

“Still Young On the Inside”
II Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Psalm 57

About twenty-eight years ago, Jean’s mother, Jane, came to live with us. She had already begun this on a limited basis. After my daughter Kate’s birth, Jane journeyed the one hour from her home to spend Monday through Friday as Kate’s live-in babysitter while Jean and I continued to serve as pastors of two different churches. But within eight months of Kate’s birth, Jane was diagnosed with cancer, and after surgery, the harshness of the chemotherapy brought her to our home on what would become a permanent basis until her death.

This, of course, was a difficult period, but one Jean and her sister, Kathy, now cherish as a special time with their mother. And though the destructive nature of the chemotherapy at that time produced periods of debilitating sickness, these were interspersed with moments of joy, laughter, and love. And you also learn some things that have a way of coming back around later in life.

One of those incidents about which our smiles grow wider as the years pass occurred when Jean was washing her mother. Too weak to manage the bathtub by herself Jean had helped her mother climb in the tub, and was giving her a hand when her mother stuck out both her arms. Typical of most older persons, her triceps region had grown a little flabby. One could detect a few old age brown spots here and there. Wrinkles and veins had become more prominent. Silently, noting all this, Jane then turned to Jean and said, “I can’t believe these are my arms and hands. They are the arms and hands of an old lady.”

At that time, Jean was thirty years old and I was thirty-two. So when Jean tells this story later, we are both amused at her mother’s comment. Jane was sixty-six years old. Of course, she possessed the body of an older woman. What did she mean she couldn’t believe she had the hands and arms of an old person? She had watched herself age through the years; she knew how old she was.

Well, I’m almost sixty now, and sixty-six no longer seems very old to me. In fact, it looks younger all the time. And when I look in the mirror, I am surprised at the age of the person who returns my stare. In my mind, I’m not any older. I remember eight years ago when we took Zach down to Clemson for orientation and registration, and I felt like I could have signed up myself. Until I noticed that none of those pretty little eighteen year old girls glanced my

way, and all the boys addressed me as “sir.” What I struggled to see was readily evident to everyone else.

You may have heard the story of the man who went back to his hometown to see a new dentist. While sitting in the waiting room, he noticed the dentist’s certificate hanging on the wall displaying his full name. Suddenly he said he remembered a tall, good looking guy, a pretty good athlete, of the same name who had attended high school with him fifty years before. But after he was ushered into the office, he immediately disconnected the idea because the dentist was a balding, gray-haired man with a deeply lined face that looked much too old to be his classmate. But after the dentist had examined his teeth, trying to make conversation, he asked the dentist if he had attended the local high school.

“Yes,” he replied,

“When did you graduate?” the man asked.

“1953,” he answered.

“I think you were in my class!” the man exclaimed.

The dentist looked at him very closely and then asked, “What did you teach?”

Incidents like these remind us of the Apostle Paul’s words here in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” As I have noted this first part comes as no surprise to us. Medical science has taken enormous strides since Paul wrote these words, but though we have lengthened our time, our bodies still waste away. Now, that doesn’t mean we don’t make a herculean effort to hold back the ravages of time.

When I was growing up my family had one doctor, a general practitioner who delivered us and took care of all of us from birth to death. Today, my medical appointments look like a Westminster Church directory. As many of you know from your experience with Westminster medical people, no one could receive more competent, kind, and supportive care than I do. But I still continue to age. We all do. Regardless of the efforts we make, eventually our bodies wear out. As actress Bette Davis once said, “Old age ain’t no place for sissies.”

At a nursing home in Florida, a group of senior citizens were sitting around talking about their aches and pains.

“My arms are so weak I can hardly lift this cup of coffee,” said one.

“I know what you mean. My cataracts are so bad I can’t even see my coffee,” replied another.

“I can’t turn my head because of this arthritis in my neck,” said a third.

“My blood pressure pills make me dizzy,” another contributed.

“I guess that’s the price we pay for getting old,” winced an old man.

There was a short silence. Then one woman said cheerfully, “Thank goodness we can still drive.”

No matter how decrepit our bodies, in our minds and cars, we are still young.

“So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

Even though we may at times try to fool ourselves, it is easy for us to see the aging of our outward appearance. Yet, Paul says there is an inner nature that continues to grow in strength rather than weakness. We cannot see it, yet its effect is profound. Christians have always believed in the power of prayer, the positive effect a life dedicated to Christ can have spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Before the Enlightenment, these unseen variables often became entangled with myth and magic, the world of demons, dragons, and miracles masking the true effects of a godly life. After the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason once again relegated spiritual benefits to the dust bin of quaint, anecdotal peculiarities.

But recent, and increasing, scientific studies of the unseen effect of spirituality on mental and physical health causes us to reexamine the powerful benefits of spiritual activity. For instance, a study of several thousand California residents over a thirty-one year period found that those who attended worship services once a week or more had significantly lower risks of death compared to less frequent or non attendees. Angela Swanson, affiliated with Duke’s Center for the Study of Religion/Spirituality and Health reported that a long term study of 124 parents who lost a child to infant death syndrome discovered that “greater religious participation was related to increased emotional support from others and an increase in the meaning they found in the loss of a child.” Likewise, she notes that in a “1990 study on a group of older men who experienced ‘the death of someone close,’ membership in a synagogue or church was a good predictor of those having much lower levels of depression than those without membership.”

Studies, and results, such as these are increasingly common. Belief, meaning, and purpose, exemplified by a life of faith produce positive physical and emotional benefits. What cannot be seen, what exists in the heart and mind become powerful allies in emotional and physical health. They remind us that while our bodies weaken, the life of the mind, the spiritual element of our lives can grow stronger, and that unseen strength can even affect our physical health. As Paul notes, we can be “renewed day by day” as we continue to grow in love and faith through our commitment to follow Jesus Christ.

We are surprised at the aging of our bodies because in our minds, we do not grow old. Our relationship to God matures in the same manner. Like our bodies, it grows, but it grows stronger instead of weaker.

In his book entitled, On Being a Muslim, Farid Esack quotes a poem entitled, “What Cancer Cannot do.”

Cancer is so limited
It cannot cripple love,
It cannot shatter hope,
It cannot corrode faith,
It cannot destroy peace,
It cannot kill friendship,
It cannot suppress memories,
It cannot silence courage,
It cannot invade the soul,
It cannot steal eternal life,
It cannot conquer the spirit.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that earthly trials and tribulations, physical breakdowns, cannot destroy what is most important in our lives.

“For we know 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.”

Paul concludes his argument by noting that as our bodies age, our spirit is constantly renewed, and at death our renewed spirit will discover an eternal home. Paul viewed everything through the lens of Christ’s defeat of sin and death. Pain, affliction, growing old are only bumps in the road to eternal glory. Just as earthly problems carry no lasting power over our inner spirits, neither can they detract from the glorious home we will find in eternity.

In this passage, Paul concedes our struggle to understand and believe that a glorious eternity awaits us. We grasp onto what we can see and feel,

material objects whose presence and value can be empirically proven. Eternity, on the other hand, remains a matter of faith. A central question in religious faith is whether what cannot be seen, heard, or felt can be real. Yet, if only what we can see, hear, or feel is real, then death brings total destruction. But just as there is a mental reality within us, a life of thought, of spirit, that also cannot be seen, heard or touched, there is an eternity just as authentic.

Scholars have for centuries argued over the properties of this eternity. Do we receive new bodies? What will they look like? Will we know one another in heaven? These are understandable, even worthwhile questions. But ultimately, they do not matter. For those of us who everyday watch our bodies die, while our spirits continue to seek God, what is important is that on the day this temporary physical specimen fails, our God will be there to welcome us into a new world.

A minister, priest and a rabbi were discussing when life begins.

“Those of my denomination,” said the minister, “believe that life starts when the heart begins to beat.”

“We take a different view,” said the priest. “We believe life starts at the moment of conception.”

“Well,” said the rabbi, “it is our belief that life starts when the kids move out.”

The Christian believes that no matter what happens on this earth, life will begin at death.

“Still Young On the Inside”

The Apostle Paul reminds us that the Christian is always young on the inside. Our physical bodies are only an element of a spiritual journey that continues all of our lives and even into eternity. Because we cannot physically experience something does not mean it is not as real as those elements we can see, hear, and touch.

This morning, whatever our age, as we witness the change in our physical bodies, let us take heart, that the Spirit of God within us remains as vigorous as ever. The faith we carry inside us will always be young and eternal.

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