



Sermons from Northwood United Church

**“The Gift of Eldering”
Psalm 139; Ephesians 4: 7, 11-16
Marion Best March 25, 2012**

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of your service this morning. This afternoon and tomorrow I will be meeting with a group from your congregation to pursue the question: how can we reclaim the gift of Eldering?

In many cultures Elders are seen as the wise ones and the ones who pass on the community's core values and beliefs to a younger generation. It isn't limited by age but it does require having lived long enough to be able to reflect on a lifetime of living that includes joys and sorrows, gains and losses from which to extract wisdom. It isn't just a matter of living for a long time that makes one wise, it is a matter of reflecting upon one's life and drawing learning and wisdom from those life experiences.

Marcel Proust said “We don't receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.”

In the Ephesians passage read this morning, there is a strong call to follow one's vocation: a vocation where one is led by God. Yes we are each born with some natural attributes that we often refer to as our gifts; but we also learn certain skills through our lifetime that are useful in our employment, in our homes and daily lives and then there are the spiritual gifts that turn a job or a role into a calling, a vocation. Elders have spiritual gifts to share: be it understanding, compassion, deep listening, offering perspective or sometimes by simply being there. These gifts in Ephesians are called into being in order to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.”

So often we think of the work of ministry being limited to what we do inside the walls of our churches. In fact we lay people live most of our lives outside these walls and we need to ask ourselves how we can be in ministry in our families, our neighborhoods and beyond. That takes self knowledge, courage and the reassurance that a community will support us and that God will be present with us. That's why the Psalm we read together this morning is my favorite. To be really known by another is a gift but to be reassured that God knows us that intimately is a great gift. The omnipresent Holy One: no matter where I go, God is there.

If one's wisdom is going to turn into action that benefits the lives of others, there has to be collaboration. People of all ages have to learn from each other and be in committed relationships with purposeful communication. There are no Elders without a community.

Sadly we live in a culture that tends to separate the generations. One of life's greatest joys is to have multi-generational relationships. To have good friends or relations who are a generation older and a generation or two younger brings a variety of experiences and knowledge. It broadens understanding and increases the ability for all ages to relate in ever widening circles. Over the years churches have been places where all ages had a sense of belonging. However many of our churches have become devoid of younger generations. The increase in 'adult only' living communities results in a lack of children and youth as neighbors. To be in relationship with those of a younger generation takes more time and effort than it once did, but it is worth doing.

It may be that you have children or grandchildren in the 18-30 age range that are referred to as young adults. It is important that older generations understand the context these young adults are living in. It is very different from when I was in my 20's. I recently facilitated a

weekend with young adults and the leaders who work with them. We cautioned that we cannot make generalizations about young adults since they are not a homogeneous group and they experience the world in different ways based on their social locations (i.e. socio-economic class, race, gender) but some common characteristics of their lives stood out.

They exist in an “instant culture:” instant communication, instant food, instant purchases, instant relationships and instant information. Technology plays a prevalent role in young people’s lives: they are fluent in new technologies and the rapid pace at which those technologies change but this can often lead to dependencies both for information and relationships. There is no shortage of information available to them but how do they discern the validity and value of the information they access?

Many young people experience high levels of pressure when it comes to making choices about education and vocation and choosing a life direction. There are multiple options available to them and while this may seem attractive, it can also lead to confusion and the inability to make decisions about future directions. The current economic reality particularly impacts them as costs for education increase and job opportunities decrease. The current younger generation is highly affected by mental health concerns such as depression. There has been increased attention recently to the suicide rate among this age group and pleas to encourage conversation with young adults in homes, schools and where the young gather.

This is a generation that, since childhood, has grown with a heightened awareness of the ecological crisis. The ways in which young people respond to this and other challenges of our time seems to vary between reactions of despair, hopelessness and apathy to responding with a strong and committed political engagement. To have the love and support of an Elder in their lives can be both stabilizing and enriching. However for the Elder, it begins with learning and understanding the culture and perspective of the other.

Mentoring people from another generation can be highly rewarding. Last year I was asked to mentor some ministers who were going to be involved in an intensive leadership development program. I was hesitant, having been retired for some 15 years and not sure if my leadership skills were too outdated or rusty to be useful. However during our time together I learned how deeply integrated my life experience is and it confirmed for me that being a mentor is not about giving advice: it is about listening, asking the right questions that will lead a person to deeper enquiry and broaden their possibilities while all the time encouraging and supporting the learner. It was one of the most rewarding tasks I have undertaken and I felt as though new life had been breathed into my being

Another way of contributing to future generations is to record your life story. If you consider doing this I think author Jim Taylor has some good advice Recently he wrote:

“My mother died when I was 36. I thought I knew her -- and in one sense, I did. She had been there all my life. There had never been any family rift or isolation. But after she died, I realized I knew nothing about how she became the person I thought I knew so well.

I didn't know what kind of schools she had attended, or how they shaped her personality. I knew where her family spent summer holidays, but not what they did there. I knew she had taught English, but not where. I knew she had decided, at 30, to become a missionary in India, but I didn't know why. I didn't know if she had any boyfriends before she met my father.

I suspected that she did not have a happy childhood. Her father, my grandfather, was a patriarchal tyrant, so abusive in later life that he had to be committed to institutional care. The one time I got my mother talking about her early life, she started happy and ended crying. I never pursued the subject again.

After her death, I wrote to her sisters, hoping for enlightenment. They were little help. They told me dates, locations, academic degrees -- the kind of information that a resume might

include. But no stories. No incidents that illuminated her life. No insights into her personality. No anecdotes that might evoke a wry grin of recognition.”

As I read Jim’s piece I thought how precious it is when there is time and space for story telling whether it be with peers or between generations.

With the so called Baby Boomers now reaching retirement, there has been an increased focus on aging in healthy, creative ways. Robert Raines is a wise man who refers to aging as a “time to live” and points to seven creative steps in the aging process. These are the underpinnings for Eldering.

Waking Up: recognizing your own mortality and realizing that now is the time to engage again, the meaning and direction of your life.

Embracing Sorrow: acknowledging your own losses and grief and the pain of others, that it may darken and deepen your humanity, yielding compassion.

Embracing Blessedness: remembering and delighting in all the ways you have been, are and can be a blessed and blessing person in your life.

Re-imagining Work: reviewing and revising ways in which you want to contribute to society given your ‘gift’, complete your lifework, live out your purpose in the years ahead.

Nurturing Intimacy: deepening your inter-connection with your life partner, siblings, children, grandchildren, other family members, friends, nature, yourself, God.

Seeking Forgiveness: doing what you can to clear the decks of your relationships so as to enter the later years with as unburdened heart as possible.

Taking on the Mystery: accepting life and death and exploring the ultimate meaning of your life with thanksgiving and hope.

I leave you with a quote from the Biblical book of Wisdom that offers these images of wisdom: “wisdom is intelligent, holy, unique, mobile, clear, unpolluted, loving the good, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety. For she is a breath of the power of God”.

Let us pray: God of power, Breathe your breath on us. May your Spirit transform us, May the gifts of your Spirit equip us to serve you, We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen