

32963 Faith Column for 11-17-11
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Growing Old?

We recently came across some fascinating statistics about life expectancy in the United States. Of course we all know that life expectancies are lengthening. But the magnitude of the change is more dramatic than many of us have probably stopped to consider.

For instance, if you had been born in 1850, the U.S. Census Bureau says your life expectancy would have been 38 years. If you'd been born in 1900, it would have been 49 years; in 1925, 59 years; in 1950, 68 years; in 1975, 72 years; and in 2000, around 77 years. Decade by decade, longevity inches upward. Some suggest that a child born in 2011 may have every reason to expect a lifespan of over 100 years.

The rapidly increasing life span has caused some futurists to declare that we must rethink life stage expectations. No longer does retirement at 65 make much sense, for example. With decades of healthy, potentially productive life ahead (and a need to fund it), we may all be working well into our 70's or 80's. The question we should ask ourselves then, as we enter the seventh, eighth, or ninth decades of life, is not, "Am I ready to go?" but "To what should I contribute the next 20 years of my life?" Growing old too soon, dropping out of circulation, sitting back, or just letting the world go by is an unjustifiable denial of possibilities for many of us.

We love the role models for older adults that the biblical record provides. Abraham and Sarah followed God's leading and bore the child God promised them at advanced ages, securing the destiny of their people. Moses quietly tended his sheep until called by God as an older adult to lead his people out of bondage. Elizabeth and Zechariah, long-resigned to childlessness, rejoiced in their older years at the birth of their son, John, whom they would raise to herald a Messiah. Our forerunners in faith understood that life's capacity to bring challenges, and our ability to contribute to life in world-changing ways, doesn't diminish with age. In fact, we might argue from the record, that with age and experience come both opportunity and wisdom – two keys for truly fruitful living. Long life is a gift to us, given by God's grace. Are we ready to accept it and maximize its potential for good?

If not, perhaps the advice offered by writer Leonard Sweet in his article, "Growing Old Grace-fully" will help. Says Sweet: Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean letting others take over the reins, it means letting God direct your course. Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean disengaging from the community, it means being prepared to take on new positions of leadership. Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean allowing your vision to dim, it means becoming a visionary for the future of your church, your community, your country. Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean caving in to limitations, it means giving God the opportunity to strengthen your weaknesses. Growing old "grace-fully" does not mean hunkering down in an "empty nest," it means opening the doors of your mind, heart and home to new ideas, new feelings and new people God sends your way.

Are you growing old? God willing, not yet. But when you do begin to grow old, may it be with the all the grace God offers you!