

Sermon for Nov. 5, 2017 – “Grace-Full Aging”

All Saints Day, OT31, Year A – Texts: Luke 2:25-38

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In our reading, we meet two role models for aging gracefully, Simeon and Anna. I want to focus on Anna today. Anna – a prophetess, daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. Our reading tells us that she was very old, that she’d lived as a widow for so long was remarkable, but what’s even more remarkable was that, again, according to our reading **“she never left the temple...but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.”**

One of the things I love about Luke’s gospel is that it tells us most about elderly people. We see that from the very beginning, just five verses into chapter 1, we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth. They’re well past the age of bearing children. Yet God has visited them and gave them the joy of being the parents, specifically, the parents of John the Baptist. Next, we find Simeon, also in our reading, a man who’d been promised that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Now, another beautiful elderly person named Anna, and in only a few verses we learn a lot about her. There’s lots to love about Anna, lots to admire. And, I think in looking at her life we’ll find her to be an ideal role model. A model of what it means to age gracefully; and by aging gracefully I mean literally growing in God’s grace, to continue to mature spiritually, to continue to work out what it means to be faithful as we age, to continue to look for ways to be a blessing to others. In looking at Anna’s life as God’s model for growing older, I find three characteristics we must consider. The **first** is that she’d obviously known sorrow but hadn’t grown bitter. Think about it, she’d been a widow for quite some time, Luke makes a point of telling us this. Now, my grandmother lived 20 years after my grandfather died. It had to have been tough. Very few people manage to get through life without ever experiencing a major loss, a major trauma or disaster of some kind. I’d imagine that’s true with most of us here. I’d imagine that most of us are well acquainted with grief and sadness. I’m willing to bet that whatever happened had a big impact on our lives. Perhaps even threatening our very existence, shaking us to our core, threatening to change us, and not in a good way. The effects of Anna’s trauma were long-term. They stretched out over years, decades, yet she remained faithful. On that subject, Eugene Peterson wrote a book called “The Long Obedience.” I think that phrase describes Anna perfectly. Being people of faith doesn’t guarantee a safe, or easy life. This shouldn’t surprise us, after all aren’t we called to “pick up our crosses and follow” Christ? Indeed, we are. And, it’s a call that stretches throughout our **entire** lives, throughout **every** stage of our life-long faith journey. I hate to be the one to have to tell you this, but at **no** point are we ever allowed to say: “Okay, I’m old now, time for me to put my cross down now, and thank goodness...It was getting heavy!” Nope, sorry, there’s no retirement age for Christians. As long as there’s breath in our bodies God **can** and **will** use us.

I said to a colleague recently that when God is done with us He’ll tell us Himself – face-to-face. We must remain faithful **always** until the day we’re called home. Faithfulness involves perseverance, and long obedience. Anna had both. She accepted that you cannot reverse traumas once they happen or pretend they didn’t happen. All we can do is change our perception of whatever’s happened and choose how we go on living from there, not blaming God but recognizing that God is with us in our darkest times, helping us through our grief/loss. That’s exactly what Anna did. She could’ve become bitter, but she didn’t.

Bitterness only destroys our lives and our relationships. It corrodes our spirits. It will destroy us from the inside out and ultimately, it will spill out and destroy our relationships. We know that didn't happen to Anna. The text even tells us that she gave thanks to God! Doesn't sound like a bitter person to me!

The **second** of Anna's characteristics is that she didn't become withdrawn. Nope. In fact, she did just the opposite, she reached out to God and to others. When we go through difficult times, times of grief, pain, or sorrow, there's a temptation to withdraw from the world. For the most part that's normal. It's often difficult to be around people, to trust again, to commit to relationships again. We go inside a shell. It's hard **not** to. We want to be alone with our grief, our pain, but we know this didn't happen with Anna. She did not withdraw into herself, as I said, she did the exact opposite. In James' letter we're encouraged to "draw near to the Lord..." because when we do He will draw near to us. That's what Anna did. Luke tells us that she "**never left the temple...But worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.**" That's why she, like Simeon, was blessed to lay eyes on a baby...a baby who was, in fact, the Savior of the world! She had the opportunity to tell others that God's promise of salvation had come true, that indeed salvation was there in their very midst!

A **third** characteristic of Anna is that she had come to the end of her years but not her **hope**. She held on. She spoke to those looking for the redemption for Jerusalem, the salvation of God's people. She still believed that there would be a future. She believed in that future, God's future. Anna knew that God would redeem His people because God had promised it and so, she looked **forward** in hope. She did not let old age become simply about a list of concerns. Things like: Will I stay healthy? Will I be able to survive the grief of having outlived my friends? Why am I still here? She rose above that. Her trust in God enabled her to do so.

I've been asked that question "why am I still here?" before. The first time was while I was in seminary and, in all honesty, I had no answer and I felt that I had failed that person. To some extent I still feel that way. The next time someone asked me that question it caught me completely off guard. It was by a member of this congregation. The person said that most of their friends were gone and that there didn't seem to be anything more to accomplish. Nothing remained for them to do. They were simply waiting to die. I thought for a moment. I asked them, knowing the answer, if they had children. The person said that they did. I asked if they loved their children and were proud of them. They said yes, of course. I asked if they'd told them recently that they loved them, if they'd told them that they were proud of them. The person looked at me and said simply: "oh, they know." I said to the person that while that might well be the case, that's not what I asked. I didn't ask if they **knew** that they were loved or if their parent was proud of them, I asked if they'd been told that **recently**. I repeated the question, "Have you told them **recently** that you loved them and that you were proud of them?" No response. I waited a moment allowing things to sink in, and then I told them that while we have breath in our bodies there's still something for us to do, something God is calling us to do. If we have families, children, a spouse, maybe a sibling, have we told them lately that we love them? Do they know how much we love them? What they mean to us? Are there people we've neglected? Are there relationships we need to restore? Are there amends that need to be made? Have we withheld forgiveness? Forgiveness that we need to seek? Is there guilt that needs to be confessed? Over something we've done? Or something we've failed to do?

It seems to me that most folks tend to think of serving God almost solely in the context of church; volunteering, agreeing to become an elder or deacon. I guess I get that, sort of. I mean, we're human. We tend to compartmentalize things, especially our spirituality. And, just as often we tend to think that just because we're not as **physically** capable as we once were we're of no use to the church or anyone else, for that matter! Why is that? I guess I can see why people say that, but they're wrong! Maybe we can't do what we did when we were younger, but, who can? As a pastor, one of the most important things that I can do is to recognize the changes that take place within people's lives, how their needs change as a result, how to help people figure out how they can remain faithful through the course of their lives, how to help people continue to grow spiritually more mature, helping them face the inevitable changes/transitions in their life regardless of how, why or when they occur. I need your help. I need you to be honest with yourselves because the church needs you! God has given us individually, and as a church, everything we need to do the work to which he calls us. This is central to what being a church is all about. This ministry is something to which Paul called the Galatians a long time ago and what I've been calling us to do pretty much from the first day I walked into the church, which is that we are to bear one another's burdens and so, fulfill the law of Christ. We're getting there but we need everyone on board! Let me say it again as plainly as I can, No one is too old to serve God! Anna is a great example of that. In fact, scripture is full of examples. Remember Abraham and Sarah? They're in their mid-70's when God calls them to leave their home, and go to a place God would show him. They're 100 and 99, respectively, when Isaac is born! How about Moses and his brother Aaron? They're in their early 80's when they stand in front of Pharaoh and tell him to let the people go! Scripture makes it abundantly clear that there's usefulness as we grow older, that it's not about the years in your life but the life in your years! The saints of the church knew this and on All Saints Day they stand as a reminder that our journeys don't end when we reach a certain age, we just enter a new phase! If we have any sense of self-awareness we recognize that we've gained wisdom, perspective born of years of experience. What an incredible gift! Now, the skeptics among us may ask, how? How's this supposed to happen? Well, if you've been paying attention, the answer's simple! It's by doing what Anna, and countless other seniors have done for millennia and that is, trust God! Seriously, when have we ever done anything difficult on our own? God's has always been with us. God's always provided for us. God, as the psalmist in our first reading reminds us, doesn't discard us in our old age. Even when we're old and gray God won't abandon us. He will revive us. He will bring us up again, even from the depths of the earth. He will increase our honor and comfort us once again. Or, as Isaiah put it, God **"gives power to the faint...and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary...and the young will fall exhausted...but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."**

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing and I'll say this as often as I have to, our task is to remain **faithful**, despite the fact, that what faithfulness looks like may have changed drastically from when we were younger. We must **continue** to grow spiritually. We must **remain** focused on God. We must be ready for what God **can** and **will** do in our lives, **to** us and **through** us, in the lives of those around us. Anna did. She was locked in on what God was doing and what God was about to do through that baby she and Simeon met in the temple that day. When we're able as Anna was, to fully place our trust in God, we find a certain kind of hope and living in hope is the only way to live.

The saints of the church knew this. Those well-known, those known only to us. That's the way they lived; knowing sorrow but not becoming **bitter**! Not withdrawing from the world but **engaging** it, drawing closer to God in the process! Approaching the end of their years but not the end of their **hope**!

May we do likewise!

Thanks be to God who will our strength and portion be as long as life endures!

Amen and amen.