

WRINKLES

Psalm 22:9-15

Psalm 22:22-26

Three older ladies were discussing the travails of getting older. One said, "Sometimes I catch myself with a jar of mayonnaise in my hand in front of the refrigerator and can't remember whether I need to put it away, or start making a sandwich."

The second lady chimed in, "Yes, sometimes I find myself on the landing of the stairs and can't remember whether I was on my way up or on my way down."

The third one responded, "Well, I'm glad I don't have that problem; knock on wood," as she rapped her knuckles on the table. Then she told them, "That must be the door, I'll get it!"

When George Bush, the daddy of George W, was President he visited a nursing home and took the hand of an elderly man walking the halls and asked kindly, "Sir, do you know who I am?" The man replied, "No, but if you ask the nurses they can tell you."

Someone once said that there are four ages to life: (1) when you believe in Santa Claus; (2) when you don't believe in Santa Claus; (3) when you are Santa Claus; and (4) when you look like Santa Claus.

Of course, if you want to put old age in perspective you have to consult the expert, George Burns. According to George, "Old age is when you don't have to own antiques to sit down on something that's over 80 years old."

Burns also says that "You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoes and wonder what else you can do while you're down there."

Sometimes you have to laugh so you don't cry.

As you know, last month I went to Stetson University's Pastor's School, which, as you know, means I stayed with my elderly parents in Daytona Beach and commuted over to Stetson which is at DeLand. Anyway, it's a long trip down to Daytona from Charlotte, about nine hours counting pit stops. And on this particular trip down I found myself doing a lot of laughing to avoid crying. My brother and I on the entire trip down switched back and forth between laughter generated from reminiscing about growing up in the Ayers clan to invisible tears talking about our parents' current existence. My parents have more than their share of wrinkles. Or put another way, for them small things are now big things. Doing clothes, emptying a dish washer, cleaning a bathroom, what they used to do without blinking an eye now has to be planned, thought out, scheduled because----because there is a limited amount of energy to do stuff.

And so when Ken and I finally arrived in Daytona around 10:15 p.m. we found one of them resting in a chair and the other on a couch. We shook our father's hand and kissed the wrinkled cheek of the one who brought us into the world.

During the visit, for the most part, the ones who took care of us no longer could not take care of us so we took care of ourselves. I know what you are thinking. You are thinking, "Well, it's about time. It's about time you took care of yourself." I know that. But I also know this. Even when we are adult children and it's time we take care of ourselves, even then our parents like to take care of us when we visit. However, there comes a day, a sad day, a depressing day, a heartbreaking day when they can't do for us like they want to and it's painful for them and it's painful for us.

When Vicky, Will and I were down at my parents at Thanksgiving Mom baked Mother Horn's pound cake, Mother Horn as in my deceased grandmother---- she baked Mother Horn's pound cake except she put in lemon extract instead of vanilla. It was delicious and I'm still mad at Will for eating the last piece. In my opinion, eating the last piece of pound cake is the unpardonable sin.

During the visit Mom kept talking about dying. You know how old people talk about dying and how it makes their children feel uncomfortable. Mom kept talking about dying like it could be any second, any minute or any day, and not wanting to hear any syllable of it I told her that if she was going to die soon she needed to bake a bunch of pound cakes, maybe even freeze a dozen or so of them. I shared that I figured, and I do like "to figure", I figured the best way to help us remember her after she died would be for her to provide pound cakes for us to eat while we grieved. Might even call it something official like "Pound Cake Grief Therapy".

Mom laughed.-----O.K., she just grinned.

It's hard to hear a parent talk about dying.

On this last trip with my brother there was no pound cake. Mom didn't have the energy to bake one. There still was talk about dying, though.

You wouldn't expect it from looking at me, but my mother is nothing but skin and bones. And her skin is very wrinkly. If the truth be known, she may live longer than I do or even until "Jesus comes back".

My father is having his trials and tribulations also. His problem is his eyes, and I guess I should say diabetes. Eye problems and diabetes spells trouble with a capital "T". Surgery a few months ago didn't work. And so he's worried about getting his driving licenses renewed next November.

I talked to my brother, Ken, this week and he shared that Dad had asked him to drive to a retirement community in Winston-Salem to see if any "For Sale" signs were up. They don't want to move back, but if he doesn't get his driving license renewed they will not have a choice.

Wrinkles. Sometimes you have to laugh so you don't drown in your tears.

Do you find yourself worrying about your parents' health? Have you seen them slow down? Have you felt old watching them get old?

Or, if you are on up in years, do you struggle with the ins and outs, the daily challenges, of being wrinkled and old and elderly? Are you tired of visits to the doctor and this health problem and that health problem? Do you ever wish for the earlier days? Does it break your heart that you no longer can do things for your children that you used to could do for them?

For all of us dealing with senioritis, either because we have it or our loved ones have it, for all of us there is a Psalm. Don't you just love the Psalms!

I am referring to Psalm 22. Hear the heartbreak in verse 14. The Psalmist writes, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up. . ."

Is that a description of you? Is that your spouse? Is that one of your parents or both of them? If not, do you see it coming around the corner?

Question. How are we, as people of God, to deal with "wrinkles"?

Please don't offer any simple religious solutions. They aren't helpful. We don't have solutions, but we do have a Psalm. And one of the things the Psalm teaches us is to be honest, honest about our situations, honest about life honest about God. The Psalm teaches us not to be in denial of our tears, our worries, our concerns, our heartbreaks. If you feel like water being poured out and your heart is like melting wax, why, by all means, don't clean up your feelings for God or for your faith community. We are to name our dilemmas and scream and shout and complain as often as is needed. This is not a one shot deal. There is healing in repetition. Or if not healing, sanity and an ability to cope.

I remember seeing a client at the Presbyterian Center several years ago and every Tuesday at 5 p.m. he would say the same thing, over and over. He did it for a year. The same old story. At first, I listened emphatically, but then after hearing the song and dance for 52 times I found myself thinking, "Just get over it." It was at this point that I was forced to look at my own life and realize we don't just get over things and that I too had been working on some of the same issues for a long time. Later, at another point, I learned that repetition can lead to healing. It's not automatic, but it can and does happen.

So I encourage everyone to pull out Psalm 22:9-15 every day if you need to. Go to that well and drink from it. Hopefully, with repetition and caring and loving relationships there will come a day that no matter your circumstances you can move to the 22nd verse of Psalm 22. Listen to it again.

I will tell of thy name to my brothers [and sisters]; in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee!

You who fear the Lord, praise him!

All you sons [and daughters] of Jacob, glorify him and stand in awe of him. . .

For God has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted;

[For God has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted;]

The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek God shall praise the Lord!

And then this person who has said their heart is like wax, this person writes, “May your hearts live forever!

That is my prayer for us! Those of us dealing with wrinkles, whether our own wrinkles or those of loved ones, may our hearts live forever!

I’d like to close with a story by Phillip Gulley. Gulley writes:

When my grandparents turned eighty, our family began speculating about who would be the first to go. Grandpa, we decided, because he had smoked a pipe for fifty years and would die of cancer. Thus we were surprised when, at the age of eighty-eight, Grandma fell off their back porch, broke her hip, and died after complications. She fell one week and the next week we were at Gardner’s Funeral Home receiving consolations.

Four years later, we still can’t believe she’s gone and catch ourselves looking forward to Sunday dinners and Grandma’s strawberry dessert. After Grandma died, we thought Grandpa would soon follow. But he had a dog to care for, and the responsibility revived him.

At the age of ninety-two, Grandpa and his dog went to live in a retirement home. Before he moved, he called me over to his house to give me his woodworking tools. He stayed at the retirement home for three days, then returned to his house on Hickory Drive. He called to tell me he had moved back. I told him I was happy for him, but if he thought I was going to return his tools, he was crazy.

I asked him why he moved back.

There was no place for Babe to run, he told me. Babe is his dog. He hasn’t run in five years, but Grandpa still imagines him to be fleet and frisky, a perpetual puppy. Grandpa opens the back door and Babe drags himself out to the yard, where he collapses in a heap. After a while, he struggles to his feet, does what he went outside to do, then drags himself back in. You time this dog with a calendar, not a stopwatch.

Grandpa moves at a similar pace. It is sad to see. When I was a child and we would walk the four blocks into town, I ran to keep even with him. Now I pick him up for Sunday dinner and it takes five minutes to negotiate the thirty feet from front door to car door. This is the same man who, on his sixty-eighth birthday, pedaled a bicycle one hundred miles. He hasn’t made his

peace with legs that won't do as he commands. It bothers him, I can tell. He drops into the car seat and shakes his head in frustration.

"This is horrible," he declares. "I hate being old."

His driving days ended after a series of scrapes and bumps, culminating in a near-miss with a gas pump at Larry Waterman's gas station. The idea of Grandpa leaving this world in a ball of fire was more than we could bear, so we persuaded him to surrender his license.

He had taken a driver's exam to renew his license. He told me how the driving examiner had cowered in the passenger seat, yelling, "Those are mailboxes! Those are mailboxes!"

"Like I don't know a mailbox when I hit one," Grandpa said.

Without a license, Grandpa was stuck at home and began casting about for alternative transportation. He needed a way to get to the Sunshine Café, the Pizza Hut, and the Seniors Center. He read a newspaper circular advertising a Sears riding mower. He thought of buying one, removing the mower deck, and riding the tractor back and forth to town.

"What kind of mileage do you suppose they get? He asked me.

I called Sears and asked the man in the tractor department. He wasn't sure. He told me the cutting width---thirty-eight inches. I don't think anyone had ever asked him how much mileage a riding mower got. So I put a gallon of gas in my tractor, put it in third gear, and rode north out of town past Ron Randolph's house. Turned east on 500 North and went two miles to Maplewood Road. Then aimed back south and went one mile before running out of gas in front of Ernie Helton's place. Ernie gave me a gallon of gas to get home. When I got home I called Grandpa on the phone and told him a tractor gets eight miles to the gallon in third gear.

That's not very good miles," he said. "I wonder how much a golf cart costs."

Three thousand, two hundred, seventy-five dollars and forty-eight cents, I discovered. Plus tax.

Grandpa finally settled on a three-wheeled electric scooter. Grandpa's electric scooter has two speeds---turtle and rabbit.

My grandfather is a marvel to me. But we are witnessing a slow surrender, a breaking down.

One day after mowing his lawn, I went inside to visit with him. We talked about death, his death and mine, and how we wanted to pass. He declared he was ready, that he wanted to be with Grandma. I told him I was not yet ready to die, but that I knew how I wanted to go.

"How is that?" he asked.

"I want to be shot by a jealous husband while climbing through a bedroom window at the age of ninety."

Grandpa didn't laugh. What I intend as a joke, he takes literally. Now he is worried that I will become a philanderer and disgrace the family name.

There are times when I don't see him for several weeks. When I see him I am surprised at his decline. Were I to see him every day, I would not likely notice this slow breaking down. So when I do see him, I am invariably alarmed and slightly panicked.

Grandpa is fading, I think to myself. One day we'll come here and let ourselves in and he'll be lying in bed, drawn up and still.

On the fourth anniversary of Grandma's passing, I ate lunch with Grandpa at the Seniors Center. He said to me, "Grandma died four years ago today."

Then he pushed his plate back and said he didn't feel like eating.

I got an email from my mother this week. She wrote:

"Hello,

Just thought I would let you know I really did have a great deal of pain when you were here. I had a bone scan done Tuesday and went to doc today. He said my back was broken smack in two. I know I have never had this pain before.