

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Aging Disciples

Mark 8:27-9:1

During a visit with a lady in a nursing home, she noticed that I had removed my glasses to rub my eyes. "Is something wrong with your eyes?" she asked. "No, everything is okay," I replied. "I haven't had my glasses adjusted this year, but I don't think there has been a significant change in my prescription." To which she responded, "Or, it could just be that you're getting to be an old man." "That's true too," I said, as we chuckled together.

Since I had another birthday earlier this week, there's another year's worth of truth in what she said. But what if, instead of thinking of myself as someone on the way to being an old man, what if I think of myself as an aging disciple. That sounds a little better, doesn't it? Aging disciple.

Last Sunday, I preached about spiritual growth and development. In other words, God intends for us to be more than just spiritual infants. We're called to persevere patiently, in faith, and to mature in Christ. But maturing takes time, and the passage of time usually brings change. Not only change in our perspective, our understanding, and our discernment, but also change in our bodies. As those birthdays seem to arrive sooner and faster, our bodies remind us that time moves on.

In today's text, both time and Jesus are moving on. This is a critical point in Mark's Gospel. Jesus' public ministry in Galilee is essentially finished. From this point onward, the action moves toward Jerusalem, where Jesus will suffer and be crucified. As the story turns toward Jesus' rejection and death, Mark details crucial scenes where we're reminded of who Jesus is, the Christ, as well as what it means for Jesus to be the Christ and what it means to be a follower of this Christ. In short, the way of Jesus defines the way of his disciples.

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (vv. 34-35). These are words that some of us have heard many times. But they always speak with power to us because Jesus summons us to our own death. For some of Jesus' followers, bearing their witness leads, literally, to death, the end of their lives. But just because most of us who identify ourselves with Jesus will not be killed because of our witness doesn't mean that our discipleship includes no cross. Everyone who commits his or her way to Christ is choosing the way of death, the way of letting go of your life rather than trying to cling to it and possess it for yourself.

If you want to be one of my people, says Jesus, you need to become like a condemned criminal carrying your own cross bar to the place of execution. Now this doesn't mean that the call of Christ is a summons to self-hatred or humiliation. It's not an invitation to reject yourself. Rather, it's a call to be liberated from a life devoted to self-protection and self-preservation. If you cling to your life desperately at all costs, you'll only end up losing it. But if you let go of your life, trusting in the faithfulness of God and living in obedience to his will, you'll know true freedom, God's salvation.

There are many ways this kind of cross-bearing for the gospel can take shape in our lives. One of these is our experience of aging. In other words, the way that we face and engage the experience of growing older can be a form of discipleship. We can use the experience of aging as a way of following Jesus.

True, the Jesus who said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me," was certainly no senior citizen. As best we can tell, he was probably in his mid thirties when he was executed. This means that he died in what we would often consider the prime of his life, without experiencing old age. Keep in mind too that as one person has pointed out, in the ancient Mediterranean world, life expectancy at birth was about 25 years, due largely to high infant mortality rates. What's more, only 5 to 10 percent of the population was made up of people over 60.¹ Compare these kinds of numbers to current figures in the United States, where life expectancy is now in the high seventies.

But just because we follow a Savior who died young doesn't mean that his summons to discipleship is age-specific. He still says, "If anyone would come after me, . . ." Anyone, child, youth, or adult, can confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, and begin following him in his costly way. And no matter what stage of life you come to faith in Christ, the fact is you're always aging. True, you may think of it in different ways at different phases of the journey. When you're young, you may think of aging more as a matter of growing up. And later in life, with lots of years behind you, you may think of aging more as a matter of growing old. But whether you're looking at things from a growing up or a growing old perspective, aging is always part of the picture, for all of us. I remember when I was sitting on the sofa surrounded by my late night snacks, and a commercial came on where the fit looking host announced, "Aging is optional!" True, in the sense that diet, exercise, and other healthy habits can make a difference and lengthen your life. But untrue in the sense that we're all subject to decay, deterioration, and death.

Several years ago, *Newsweek* magazine featured an article about movie star and former governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger. The article summarized his situation this way: "Life at 63, for Arnold Schwarzenegger, is a titanic clash between human frailty and dazzling possibility. 'I feel terrific about where I am in my life, when I look back at what I've accomplished,' [he said], 'but I feel [horrible] when I look at myself in the mirror.'" Recall that Schwarzenegger was once Mr. Universe, Mr. Olympia, Conan the Barbarian, and the Terminator. But as he reflected on his own decay, Schwarzenegger said, "I'm not competing, I'm not ripping off my shirt and trying to sell the body. But when I stand in front of a mirror and really look, I wonder: What the [heck] happened here? What a beating!"

At age 50, Schwarzenegger had surgery to replace a defective aortic valve. At some point in the future, doctors would have to do further surgery to install a new one. Commenting on that experience, Schwarzenegger said, "It does quite a number on you for quite some time, because even though you're strong willed, you know from now on you're damaged goods." Then, with a chuckle, he added, "As with most things, I live in denial."²

Many of us spent some time in front of the mirror this morning, getting ready to come to church. What did you see? Perhaps you saw a waistline that's expanding. Hair that's getting thinner or grayer, or both. A network of wrinkles the keeps spreading or skin that keeps drooping. Acne that just won't go away, or teeth that aren't as straight, or as white, as you would like them to be. Scars or the disfigurement left behind from your own surgeries and battles with disease. Perhaps you saw someone who's doing the best you can

to take care of yourself and be as healthy and whole as possible, without living in denial about the fact that time is passing and your body is changing. Aging isn't optional.

In the hymn "Abide with Me," the second verse says, "Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day; / Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away; / Change and decay in all around I see: / O Thou who changest not, abide with me!" As we see change and decay all around us, and in us, our hope is in the crucified and risen Lord who is with us. The unchanging One who is eternal not temporal. The One who is no longer subject to decay and death. And yet at the same time, the One who has taken into himself and redeemed all our human experience, including the experience of growing older. Though he only lived to his mid thirties, Jesus knows fully, from the inside, what it's like to journey toward death, and into it, trusting that God would vindicate him in the end.

And he calls you and me to follow him on his costly way. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." As I stressed earlier, one of the ways that we can lose our lives for Jesus and for the gospel is by facing and engaging the process of growing older. What we do with our aging can be a form of discipleship.

This can be a very countercultural form of witness in an environment where youth, and our own physical survival, are idolized. We live in an atmosphere where plastic surgery is a booming industry, testosterone boosting pills are as available as aspirin, and the market for age-defying makeup grows by the day. Even something so basic and essential as water gets caught up into the frenzy over youthfulness. "Naturally pure and mineral-balanced water supports your body's youth." That was the primary claim in an Evian Water commercial a couple of years ago. The advertisement featured babies performing all kinds of incredible, athletic moves on roller skates, with "Rapper's Delight" playing in the background. The commercial culminated with the slogan, "Live young, live young."

In a culture where, day in and day out, in a multitude of forms, we're summoned to, "Live young, live young," Jesus still calls, "Take up a cross and die, take up a cross and die." This doesn't mean we shouldn't take care of ourselves in ways that promote a longer, healthier life. We should still eat well, exercise enough, get adequate rest, go to the doctor, and so on. But Jesus' call to follow him does mean that we shouldn't live in a cautious mode of self-protection. We shouldn't worship youthfulness and self-preservation. We shouldn't make an idol out of our own physical survival. Instead of bowing down at the altar of longevity, we should focus more on fidelity.

Length of years is indeed a blessing. But that doesn't mean that we have a right to a long life, or that our lives are our possession. No, our lives belong to God. And what matters most isn't how long we live but how faithfully we live.

The artist Rembrandt was known for many things, including his ability to capture the dignity, worth, and beauty of growing old. In fact, he painted more self portraits than any other artist of the 17th century. Together they tell the story of his journey into old age. For instance, in 1640, at the height of his career, he painted what's called "Self Portrait at the Age of 34." He looks self-assured, and perhaps even snobbish, decked out in an elaborate costume. But nearly 30 years later in 1669, the year of his death, Rembrandt painted "Self Portrait at the Age of 63." In this painting, he's wearing a simple coat and beret, with a wise, humble, and peaceful expression on his face. As one art critic has put it, "At 34 [Rembrandt] looks proud, at 63 he simply looks human."³

These days, instead of taking up the brush, we're more likely to grab our phone and snap a selfie. Or if you want to get ahead of the game you can buy some age progression software that will enable your computer to come up with images of what you'll look like in another ten, twenty, or thirty years. Jesus didn't have these options, and he didn't have as many years of life as most of us. But our risen Lord can still be clearly seen and heard today, calling us not to a long life but to a faithful life. A life where gaining yourself actually comes through losing yourself. A life where you take your own aging, your own experience of growing old, and use it as the opportunity to let go of your life for Christ and for others.

¹ Tim G. Parkin, cited in Richard B. Hays and Judith C. Hays, "The Christian Practice of Growing Old: The Witness of Scripture." In *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 649-50.

² Lloyd Grove, "Arnold's Wild Road trip." *Newsweek* (April 25, 2011).

³ As summarized by Matt Woodley at the PreachingToday website. Accessed March 30, 2017 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2013/april/3040813.html>>.