

## **“Dealing with Our Aging Body”**

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

(The Message)

“Honor and enjoy your Creator while you’re still young,  
Before the years take their toll and your vigor wanes,  
Before your vision dims and the world blurs  
And the winter years keep you close to the fire.  
In old age, your body no longer serves you so well.  
Muscles slacken, grip weakens, joints stiffen.  
The shades are pulled down on the world.  
You can’t come and go at will. Things grind to a halt.  
The hum of the household fades away.  
You are wakened now by bird-song.  
Hikes to the mountains are a thing of the past.  
Even a stroll down the road has its terrors.  
Your hair turns apple-blossom white,  
Adorning a fragile and impotent matchstick body.  
Yes, you’re well on your way to eternal rest,  
While your friends make plans for your funeral.  
Life, lovely while it lasts, is soon over.  
Life as we know it, precious and beautiful, ends.  
The body is put back in the same ground it came from.  
The spirit returns to God, who first breathed it.  
It’s all smoke, nothing but smoke.  
Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, all is vanity.”

How old are you? How old do you feel? Does your body still function in the way it did when you were younger?

On March 3, 2024, OCPC will be 175 years old!

Some of the tombstones in Lake Ripley Cemetery, the location of the original Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church, date back to around the time of our founding.

Many of those tombstones show their age. A few of them have been broken due to vandalism; others are cracked and worn by the weather and the aging process to the point it is very hard to read the name and dates on them.

Every thing that is new will eventually get old, including our tombstones.

With the aging process, things will wear down, or break down, or fall apart, and in time will need to be remodeled, torn down and replaced with something new.

The original church was a basement dug into the side of the hill. Eventually, OCPC added onto it, and in time, they it torn down, and built a new building in a new location.

But in time, even this building, that was once brand new, has grown older and in its aging process continues to need updates.

I am guessing the same is true of your own homes or any "thing" you own, from the vehicles you drive to the clothes you wear to the furniture and appliances in your home.

Everything ages; we humans are no exception.

According to MacroTrends.net, "The current life expectancy for U.S. in 2022 is 79.05 years, a slight increase from 2021.

Over the past 200 years, life expectancy has nearly doubled. By the year 2030, seventy-million people will be over the age of sixty-five; double today's number.

Because women have a longer life span than men, American women beyond age seventy-five outnumber men three-to-one.

The very old, those over eighty-six, are one of the fastest grown age groups. This group numbered four million in 2000 and are projected to grow nearly nine million by 2030 and to sixteen million by 2050.

Centenarians increased from fifteen thousand in 1982 to well over one hundred thousand today.

The aged segment of the population will grow from 12 percent to 21 percent, compared to with 1900, when those sixty-five and over were only 4 percent of the population.

By 2058 the number of people sixty and older worldwide will triple to over two billion.

Do these numbers make you feel older or younger?

Can you remember when you were younger and all the things you hoped to do, dreamed of doing, and you were once able to do, but now struggle to do or can no longer do or can't remember to do?

The late country music singer and "Hee Haw" star Roy Clark, sang a beautiful ballad **"Yesterday, When I was Young - The taste of life was sweet, Like rain upon my tongue...The thousand dreams I dreamed, The splendid things I planned, I always built to last, On weak and shifting sand, And only now I see, How the years have ran away Yesterday, when I was young...."**

From the moment we are born, we begin the process of aging. And here we are today, sitting in an aging church building, with our aging bodies, with our new knees and hips, pacemakers and hearing aids, bifocals and cataracts, dentures and graying hair, wondering when did we get to be this old?

In this book, "Aging: Growing Old in the Church", retired Methodist Minister, William Willimon says: **"The most expensive advertisements on the nightly news tout drugs for the aging. Some drugs promise relief for the aches, pains, and illnesses of aging; other drugs swear they can stem the effects**

**of growing old. In these ads, older adults appear peddling bicycles, bungee jumping, or gleefully splashing about in the pool with their grandkids. 'Grow old along with me!/The best is yet to be. 'We wish the exaggerated claims of these advertisements were true because when people are asked what comes to mind when they hear the term growing old, the majority respond with not with words about the golden years but with talk of loss, loneliness, dependency, grief, sadness, abandonment, dementia, and regret. Somewhere between bungee jumping and despondent loneliness lies the truth of old age."**

Why are we reticent about aging? Willimon says: **"Let's be honest: one of the reasons aging requires courage is the looming, encroaching specter of death."**

George Burns, who lived to be 100, said before he died: **"I get up every morning and read the obituary. If my name is not in it, I eat breakfast."**

I had a church member in Monroe, Harold, who each Sunday, when I would greet him, and asked, "How are you today?" He would respond, "Still vertical!"

We can laugh about our aging, all the aches and pains, and trials and tribulations that come with growing older, and we do, but we also need to acknowledge, growing older at times - sucks!

So here we are, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12, the body of Christ, or more honestly, the aging Body of Christ, worshipping in an aging building.

As a congregation that has grown older and grayer, we have to acknowledge, we can no longer do all the things we once did as a church.

Back in June at our annual meeting, we took time to reflect together on our future, but what many of us talked about wasn't the future, but our past, back when you were younger.

I have thought about that over these summer days. It made me wonder if we avoided having the realistic conversation about our future as an aging church, because to do so was to acknowledge what lies in store for all of our bodies and for the many aging bodies of Christ like our own - death and closing.

As humans and as an aging congregation with a graying, shrinking membership, we cannot avoid that reality, yet, it doesn't mean our ministry is finished.

We are about to help welcome Amanda and David's baby. Next Sunday we are going to baptize a young adult, Jacob, and an even younger child, Duncan Meier.

In both birth and baptism is the promise of new life.

In baptism, we talk about dying with Christ, and being then raised, like Christ, to new life, a new future, one filled with hope of a day when suffering and pain and sorrow and grief and death will be no more, because God will make all things new.

Even as we grow older with each passing Sunday, and our aging building is in constant need to repairs, like many of our own bodies, we still have a calling as disciples of Christ.

In his book on aging, William Willimon says: **“We can retire from our careers but not from discipleship; the church has a responsibility to equip us for discipleship in the last years of our lives. Even though growing old usually includes some painful events, the Christian faith can enable us to live through both the joys and anguish of aging with confidence and hope.”**

We do not have to have a Sunday school or a youth group or other programs like in the days of our own childhood or teen years to help raise these new ones in the faith. Yet, our calling as “Elders” and the elderly is to tell them the stories about Jesus and his love, about faith and life, about the struggles they will face in their living and yes, dying through our lives and interactions with them.

The stories we are called to tell are not ones that simply reminisce with them about days gone by and the way it used to be. No, we are called to share with them how in our daily lives we faithfully follow Christ as we have aged and matured in our faith.

In doing so, we can help them see God’s promised future that lies before them; a future filled with hope and healing, love and justice, reconciliation and peace.

However, what we cannot promise them as the aging Body of Christ is that we will exist as a church in their future, in part because as we grow older, we will not exist in the future. That is the reality facing all of us as humans.

Likewise, in our mobile society, they cannot promise us that they will still living in our community in their future.

What we can promise each other, young and old alike, is what God has promised us in Christ, and that is to be with us - from the very first breath we breath, when life begins, to the last one we take on earth as life eternal begins.

Willimon reminds us of this with these words: **“God gave me the precious gift of life. My life is on loan from God. Even more valuable than my life, God in Christ called me, gave me a vocation to discipleship, whereby my life is caught up in the purposes of God and I am utilized by God in God’s salvation of humanity. . . While I have life, in whatever physical or mental condition I find myself, in whatever circumstances I am cast, I am called to glorify, to serve, and to enjoy God and God’s good gifts and to use whatever gifts God has given me in service to the needs of others.”**

We are aging yes, but we are still the Body of Christ, and individually, members of it. Amen