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Center for Healthy Aging Ministries, Programs & Services

“Old Age Without Apology” by Pastor Harold Schmidt

“O God, from my youth thou hast taught me, and I still proclaim thy wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, till I proclaim thy might to all the generations to come.”
-Psalms 71: 17-18

It is gratifying to me that in this congregation all age groups from children to elderly, make unique and valuable contributions to the life and work of First Lutheran. This morning, we would in our worship particularly recognize the elderly of our church. I can't imagine a congregation anywhere that has a more dedicated, active group of senior citizens than we do. Among this group of elderly are 50-60 homebound members, some of whom are able to be with us this morning, due to the special help of others. We rejoice to have them here in this house today.

As I have come to know them, many of our elderly are living proof that the final season of life can be a blessing and not a curse, as it is for so many elderly in society. This sermon is an affirmation that divine grace makes it possible to experience old age without apology, without succumbing to the cultural images which idolize youth and pretend old age does not exist. There seems to be an unwritten law in our culture which makes one apologize for being old. Paging thru the popular magazines and newspapers and watching TV commercials we see faces and figures which are young. An aggressive, bustling world of business and commercial competition has little room for the slower pace and longer wisdom of old men and women. Retirement at 65 is mandatory in most places. Most of us get skittish about giving out our age, as if the older one grows, the more apologetic one should be.

“All would live long, but none would be old!” was Ben Franklin's way of summing up a cultured attitude which is deep seated. In my pastoral ministry to many elderly, I have heard this sentence so many times, “I don't want to be a burden to anybody!” Now, such a thing is never said in connection with a human being who is six months old. But at 86, the requirement of extra care from others is viewed as a problem. The aged are made

to apologize for being alive. The conditioning of our culture is not to bother much with older people. Be polite to them, of course, but treat them as marginal.

The test is the testimony of one who is anything but apologetic, however. The writer of the 71st Psalm was an old man when he put these words down, guided and blessed as he was by God's inspiring Spirit. He spoke as one who has known much of what life brings on in the later years – loneliness, neglect, infirmity. But there is no hint at apology for being old. Neither is there any hesitancy to call old age what it is – old age! Nothing here but the sunset years and the golden season of life as the Psalmist speaks to us across the centuries of time.

The first thing that strikes us about these words is their trust in God, who has always kept faith in His people: “From my youth Thou hast led me...” That, of course, is the unique thing about old people who are people of faith. They have the special privilege of looking at the present in the light of all the years of divine blessing which brought them to the present. This is no cause for apology. Instead it is the source of gratitude... And that is a key to living old age in a positive way – living it in a spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving, for a longer life later. There are always yet things for which to be grateful – and I see that spirit in so many of our elderly... It's true: the evening of a life lived in faith, brings its lungs with it.

To be sure, God does not require us to live our older years of life as though all the problems of living were older. The Bible gives us many reminders that our old age, like any other time in life, has its times that are hard to take. The 12th chapter of Ecclesiastes is a vivid, poetic description of old age in symbols taken from nature and the common experience of life.

“Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them;’ before the sun and the light and moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain; in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are

bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel is broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity."

If that's what is happening in your life these days, you should know that you have more and more company. Statistics show a very rapid increase in the percentage of people who are over 65 in our society and that percentage is growing every year. That dramatic increase in longevity gives much reason for us to be thankful for better health, better food and better conditions of life in which to live out our final years on earth.

But the deepest need of people who are old is not physical. In another psalm, 103rd, the writer tells us that "our days are like grass, like the flower of the field which flourishes in the morning. But the wind passes over it and it is gone..." and its place knows it no more. That phrase – "and its place knows it no more" echoes the deepest melancholy of the human heart. It expresses the fear that our life will mean nothing after we are gone. All that we live for, strive for, believe in, direct our lives toward – will fade away when we die. Life is seen as a rock which causes ripples when it falls into a pool of water, but soon the ripples disappear and all is as it was – no difference at all.

But hear the Psalmist sing with trust "from my youth Thou hast taught me... I still proclaim Thy wondrous deeds...even to old age and gray hairs, do not forsake me"... God will not forsake you. How could He? Remember what great sacrifice He has made for you and for us all. He sent us His dear Son to come among us on earth as our Brother and Lord. At Jesus' birth we are told of a beautiful moment when two old people welcomed His coming. Only 40 days old, when Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple for dedication, Jesus was held in the arms of old Simeon. That venerable man of so many years of faith and service to God, too this child into his arms and sang, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace...my eyes have seen Your salvation." At that time also came Anna, in her late 80s, and she too sang in praise, joy and thanksgiving for the Child whose coming was the sign of God's keeping of all His ancient promises.

In this Child, who grew to manhood in order to take up His cross and suffer death for our sins, this One whose days were also like grass, whose flower of life faded, who died in the promise of life – in Him is God's answer to our fears that our lives do not mean much, or that "the place will remember us no more." God remembers us in life and in death! He keeps faith with His promise in our baptism, "I will not leave you nor forsake you." Since He has seen to all that, we do well to rest back on His promises and let Him take care of all the things that would rob us of our peace. St. Paul was near the end of his life when he wrote the words of our second lesson, "Thou our outer nature wastes away, our inner nature is being renewed every day...because we look not the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

No wonder the old man who wrote Psalm 71 could say "even in old age, I will proclaim Your mighty deeds to the generations yet to come." Many of our elderly are doing just that, witnessing to their faith to generations yet to come. Not all of them can hold grandchildren on their laps and read Bible stories to them, but let me tell you of how I regularly see our elderly "proclaiming God's mighty deeds to the generations yet to come": 1) their prayer and devotion life 2) their love and support of the church (have their envelopes ready; support of TAHE 3)The story of three centenarians Martha (100th birthday party), Marie (quilts/carpets), Julia (worship) 4) their ministry to me.

In all those ways, our elderly are ministering to us, by example, even in old age. And we in turn, need constantly to be aware of our ministry to them. Someone has said that the "mark of a great civilization is how it takes care of its elderly." If that is true of a country, it's even more true of the church. And I feel good about First Lutheran's ministry to the elderly, especially to our 50-60 homebound members: cards, visits, deacons, wheelchair AAL, plans to begin a new Senior Citizen Center to enrich the last years of many

elderly in our area and congregation. "The mark of a great congregation is how it cares for its elderly."

Finally, to those of you who are not yet old, this sermon applies directly to you. Don't look now, younger people, but someone is coming down the road to meet you. That person is you in the years of old age God will give you...what kind of person will you be when you are old? You will be a composite of everything you say, think and do

today. You will reflect the kind of faith which you are allowing now to be nourished by Word and Sacrament. Each of you is preparing for old age right now. May God bless each of us in our journey toward old age and beyond, even into life everlasting.

***Used by the permission of Pastor Harold Schmidt,
Chaplain of Good Samaritan of Omaha, NE
(402) 895-2266***

Champs
Center for Healthy Aging, Ministries, Programs & Services
13271 Millard Avenue
Omaha, Nebraska 68137
Tel: (402) 895-2224
Website: www.champsonline.info
Email: champs@crossandheart.org

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