onward it is flowing
In current unperceived, because so fleet."

Another reason we prize youth is because of the dreams of the heart it has. Those were the days when we could climb any mountain, defeat any dragon, conquer any world. And we know when this rose-colored attitude toward the world is gone--when we see life more realistically, more cynically--then something very precious has gone out of our hearts.

"There are gains for all our losses.
There are balms for all our pain:
But when youth, the dream, departs--
It takes something from our hearts
And it never comes again."

Yes, when the visionary optimism of the youth is gone, something really wonderful has gone out of our lives that we can never recapture.

But not only is youth precious, not only do we regret what we are losing, we fear and regret that which replaces youth--old age. And as we think about old age, we certainly have a right to fear it. For one thing, we can look forward to infirmity of body. Our bodies simply wear out. And we can't replace them with a new model, either. If you have ever been in an old folks home and seen the bed-ridden patients there, you know what I am talking about. I think most of us fear being physically incapacitated. We fear it like the poet who wrote:

"Let me go quickly like a candle light
Snuffed out just at the heyday of its glow:
Give me high noon--and let it then be night:
Thus would I go."

Another thing we fear about old age is the loss of loved ones and friends. The older we get, the more we come to realize that life is not built on "things". No, we discover more and more that life is built on personality and the interaction of one personality with another. I have been into home after home where death has struck. And the husband or wife who is left behind is the most pitiful of all. Isn't this true in your own life? If you had to make the choice right now between all you owned and your loved one, which would you choose? So, as time goes on and takes from us those whom we love and cherish, the very center of life, the very structure of all that makes life worthwhile is cut out from under us. And this is so because life is ultimately built on persons--on relationships--and not on "things".

Another thing we fear about old age is uselessness. I've heard people say about another person, "All he is interested in is making a dollar." You know, I don't believe that--not really. I think rather that we all like to stretch our abilities, use our talents, feel that our lives are counting for something. Isn't this one of the damning things about automation? Back in the old days, a man made an object from start to finish. When he got through he had a sense of accomplishment. What he had done was his from beginning to end and his craftsmanship was a source of deep contentment and personal satisfaction. But with automation where a man turns one screw or tightens one bolt there is no place for a personal sense of accomplishment. And this is part of the problem of growing old, to be cut off from any really useful occupation, any meaningful contribution to the world. It's like the two elderly men who were sitting on a bench overlooking the ocean. One said to the other, "What are you doing?" "Well," replied the second, "I am counting whales out there on the ocean." "Whales", said the first man, "Why, man there have never been any whales off this coast!" "I know that," said the second man,

"But if they ever do show up, I'll be ready to count them." "Yeah," said the first man, "I guess that beats loafing." Yes, the fear of uselessness.

Another reason we hate to grow old is the fear of death. You know, the psychological attitude towards death is amazing. We all know intellectually that we are going to die. Yet, as a matter of practical fact, not a one of us here right now thinks it will happen to us! That is, none of us are conscious of the eminence of death. Yet, as people grow older, more and more they are brought face to face with the stark realization that death cannot be far away. The years have simply run out. As more and more of their loved ones and friends are taken away, more and more are they conscious of the eminence of their own passing. And quite frankly, there are very few people who are ready or willing to die. And of those who are in great pain or dreadfully ill, even few of these yearn for the battle to be over and done.

As we reluctantly give up our youth, as we fearfully face the prospect of growing old, are there any resources available to help us in living with the years? Are there any helps for us that will make the process of aging a little easier and more bearable? I think so and I would like to suggest several of them for you.

First, I would like to suggest that one resource for living with the years is to develop your mind. While your body degenerates steadily after 25, this is not true of your mind. Recent studies indicate that our mental power declines very slowly up through the seventh decade, and that certain powers, such as ability to synthesize and generalize from life's experience, may be retained at a high level until relatively late. Now, you do lose some ability in things that require speed of reaction or sensory ability, but tests show that we have little decline in mental powers that do not depend on physical abilities.

Yet, these same tests show that habits of learning, habits of mental interest, and the general activity of mental life, tend to become relatively fixed in early years. This has some serious implications for us. It means that when our bodies are worn out, when our physical capacities have degenerated we can still have a meaningful and satisfying mental life that is interesting and stimulating, but only if the patterns have been set earlier. That is, if you do not have a wide range of mental interests now, you will not have them when you grow old, nor will you likely be able to develop them.

At 79 Bertrand Russell began preparing his autobiography. At 87 George Santayana was writing a voluminous new book, reading Latin literature, and studying modern poetry. Bernard Baruch lived well into his 90's and had a diversity of interests. But the important thing is to develop now those latent intellectual interests so they will be there when old age comes. If you have an interest in drama, or art, or literature develop it now. Then, when the focus of your present mental stimulation--your job--is taken away from you, you will still have satisfying mental resources to fill your life.

A second resource for living with the years is to develop an interest in people. Most of our present interest in others revolves around our immediate family or our job. But when our loved ones are slowly taken from us, and when our job is gone, what then? And life is basically personality centered. That is, that which makes life most meaningful is not things, but interpersonal relationships. Studies show that a person of fifty who has few friends is not likely to develop many new ones. Therefore, fairly early in life we need to develop an interest in people. You know, you can learn something from almost any one and every person you meet has something of interest about him that is worth discovering if you will take the time and care enough. As we grow older, often we will be left alone and lonely simply because we have not learned to be interested in others. The person who,

at a reasonably early age, has developed an interest in others as persons of worth, is the one who will have resources to carry him through the lonely years.

A third resource for living with the years is to build the sort of life now that you will be proud of then. When life is in the autumn leaf, you cannot change the past. And that past--the life you have lived--will be a source of pride and comfort, or a source of sorrow and regret. So, we ought not to sacrifice ultimate things for temporary gain. You see, character is worth more than cash. Money in the bank when you are old is small comfort to a person whose life is not a source of pride. Over in the 6th chapter of Ecclesiastes we read, "If a man beget a hundred children, and lives many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good.....I say, an untimely death is better than he." I hope that when I am old, I can look back on a life that has been honest, filled with integrity, characterized by generosity and compassion, and that has been spent usefully in worthwhile things. If I can't do that, then life will not have been worth very much after all. So, a resource for living with the years is to live the sort of life now that will be a source of comfort and satisfaction then. Indeed, at the end, character will have been worth much more than cash.

And finally, a fourth resource for living with the years--and the most important one of all--is a deepening and maturing relationship to God. Let me speak a word of warning to our young people. Do not think that, when the time comes, you will then establish a close relationship to God. It is not very likely. Rather, when the years lay heavily upon your shoulders, your friendship with God then will be only as fruitful as the seeds you are planting today. Our text for this morning puts it very well, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh...." When the years of life are far spent, when the darkness of twilight begins to fall, the only thing that will matter will be your relationship to God. Such a sustaining fellowship develops over the years and if you do not have God now you will not have him then.

Over in Isaiah the Bible says, "Even to your old age I will be the same, when you are grey-haired, still I will sustain you..." (Isa. 46:4) Yes, when youth and strength of body is gone, when loved ones and friends have passed away one by one, when you are old and the sun is setting, if you still have God he will sustain you and you will have learned to live with the years. Then, when life is over and the tale is told, with joy you can close the book on this earthly part of life and say,

"Thank God for life; and when the gift's withdrawn,
Thank God for twilight bell, and coming dawn."