

We Are What God Has Made Us

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10 by Patty Friesen Mar.11/24

In our Old Testament reading, when the people return to God, God provides healing in the wilderness. In Ephesians, Paul introduces us to God who is “rich in mercy” and “love” and who made us as God’s special creation or some versions say work of art. Therefore, since we are God’s work of art, we long to return to God the artist as at the beginning. Ephesians speaks of this process of returning using the familiar language of grace, “for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (2:8a). Paul sees every Christian life as led by God to grow in grace. Each life has a purpose of “good works, or becoming God’s work of art.” (2:10).

How do we know what we are supposed to do or how we are supposed to be in life? How do we grow in grace? Canadian spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser writes in *Sacred Fire* that our following Jesus grows naturally as we grow through the seasons of our lives. He says our youthful adolescent stage is full of passion and restlessness and quest for freedom because God made us this way. God made us to struggle to find our youthful identity within and apart from our families. God gave us sexual desire that we may find friendship and intimacy with others. God gave us restlessness so that we may seek God in the midst of it.

Being a teenager is an important stage of life and in church we hire youth ministers because we want our youth to have some guidance in this overwhelming stage of life. We want to make it easier for our youth but the process of growing up is rarely serene. It is a struggle, a wrestling match with every kind of untamed human

energy, even though these energies propel us into adulthood. Everyone has their own tale of growing up, usually involving a lot of painful restlessness and a few humiliations of the not-so-gentle passage from childhood to adulthood. We often feel alone and that no one understands or cares and adults have made a real mess of the world. It's not easy being young!

There are different seasons in our lives, each with distinct challenges. This has huge implications in terms of how Jesus calls us in different ways at different times in our lives. When we are young and trying to get our lives together, we hear Jesus' invitation to - "come and follow me and I will make you give you purpose and direction and meaning for your life helping others." As a church we try to amplify Jesus' call to young people by sending them to camp and on service opportunities - to hear his call in nature and in the eyes of people different from us. Jesus is very real to us when we are young – as our Saviour, friend, guide and comfort. Jesus says unless we become youngish and open to him, we will never get the kingdom of God.

Most of us would love to be young again with all that passion and openness and energy. As we age, other struggles emerge - commitments to jobs and family and soon we find ourselves beset by a new set of struggles: disappointment, tiredness, boredom, frustration, resentment. The careers we've chosen get boring and the people we've committed to get boring and we may resent the opportunities for other things that have passed us by. (p. 5). Most of us can relate to Henry David Thoreau's famous line: "The youth gather their materials to build a bridge to the moon, and the middle-aged console themselves to build a woodshed." That's a comedown of expectations that is not easily digested. It's not easy being middle-aged!

Someone once quipped that we spend the first half of our lives struggling with the sixth commandment - thou shalt not commit adultery and the second half of our lives struggling with the fifth commandment - thou shalt not kill! Indeed the famous parable of the prodigal son and his older brother can serve as a paradigm for these stages: the prodigal son, illustrating the first half of life, is very much caught up in the fiery energies of youth - running away from home and having a good time and the older brother, illustrating the second half of life, struggles with duty and responsibility and within that resentment, anger, and jealousy. The older brother tells the father, "I served you faithfully all my life and you never once killed the fatted calf for me."

When we are middle-aged, we are finally experienced in our jobs and mature and responsible in our relationships – taking care of children, grandchildren and aging parents. But it's exhausting. We limp from day off to day off and vacation to vacation, trying to catch up on desperately needed rest. In this time of being tired of trying to save the world, Jesus may be calling us to "come unto me all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest!" Maybe Jesus just wants us to hang out on a Saturday or Sunday morning and watch the sun come up with a cup of coffee before everyone else is awake. Maybe Jesus wants to speak to us in our sleepless nights worrying about money and parenting. It's a different stage with Jesus at this stage. here may be less passion and more doubt about everything as we grow into a more intellectually and experientially authentic faith.

As we head into retirement, we start to feel our stiff bodies more. We begin to let go of our work identity and disposable income. We may start downsizing our possessions and moving into a smaller place. It is a process of letting go and it's not

easy. Thinking about retirement for myself next year, I've started giving my theology books to Luke and Zachary, supporting the next generation of ministers. As we age – it all becomes about supporting the next generation at work, in our families and at church. As we age – we have to let the next generation take more control in our families and at church. We've raised them right – they are ready to take over. I preached at Bethany Manor a couple of weeks ago and Mom was sitting in the back with her friend who loudly said, "My kids made me move into Bethany Manor." To which Mom replied loudly, "My kids are always telling me what to do." It's a tough crowd at Bethany! Aging parents can make it easier on their tired middle-aged children by getting their names into Bethany early and getting their wills, Power of Attorney and eventually shared signing authority on bank accounts. It's hard to make these decisions but our health can change on a dime and it's helpful to children when parents plan ahead. It's not easy being older!

As we age, we feel like the psalmist in Psalm 71 who said, "Do not cast me away when I'm old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone." The final third of our lives can be the most challenging with loss of health, loss of spouse, loss of home. It may feel like we cannot keep up with all the changes in the world and at church. This stage of our lives isn't about what we do that gives us value and purpose anymore. It is simply being who God made us and praying for the next generation.

Lois Siemens, chaplain at Bethany Manor says she hears a lot of elders say, "I don't have a purpose anymore." "Yes, you do," she says. "Keep praying for your grandchildren and keep calling them – they appreciate it even if they are busy." Our final stage of life is a deeper spiritual stage of trusting that we have been saved by grace and

not anything we've done in our lives. We simply trust that we are held in God's hands now at this stage. In our final stage of life, Jesus may call us with "unless a grain of wheat gets planted in the earth, it cannot produce life." We realize at this last third of our lives that Jesus not only gave us his life through his call to meaning but he also gave us his death to show us how to die with meaning.

In the last years before his death, Henri Nouwen began to focus more of his reflections and writings on the theme of dying, particularly on how our death is meant to be our last and greatest gift to our loved ones. There comes a time in life, he submits, when the real question is no longer: How can I live now so that my life still makes a contribution? Rather, the question becomes: How can I live now so that when I die, my death is an optimal blessing to my family, my friends, the church and the world? How can I show them the grace and support and gentleness that I want to be remembered for after I'm gone.

Every Christian has "good works" that are our divine calling. St. Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556) composed a process of spiritual discernment for Christians who are seeking to find out what God intends for us. The most important rule of St. Ignatius is, "The love which moves me and makes me choose love has to descend from above, from the love of God."

Let us choose love as we continue hungering for hope through this Lenten season. Let us choose building community between the generations at church, as we enter this year of discernment of building use and future pastoral needs. We have an intergenerational friend-finding exercise in our bulletins that I invite you to work on and bring to me and there are prizes! Younger people talk to older people and find out who

was born in Hague. Older people get your survey out and find out who got a B in English. Let's talk to each other and find out more about each other as we journey this path of grace together with Jesus.

Let's pray: Help us O God in whatever season of our lives, to hear you and trust in you and turn to you. Faith begins by letting go so help us let go and lean into you more. Amen.