

TARNISHED GOLDEN YEARS

Old Age... we don't want to talk about it or think about. What we do say about it is confined to funny birthday cards, where we make fun of wrinkles, gray hair or baldness, saggy behinds, incontinence, hearing loss and lack of interest in sex.

There is a popular joke among the elderly about a man who finds a frog and the frog says that if she is kissed, she'll turn into a beautiful princess. Instead of kissing the frog, the man puts it in his pocket. The frog croaks,

"Don't you want to kiss me and have a beautiful princess?"

The man says,

"Well, frankly, at my age, I'd rather have a talking frog."

Part of our discomfort with aging, is because we're afraid of it. We spend billions of dollars trying to avoid it, face lifts and anti aging creams. We decided totally arbitrarily that 65 sounds the death bell of all useful labor, and we shut old people up in homes.

In our country, we worship the young and the vibrant and the beautiful and we consider anything old to be unpleasant or irrelevant. As a result, does anyone deny that we tend to treat their elderly with a lack of respect? This is not true of all cultures at all times.

Asian cultures, and Hispanic cultures tend to still honor the aged, and frankly the European heritage also traditionally held senior citizens in very high regard. Consider the early Puritans. They wouldn't dream of squandering a single able-bodied person – so they put everybody to work, regardless of age in their subsistence level, agrarian society. In the economic life of the American colony, the elders shared the same sense of purpose as everyone else.

It's not just that Puritans gave their citizens more to do; get this friends, they were convinced that older people were **better people**. They may not have been right, but that's what they thought. So they constructed a world infused with a reverence for age. Old people held positions of power and influence. The Puritans thought that living to a ripe old age was evidence of a life filled with grace from God. They had a popular motto:

"A white head is a crown of gold."

This was more than rhetoric; the Puritans actually worked hard to **look** older. This may seem comical to us with our facelifts and anti-aging medicines, but it's true! For example,

- they cut their clothes so that the shoulders sloped.
- they wore white wigs.
- We all know someone who's lied about their age on a drivers license to appear younger? Well, the Puritans would sometimes lie on the census, claiming that they were three or four years *older* than they actually were.

- If there were a medicine available that accelerated the aging process, they might well have embraced it like Botox or Viagra.

Nearly four centuries later, what have we done? In a phrase? **We have broken the bond between age and purpose.** How did this happen? It seems to have begun with the creation of Social Security in 1935. A central goal of Social Security was to lure older workers out of the labor market, to make room for hordes of unemployed youth which were seen as a riot waiting to happen.

So a heretofore unheard of institution was created: **retirement.** Here's the central irony, we created retirement to honor the old but it has lead indirectly to dishonor. How so? Well, people continued to live longer, healthier lives, the math simply meant that the period between the end of work and the end of life grew longer and longer.

So people started to ask. Not only what is the purpose of this period in life, but what is the purpose of *old people themselves?* They became too old to work, too young to die. This "kindness" transformed the view of seniors as vital hubs of society into an obsolete group dangling uselessly at the fringes of society.

Today, I want to ask if this situation is acceptable and what we can do about it, if we're young, OR old OR somewhere in between.

UNDERSTANDING OLD AGE

First let's try to walk a mile in an old person's shoes. Not unlike teenagers seniors are going through massive emotional, social and physical changes. Betty Davis once said,

"Old age isn't for sissies."

I want us to stretch a bit today friends for a little bit of empathy. To understand so we can grow in love – because Jesus said love would define his followers. So let's acknowledge the physical changes many old people are beginning to encounter:

- The old are losing their sense of control in many areas including hearing, the ability to sleep, taste buds, agility, memory.
- Today, people are more mobile. So, never before have so many people lived so far away from the old people they love.
- Old people live in a world designed for young people. They can't drive, walk through shopping malls or airports or deal with rushed doctors in managed care systems. Many can't handle stairs, small print books or menus in darkened restaurants.
- They have access to sophisticated and expensive medical care that prolongs their lives, but some must sacrifice their savings to afford it.
- There's the loss of autonomy and independence and to say that little word that's so hard for all of us to say, "**Help.**"
- There is the loss, especially for women, of physical beauty in a society of Botox and wrinkle creams and extreme makeovers.

- The loss of work is an enormous adjustment. Statistics show that men die shortly after retirement if they don't find meaningful interests.
- Never before have old people lived to be so old. There are already sixty-six thousand centenarians in America – three times as many as there were in 1980 – maybe 4 million by 2050!
 - o So many seniors outlive their support systems, their neighborhoods their bank accounts, and their friends.
- Johnna's grandma used to say, "Johnna, you don't understand what it is like to have the phone ring and discover that another one of your good friends has passed away."

Now as I'm going through this, some spry senior citizens are thinking, that's not me! What do you mean by old people Rick? Well, one writer draws a distinction between 2 different stages of old age:

- the young/old
- the old/old.

The fundamental difference between these 2 stages is not birthdays but health. I know a man who is 46 and because of ill health is exhibiting all the characteristics and losses of the old/old category. But my parents who are 65 and 63 are very much in the young/old category. There are more and more in that category because old people are living longer healthier lives.

GRAYING AND PLAYING

And frankly friends, this has led to another problem. In 1952, Mutual Life Insurance Company VP H.G. Kenagy called on American companies to market a new idea to retirees:

"Graying is Playing."

It worked brilliantly. A new vision of the American dream was born. In 1960 the first retirement community was founded in Phoenix. The phrase "the golden years" was coined. Freedom 55 became a new goal. The young/old were told that it was their right, they deserved a rest, on golf courses and cruise ships and casinos for the rest of their days.

Enjoying the fruits of one's labors is a good thing, but to have 25% of the population – that's Boomers – become a leisure class, is surely a bad thing for society, and we're already seeing the negative backlash in individuals. Seniors find that after a few months beside a pool in Orlando, or Hawaii, they want to DO something.

Consider Dr. Dorothea Glass. After 40 years of an amazing medical career, she retired to Palm Beach in Florida to take her well-earned rest. After a few months of R and R, Glass was feeling rested – and restless. So she approached the local hospital with an amazing offer:

"Put me to work in a way that makes use of my experience and my passion for medicine, and you can have my services free of charge."

After some time deliberating, the hospital called Glass back. Keep in mind, just a year ago, this woman was the chair of a major medical school department:

Yes, Mrs., Glass, we would be happy to let you volunteer, refilling water pitchers.

Friends, it's just plain disrespect. For both the old/old and the young/old among us we killed them with our kindness. I don't have to tell you that the Bible is not at all vague about God's feelings concerning disrespect for the aged:

- **Leviticus 19:32:** "Rise in the presence of the aged; show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord."
- **Prov 23:22** "Listen to your father, who gave you life, and don't despise your mother's experience when she is old."

So I think God would enjoin upon us a reversal of the cultural trends, starting with the old/old.

TO THE OLD/OLD

Not that long ago in this country, several generations would live together. It wasn't uncommon at all for 3 generations to live in the home. But more than ever, the old/old are being isolated into retirement communities or nursing homes.

And because the young are uncomfortable, sometimes, trying to communicate with the old and seeking common ground, we tend to ignore or avoid them or, at best, rush through our times together. Friends, this segregated approach is a loss, a huge loss, for all generations.

Now here's what we fear: "Rick, the old/old are cantankerous, and bitter. They're terrible to be around because they're negative." What's true about old age friends, is that it removes from us the mask of youth. Youth covers over a multitude of cancers growing on our souls. And sometimes in old age they come out.

When he was an old man, King Solomon wrote:

Eccl 12:1-6 Don't let the excitement of youth cause you to forget your Creator. Honor him in your youth before you grow old and no longer enjoy living. It will be too late then to remember him, when the light of the sun and moon and stars is dim to your old eyes, and there is no silver lining left among the clouds. ...Yes, remember your Creator now while you are young, before the silver cord of life snaps and the golden bowl is broken. Don't wait until the water jar is smashed at the spring and the pulley is broken at the well.

Friends, the challenge to all of us that we remember God now, when we're young. To say yes to his love and leadership, his forgiveness through Christ, the transforming power of his Spirit... because someday the veil of youth will be taken away revealing the kind of person we did or did not allow God to make us.

Honor him now, before the evil days come, when much of the pleasure of living is gone. Honor him now in the days of our youth, so that God will remember us

with favor when these evil days come, and so that God's comforts will soften our hearts and delight our souls when the delights of our senses have worn off.

And because of those burdens of age, shouldn't we give even more respect and honor and care to the old, so that they can have something to balance those hardships? My wife had this attitude about her grandmother: There was no burden that she would carry for her that her grandmother had not already carried for her in her youth.

Her grandmother had nurtured Johnna, loved her, played with her, helped raise her... so no grumpiness or complaints stopped Johnna from taking her grandmother into our home and rearranging our lives to serve that woman. Until the week that she stopped eating and she passed gently on a bed in our home, surrounded by her kids, grandkids and great-grandkids.

Friends, I tell you that woman remembered her Creator in the days of her youth. Before the evil days came, when she had few pleasures. But because she did, God remembered her. Because she was a woman of great character whom God had used to touch many lives, she had someone in her old age who willingly took her in, to soften the discomforts of age, until she breathed her last.

Friends, do you see it as one of your goals, to remember your Creator in the days of your youth **so that** when you are old, there might be someone who will remember you? It's an indictment on the old and the young that we live for self and when the chips are down, we find ourselves alone in our age and in our pain.

We can learn from the old. I used to sit and listen to my grandpa Blatz tell stories. Many rambling and pointless, while others contained a lesson learned about Resilience, Patience, Gratitude. Or some were just about recovering my history. Alex Haley said, "The death of an old person is like the burning of a library."

The way to keep the library intact is to copy it, from one brain to another. Yes, we have to slow down when we walk and talk with the elderly, but I think it's worth the investment of our time to mine the treasures of their lives.

I was home to see my 93 year old grandparents two Christmases ago, they still live on their own but sight and hearing are going, the mind not as sharp. So, I know what a chore it can be to slow down to communicate, to tolerate a complaining spirit, to stretch in order to relate to a time gone by. But there's treasures there I need to mine out.

And love calls me to do it.

So I need them, but *the old also need the young*. Have you noticed how vital people stay into their senior years the more they have the time, attention and the affection of the young? The young refresh the old and soften their discomforts and revitalize their minds. Have you noticed how many college professors live into their 80's and 90's with clear minds?

Why? Instead of rejecting youth, or cursing youth, or throwing their hands up in despair over the future... they shepherd the next generation and so somehow stay young.

Friends, in our world, disrespect, and dishonor is the order of the day for seniors.. Not here. Not in God's family. So have you:

- have you made the effort?
- Have you made the mother-in-law suite?
- Have you slowed down, for a conversation?
- Have you remembered your Creator in the days of your youth so that you will be remembered when the evil days come?

Those of us in our younger years must look around at the older people, even in this church, and recognize what treasures they are and how worthy of our respect.

TO THE YOUNG/OLD

About the young/old the message today is a challenge. What's next for the young/old who will face an identity crisis when they think about retirement? Are they senior citizens? Elderly? They don't feel that way. Neither young nor old, they are finished with midlife, what will they aspire to in the next phase? Is it

uselessness, leisure? Bitterness?

While lots of people are wondering what their purpose, surveys show that one great purpose may be WORK... 80% of Boomers plan to keep working into their 60's and 70's... but not just to make ends meet. The chief reason is purpose. With that in mind, think about the opportunity we are faced that we could capitalize on.

With the first of over 77 million BOOMERS turning 60 year this January,

- we are going to be sitting on the greatest stockpile of age, wisdom, experience, and education combined with free time that the world has ever seen,
- because the BOOMERS are the richest, healthiest, most educated generation of seniors that the world has ever seen.

The Bible says:

Titus 2:3 teach older people to live in a way that is appropriate for someone serving the Lord.

What if the young/old were so respected and honored that they were mobilized for service to God, for human services, for advancing Christ's mission? It would energize good works and give seniors the place of influence they used to enjoy in Puritan times.

The patron saint of this phenomenon is Jimmy Carter. Where do you go when you're 50 and you've just retired from top of your profession? Being the president of the United States? Turns out that was just a warm-up for his most important work with Habitat for Humanity building homes for poor people.

Jack McConnell was a doctor who retired ten years ago to an upscale community in South Carolina, with the intention of settling into a life of leisure. But as the son of a Methodist minister, the ethic of service which the Gospel of Jesus Christ had taught him wouldn't let him settle. Looking at all the uninsured people through bars of his gated community the thought entered his mind:

“Why haven't I been helping these people find adequate health care?”

Lead by God, McConnell decided to un-retire. He launched a free clinic, Volunteers in Medicine, mobilizing retired doctors and nurses to provide free healthcare to the uninsured. Now every person who lives in Hilton Head S.Carolina has easy access to health care. And the best part is that it was accomplished using an untapped resource, the retired medical professional.

My own parents, retired at age 60, healthy, no debts, home paid off, decided instead of pining about being far from their kids and without a purpose... that they would offer themselves up to God. My dad was a farmer for 35 years, so he would offer free agricultural instruction in the 3rd world. While they wait for that door to open, in the last 5 years,

- they've been on a Christian mission to Venezuela,
- managed a Youth Center,
- and did maintenance and food prep for a Christian college in Maui.

The truth is, this church – AC3 – would have to stop, and I mean this, stop multiple ministries tomorrow if the seniors didn't contribute what they contribute in this place. All you have to do is walk around and you see them serving and giving.

They are an invaluable resource, and we respect them by opening up the gates to their retirement communities and letting them help us

- parent our kids,
- start ministries,
- offer us wisdom.

So let's just rebel against a culture that wants to segregate and marginalize them. And the very best way we can respect those who are older, is to give them the gift that they want most and the one that is probably most difficult for us to give. And that is time.

- Ask questions about their past,
- let them tell their stories.
- What the elderly need most is to know that they are still loved and that they are capable of loving.