

"Growing Older / Preparing for Heaven"

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church  
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, July 8, 2007

Text: II Corinthians 4:13 - 5:1 John 14:1-7 NRSV

WE'RE GETTING OLDER

I became 50 years old last month. I might as well say that at the start and get it over with. It was a significant day. When you turn 50, it is easy to think about growing older.

You know you are getting older when . . . .

- Now that you finally got your head together, your body is falling apart.
- It takes twice as long to look half as good.
- You try to straighten out the wrinkles in your socks only to find you aren't wearing any.
- Or perhaps you have gotten to the age where you need your false teeth and your hearing aid before you can ask where you left your glasses.

You know you are getting older when . . .

- The pharmacist has become your new best friend.
- You sing along with the elevator music.
- Your idea of weight lifting is standing up.
- Your ears are hairier than your head.
- You frequently find yourself telling people what a loaf of bread used to cost.
- Your secrets are safe with your friends because they can't remember them either.

I like the hair spray commercial from years ago that put it, "You're not getting older. You're getting better."

Growing older. Aging. We laugh about it, and we groan about it. We resist it, but we can't stop it. As we age physically, as Christians we anticipate the glory of heaven.

The apostle Paul puts it this way: "Our outer nature is wasting away." (4:16)

Newspaper columnist Dave Barry writes about aging: "You need to take time to learn about the biological changes that are taking place within your body, so that you will be better able to understand and cope with the inevitable and completely natural elements of the aging process -- the minor aches, pains, dental problems, intestinal malfunctions, muscle deterioration, emotional instability, memory lapses, hearing and vision loss, impotence, seizures, growths, prostate problems, greatly reduced limb function, massive coronary failure, death and, of course, painful hemorrhoid swelling -- that can make up this exciting adventure we call `middle age.'"

It's funny and sobering at the same time, isn't it?

Some of you may be thinking, "I wish I were only fifty." Aging is really an issue with some of us. When people ask you your age, does your hand mysteriously come up to cover your mouth as you answer? Are you afraid that someone will discover your birthdate and begin the subtraction process? Do you think of speed limit signs on the interstate as cruel reminders of your age? Do you prefer to pay full price, rather than admit that you are eligible for a senior citizen's discount?

## TRUSTING GOD WITH DEATH

We are all growing older. How do we deal with it? Paul writes, "We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." (4:16) While we age physically, our inner nature, our spiritual life, including our outlook toward life, can grow and blossom. We renew our inner nature through communion with God. We do it through prayer, meditation, Bible reading, and

worshiping with other Christians.

We do not lose heart. Why don't we? Because we know the end of the story. Because "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence." (4:14)

Jesus himself tells us as much. He once told his disciples, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house. I would not tell you this if it were not true. I am going there to prepare a place for you. After I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, so that you may be where I am." (John 14:1-4, New Century Version)

Jesus is telling us, "Trust me with your death." When you get near the end of life, don't be troubled -- trust me! You get the impression that to God the grave is a no-brainer. He speaks as casually as the mechanic says to a worried car owner, "Sure, the engine needs an overhaul, but don't worry. I can do it." For us, aging and the end of life is an ordeal. For God, it's no big deal.

When our daughter, Sarah, was younger, I did something that every parent has done dozens of times. I carried Sarah to bed. When she would fall asleep on the floor in the den, I would pick her up, carry her up the stairs, and put her in bed. Why? I knew that it was time for her to rest, and I knew that rest was better up there in her bedroom than down in the den.

Doesn't God do the same? Doesn't God carry us to the place of rest that he created? For God, death is no tragedy. To God the termination of the body is the beginning of life.

Can you imagine if Melody objected to my decision to carry Sarah upstairs? "Don't take her. We'll miss her. Please keep her here so that our family will all be together."

How would I answer? "Oh, but she'll rest so much better in the room I have prepared for her. Besides, you'll be coming up yourselves soon." By calling us home,

God is doing what any father would do. He is providing a better place to rest, a place he has prepared for us.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus raised so few people from the dead? He healed hundreds and fed thousands, but as far as we know he only raised three: the daughter of Jairus, the boy near Nain, and Lazarus. Why so few? Could it be because he knew that he would be doing them no favors? Could it be because he couldn't get any volunteers? Could it be that once someone is there, the last place they want to return to is here?

Jesus tells us, "Trust in God, and trust in me."

When George H. W. Bush was Vice President, he told of one of his trips to Russia. He was representing the United States at the funeral of Premier Leonid Brezhnev in 1982. The funeral was as precise and stoic as the communist government. There were no tears, no emotion expressed, with one exception. Brezhnev's widow was the last person to witness his body before the coffin was closed. For several seconds she stood at his side and then reached down and performed the sign of the cross on her husband's chest.

In the hour of her husband's death, she went not to Lenin, not to Karl Marx, not to Khrushchev. In the hour of death she turned to a Nazarene carpenter who had lived 2,000 years ago and who dared to claim, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust in me."

## COMING HOME TO HEAVEN

As we age physically, we anticipate the glory of heaven. Paul writes, "We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (5:1)

Paul compares living in this world and in heaven with the difference between living in a tent and in a house. Obviously a tent symbolizes a temporary dwelling. In

heaven we have a permanent building.

There are two ways to think about growing older. We can think of life as a slow but inevitable slipping down the slope to death. Try as we might, we cannot avoid it or cover it up. Or we can think of it as climbing up a hill that leads us to the presence of God. We don't have to fear growing older. Ultimately, it brings us closer, not to death, but into the presence of God.

That is where we yearn to be. Heaven is a holy place. No evil and sin can enter it. Heaven is place free from weariness. For some people, each day is a bitter struggle from morning until night, and sometimes even through the night. In heaven there will be no troubled hearts or tired bodies or jaded nerves.

Heaven is not an idle place, but a place of much activity. The Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, and his friend, Dr. Lyman, were walking together in a cemetery in Brooklyn, New York. Mr. Beecher remarked, "Well, Lyman, I suppose they will be bringing me out here before very long and leaving me here. But God knows I won't be staying here." Dr. Lyman asked, "Where shall we look for you?" "Somewhere doing business for God," was the quick reply.

In heaven there will be no pain, no sickness, no death. We are told in Revelation that "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (Rev. 21:4)

Paul writes the Corinthians, "This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure." (4:17) Heaven will be so wonderful, beyond our wildest dreams.

When Billy Graham was a boy, an old Welsh grocer lived near his family. When the grocer lay dying, Graham's father, Frank, was at his side. The grocer said to him, "Frank, can you hear that music? I've never heard such music in all my life -- the orchestras, the choirs, angels singing," -- and then he was gone.

Going to heaven is like coming home. We arrive at our permanent dwelling

place, at a house not made with hands.

There was a widow and her son who lived in a miserable attic. Years before, the woman had married against her parents' wishes and had gone with her husband to live in a foreign land. Her husband proved irresponsible and unfaithful. After a few years he died without having made any provision for her and the child. With great difficulty, she was barely able to provide them with food to eat and a place to live.

The happiest times in the child's life were when the mother took him in her arms and told him about her father's house in the old country. She told him about the grassy lawn, the tall trees, the wild flowers and the delicious meals. The child had never seen his grandfather's home, but to him it was the most beautiful place in all the world. He longed for the time when he would go there to live.

One day the mailman knocked at the attic door. The mother recognized the handwriting on the envelope. With trembling fingers she broke the seal. There was a check and a slip of paper with just two words, "Come home."

Some day we will have a similar experience -- an experience shared by all who know Christ. We do not know when the call will come. It may be when we are in the middle of our work. It may be after weeks or months of illness. But one day a loving hand will rest upon our shoulder and this brief message will be given: "Come home."

I don't know what your situation is today, but God does. I invite you to come to the chancel rail and pray for a variety of reasons today. You may be scared of getting older or facing medical problems. I can understand that feeling. You may be afraid of dying. I can understand that. You might want to thank God for heaven. You may want to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior, so that you can go to heaven. You may want to pray for family members or friends.

I invite you to come and talk with the Lord. If you would like me to pray with you, I will be glad to. Just kneel beside me as I pray. Come and pray as we sing our hymn.