

## **Courage to face the fear of sickness, aging and Death** Eccl 12:1-8, 2 Cor 4: 7-12; 12:7b-10

A shock we all have is that reality is so counter to the picture we have been sold about retirement. We have all seen those ads of slim, trim, well dressed, smiling, good looking people, in good health, playing tennis, or sitting in a boat moored outside their elegant retirement home, or at an exotic location somewhere with a drink in their hand. But we know these snap shots of the golden years aren't like they used to be. They never were real. Most people can't obtain or afford that lifestyle in the advertisements.

There is a man here in this sanctuary today who isn't all that old, but he already has arthritis in his right hand. Sometimes it is so bad he cannot write with his hand. His optometrist has told him he needs bifocals in a year or so. He is a little hard of hearing and needs to have the TV louder than his family. His knees do not allow him to play sports as he would like and consequently he has gained weight. Any one want to guess who this man is? It's me – a few years ago. And my body has been going in a downhill direction ever since.

All of us here could share a list of things about how our own bodies are aging. Beginning with the fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden, a curse was placed on Adam and Eve and all their descendants. This curse results in sickness, aging and death. Ever since, we humans have been on an endless search for an answer to the problems this curse presents. Some of the explorers of North and South America came looking for the fountain of youth.

Throughout time, some people believe they can try to look back, to try to discover who they were in a former life and then forward, hoping they will be someone else in a future life. It's not a surprise that everyone discovers they used to be a rich wise wizard or will be a famous beautiful princess. This is a kind of escape from the preoccupation about good health and the afterlife. We fear the words Aids, cancer, heart related diseases, Alzheimer's, and so on.

From the moment we are born we begin to age. From our moment of conception we are exposed to illness. From the moment we were a twinkle in our daddy's eye, we face death. None of this is new to us, or new to humankind. Our question is how are we going to live with aging, sickness, and death? Are we frantically going to buy into the latest health fad, vitamin pill, or cure? Will we spend thousands of dollars for the hope of delaying aging, avoiding sickness, improving health, and in running from death?

Our fear about sickness, aging, and death includes at least 7 basic fears. These are:

- fear of pain; fear we will lose control;
- fear we will suffer indignity;
- fear of running out of finances;
- fear we will burden our children or spouse;
- fear that we will be abandoned by others; and
- fear that we will be cut off from the peace, presence, and care of God.

These fears revolve around a number of losses: our loss of comfort, loss of freedom, loss of ability, loss of vitality, loss of control, loss of dignity, and above all, our loss of connection with others and our Lord. These losses cause us to be even more fearful if we let them snowball. They cause us often during our lives to be in grief, and usually we do not recognize it as such.

So my **first suggestion** at how to live with the fear of sickness, aging and death, is to face these fears and losses. Admit them, instead of running from them. Then it might be helpful to do some grieving. Life is a series of losses, of change, and that often involves grief work.

I knew a man who in his 80's was very healthy but he was going blind. He had a disease called macular degeneration. His father went blind and lived about 9 years after going blind so this man knew about blindness. Then he began experiencing it first hand. But he faced it. He attended a group at his church that met to help each other grieve their losses. The people in the group grieved about different things - like a divorce, death of a loved one, a wayward child, long term illness, going blind, loss of a job, and

so on. But facing the fear, grieving about it, and being in a support group, are healthy ways to face the fear of sickness, aging, and death. And off and on he talked about what he was going through with family and friends.

Being honest & truthful about our burdens with each other is why God calls us to be a body, a community. This way we can struggle together. This means we have the willingness to be vulnerable, to ourselves, each other & with God. It takes great strength and integrity to face our emotions, and even more with others. It leads to a better healing than being simply physically healed. I had more than one person tell me they wanted to imitate this man for their own aging and loss – even before he died! The man, the person was my father in law – Erland Waltner.

We have all heard the scripture of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, where it describes a time for everything. It starts, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die.” But we are less familiar with Ecclesiastes 12:1-8. It paints a not so pretty picture of the major senses and parts of the body beginning to fade and ceasing to function properly. This is good poetry about the aging process, but it’s depressing. And verse 8 describes life without God. “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!” **Let’s read it.**

It sounds as if all we have to look forward to as we age is disappointment and misery. Charles Swindoll in his book, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, quotes a poem that speaks of the feeling of futility and fear that many face as they age.

“I wanted the music to play on forever –  
    Have I stayed too long at the fair?  
I wanted the clown to be constantly clever –  
    Have I stayed too long at the fair?  
I bought me blue ribbons to tie up my hair,  
    but I couldn’t find anybody to care.  
The merry-go-round is beginning to slow now,  
    Have I stayed too long at the fair?  
I wanted to live in a carnival city, with  
    laughter and love everywhere.

I wanted my friends to be thrilling and witty,  
    I wanted someone to care.  
I found my blue ribbons all shiny and new,  
    But now I’ve discovered them no longer blue.  
The merry-go-round is beginning to taunt me –  
    Have I stayed too long at the fair?  
There is nothing to win and no one to want me –  
    Have I stayed to long at the fair?

The writer Solomon of Ecclesiastes, tells us life is difficult and tough. Without the proper perspectives, it may seem like we have stayed at the fair too long. But Solomon and Holy Scripture inform us that we don’t have to face life or death with a dispirited, down in the mouth approach. There is a Creator, a Redeemer, a hope giver, a promise deliverer, who gets us through it all and makes it all worthwhile. But it starts with facing down our fears. Facing reality.

But we can’t really do this on our own. We need to worship the one true God. We need to be in a healthy community. And a key way to face and conquer our fear of sickness, aging, and death is my second suggestion: **turn to scripture**. There are many scriptures that help us express our fears, worries, anger, feelings of loss and abandonment. You know many of them.

A good one is 2 Corinthians 4:7-12. “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”

The Apostle Paul who wrote this, describes the experience of many who receive news they hope to never hear. Paul was acquainted with sickness, hardship and the threat of death. His faith and experience had proven to him that even when the pressure was coming in hard on

every side, he still would not be crushed. He knew that the things that create fear when thinking about sickness and death were real. But faith in Jesus provides courage and overcomes fears.

In 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 we also find some helpful verses. The Apostle Paul talked about his thorn in the flesh and he shares with us God's response to him. **Learn to be content in God's grace.**

"Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

God's love and grace is not overcome by age, disease, or even by death. Grace is the victory that we have in Jesus Christ. As we believe in God's grace we are enabled to better see the mysteries of life, the threat of evil, and the immense wisdom and love of God who understands how we are made. As we trust God's grace is sufficient for us - any illness, the signs of aging in our bodies, and even death, are places where God's grace will support us, sustain us, and even transform us.

As we face the fact that we are really weak and not strong, self sufficient persons, we can turn to each other and to God, and find strength, comfort, and love. Something happens as we open ourselves to trusting in God. Something happens as we keep taking the steps of faith that God loves us and wants things to work out for good. What happens as this scripture says, is God's power can dwell in us.

We so often forget that God is all powerful and he shares this power with us. God's power is in

the hurricane and in the earthquake. It is also in the still small voice that convicts a person of sin. God's power has a heavenly twist. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. For when I am weak, I am strong."

This is not how we usually think about power. We think about power in the way Tim does on the former TV show Home Improvements. I like the garbage disposal that eats up rolling pins and big tree branches. But God's power is different. It is the power of lightening and it is the power of security, belonging, knowing I'm loved despite any sickness, despite my aging, and even in death. God's grace to us means we get power to get through aging, sickness and death.

Everyone knows God's power is the most powerful thing in the world. And our Creator shares it with us so we can face our fears, so we can deal with our fears, and so we can conquer our fears. After all, Jesus has conquered, sickness, aging and death in his own life. Let's allow God's power to flow into us. Let's ask God for his power to fight our fears. Let's worship the God who fills us with deep powerful joy, despite the aches, pains and worries of life.

There is a basic law of the physical universe that two objects cannot occupy the same space. One displaces the other. This is why when two cars try to occupy the same space there are problems. In the same way, two powers cannot occupy the same spiritual space. One displaces the other. When we are strong in ourselves, and not relying on God, God cannot be with us. When we are full of fear, God's grace cannot fill us. But when we turn to God in weakness, in brokenness, looking for his grace - we are filled with living water. The darkness gets broken with light. Love conquers fear. The joy of the Lord gives us strength to soar like the eagle. His grace fills us with power to live in even more grace.

And a fourth suggestion is: **grow in God's perspective.** When Episcopal Bishop Warren Chandler lay dying, an old friend asked him

about his feelings. "Please tell me frankly, do you dread crossing the river of death?" The bishop replied, "My Father owns the land on both sides of the river. Why should I be afraid?"

Sickness, aging and death are not pleasant things for us to deal with. Many of us avoid thinking about them. But they are part of life. They are part of our sinfulness. It is best to face them, grieve as needed, prepare for the challenges now, and grow in the grace and power of God. Let's live praising the God who owns both sides of the river. Let's live into death with courage, knowing we will live forever with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

How do we find courage to face aging, illness and death? Face our fears and losses. Rely on Holy Scripture. Learn to be content on God's grace. Grow in God's perspective.

When John Owen, the great Puritan, from a protestant group of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, lay on his deathbed his secretary wrote (in his name) to a friend, "I am still in the land of the living."

"Stop," said Owen.

"Change that and say, I am yet in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living."

## **2 Corinthians 4:7-12 (NIV)**

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

<sup>8</sup> We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

<sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

<sup>10</sup> We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

<sup>11</sup> For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. <sup>12</sup> So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

## **Ecclesiastes 12:1-8**

Remember your Creator

in the days of your youth,  
before the days of trouble come  
and the years approach when you will say,  
I find no pleasure in them"—

<sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light

and the moon and the stars grow dark,  
and the clouds return after the rain;

<sup>3</sup> when the keepers of the house tremble,  
and the strong men stoop,

when the grinders cease because they are few,  
and those looking through the windows  
grow dim;

<sup>4</sup> when the doors to the street are closed  
and the sound of grinding fades;

when people rise up at the sound of birds,  
but all their songs grow faint;

<sup>5</sup> when people are afraid of heights  
and of dangers in the streets;

when the almond tree blossoms

and the grasshopper drags itself along  
and desire no longer is stirred.

Then people go to their eternal home

and mourners go about the streets.

<sup>6</sup> Remember him—before the silver cord is  
severed,

and the golden bowl is broken;

before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,  
and the wheel broken at the well,

<sup>7</sup> and the dust returns to the ground it came  
from,

and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

<sup>8</sup> "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the  
Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"

## **I Corinthians 12:7b-10**

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup> Three times

I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

<sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight

in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.