

"THE AFTERNOON OF LIFE"

INTRODUCTION

For the past two Sundays, the sermons have been concerned with the day-time of life - forenoon, noon-time, and now today, afternoon.

At first thought, this sermon might seem to apply simply to those, shall we say, who are past 70, but on second thought, the afternoon of life had better be the concern of all of us, no matter what the clock says at the moment.

DEVELOPMENT

For one thing, we all have - or will have - older people whose lives are inter-twined with ours, and the more that we can understand about the afternoon of life, the better we can provide some afternoon assistance. Even so, we need to remember that there are some limitations to our earlier understanding of later life. There was a play, "The Room Upstairs" in which an argument ensued between a married daughter and her elderly mother, and at length the mother spoke these words:

"How can you understand when you've never been old? It's easy to understand young people because you've been one yourself. But old age - you've never been there - so you have no idea, really what it's like...."

The other thing, of course, is that we all face the prospect of longer afternoons in our own lives, and we had better gain as much perspective on that time of day as possible. At the time of the Declaration of Independence, the average span of human life in this country was 38 years; by 1900, it had increased to 48 years; but by 1960 it had jumped to 70 years. Somewhere I read recently or heard that by the year 2000, the average span of human life will be close to 100 years. The afternoons of life are getting longer; the percentage of older people in our population will keep on increasing.

And yet, by and large, people do not anticipate the afternoon of life. A friend of mine in the ministry said that one Sunday recently in his pastoral prayer he prayed for those "in the sunset years". A few days later he received a letter from a person who wished to remain anonymous who suggested that the pastor should not "perpetuate that myth about the sunset years".....for it seemed to that person that far from being a glorious sunset, old age was more often a dark and gathering storm. The person had a point. We all see examples where the afternoon of life is pitiful - filled with loneliness and lostness, with suffering and sadness - forlorn folk that make us a little doubtful of the sentiment in Browning's lines - "Grow old with me....the best is yet to come."

And it's not only some examples that make us apprehensive of age, but also an attitude of society that is afraid of age. It's ironical that while medical science thinks of extended age as a blessing, our culture seems to treat age as a blight. Many try to pretend they are not aging. Some time ago I came across a parody of Shakespeare's "seven stages of man" called the "Seven Ages of Woman" and it went something like this: "infant, small child, adolescent, teen-ager, young lady, young lady, young lady". In more serious fashion, listen to Rabbi Abraham Heschel:

"more time and money are spent on the art of concealing the signs of old age than on the art of dealing with heart-disease or cancer....being old is a defeat....something to be ashamed of....authenticity and honesty of existence are readily exchanged for false luster, camouflage, sham and deception....only very few people are endowed with the rare and supremem courage to admit their true age without embarrassment. With the rest of us, courage and honesty go underground when the question of age is discussed."

But surely there is an alternative to this apprehension about age and this attempt to avoid its inevitability. For while there are some examples of old age that alarm us and fill us with concern, there are other examples that attract us and fill us with hope. I know that when I think about the afternoon of life at its brilliant best, I find myself thinking of Bishop Herbert Welch of the Methodist Church. When he was 80, he said this at a birthday luncheon held in his honor: "As I get older, life becomes simpler because I see the essentials more clearly in the evening light". Last November 7th, Bishop Welch celebrated his 104th birthday, and some of his fellow bishops say that the address which he gave to the Council of Bishops earlier this year, was one of the most forward looking, stimulating statements at that session. Perhaps some of you remember that evening five years ago when Bishop Welch, at the age of 99, preached from this pulpit. And perhaps you remember, too, hearing that on the night of the power failure a year ago last November, Bishop Welch was enjoying a movie at Radio City Music Hall. They called the Emergency Squad for an ambulance to come and take him back to his home on West 110th Street. They didn't believe the call and didn't respond, after all - a Bishop of the Church, 103 years of age, watching the show at Radio City.

Of course, this is highly unusual, but all of us can think of older people that we admire profoundly, and we find ourselves thinking that if only the afternoon of life could be like that, it wouldn't be so bad. We need to ask: what is the difference between old age that is inspiring and old age that is depressing. We need to remember: that the difference is not accounted for in the developments of attitudes and actions when we are past 65. An English social worker by the name of Agnes Royden puts it this way: "If you want to be a dear old lady at 70, you must begin early - say about 17". While there is always the possibility of change and growth in the kind of people we are, there is also a basic law at work in our lives that the afternoon of life will reflect something of the preparation of the morning.

Think now, for a few moments, about some of the factors that seem to make a difference in older people.

WHAT A PERSON DOES

First off, part of the difference seems to be explained by what a person does in the afternoon of life. Whistler's picture of his mother in a rocking chair suggest a certain serenity, but it also suggests an element of boredom. For many people, I would suspect that the afternoon of life is a kind of anguish because they don't know what to do with their time and their talents.

Some people turn to hobbies and recreation and this may be a helpful part of the answer. Someone said: "A portfolio of hobbies is a better investment for retirement than a portfolio of grade 'A' securities". ~~And certainly there can be some real zest in giving time and attention to some favorite interests that have been only partly developed across the years.~~

But hobbies are hardly the whole answer. Another step up the ladder of afternoon activity is in the volunteer service that older people give in countless ways. As I was thinking about this sermon, I stopped to think about the number of retired and semi-retired persons who give so much of their time and talent in various ways to the work of our churches and community organizations. I don't know what we would do without them, and I dare to think that their involvement means a certain satisfaction to them. Many organizations, including the church, profit from the shared skills and time that older people can give.

But then I think that there is an even higher degree of afternoon activity, in a characteristic concern for other people. One of the perils of afternoon is self-pity and self-centeredness. But one of the privileges of afternoon is more time and opportunity to express a concern for others. We all know of older people who with

apparent adequate reason to dwell upon their own problems, still perform a mighty ministry to others in their expression of thoughtfulness and love. I remember one elderly lady of this church who has since gone to her reward. Often she was confined to her bed with some painful limitation of health, but she would often call the church for the names of others who were shut-in and she would then call them from her phone by her bedside, and share a cheerful word with them.

The point is this: what a person does with the afternoon of life - both from his own initiative in sensing a need that he or she can meet - and from the encouragement of others in showing him where he is needed - this makes such a difference in determining whether the afternoon of life will be marked by emptiness or fulfillment.

WHAT A PERSON IS Come a second step and see that the difference in older people is explained not only by what a person does, but even more basically by what a person is in the afternoon of life. Dr. Paul Tournier, the Swiss physician, makes an important insight for us in writing in the afternoon of his own life when he says:

"The die is cast. That which I have been able to do, to learn, or to acquire is gradually losing its value. The doing and the having are giving way to the being. What is important for the aged is not what they are still able to do, nor yet, what they have accumulated, and cannot take with them. It is what they are!"

Now there may come a time in the afternoon of life when there are serious limits to what a person can do with his life, but there are no such limits to what a person can be. Perhaps you know some older people who live from a "great depth of being". They are sadly restricted in what they can now do, but whenever we go to them with the thought of helping them we come away realizing that it has been the other way around for we receive a benediction from what they are.

One day when John Quincy Adams was 80 years of age a friend met him in the street of Boston. "How is John Quincy Adams?" this friend asked. The old man's eyes began to twinkle and his answer has become a classic:

"John Quincy Adams himself is very well, thank you.....but the house he lives in is sadly delapidated. It is tottering on its foundations. The walls are badly shattered, and the roof is worn. The building trembles with every wind, and I think that John Quincy Adams will have to move out of it before long. But he himself is very well".

"He himself is very well!" - the art of being is more than the art of doing.

I have a theory - a theory which my family and friends one day may have occasion to reject or confirm. My theory is that while I do not have a great deal to say about the physical limitations that must one day overtake me, and while I do not have a great deal to say about the mental limitations that may one day overtake me, nonetheless I do have something to say about the kind of older person that I will become - that by the grace of God, I do not have to be cantankerous and crotchety - that I might be a reasonably glad and grateful person. And the thing that gives me hope is the number of older people that I have been privileged to know who through their gathering infirmities have still provided a radiant benediction in their being.

WHAT HE BELIEVES Which leads us to a third basis of difference between older people. The difference is explained not only by what a person does, nor by

what he is - but also by what he believes and I'd venture to say that this third factor really determines the other two. If a person believes that his life is meaningless and meandering, then almost inevitably the afternoon of life will be a gathering of shadows and gloom. But if, on the other hand, a person sees his life as God-given, God-guided, with the knowledge that there has been grace for every step of the way and with the confidence that God has the last word, even over death, then "at even tide, it is light"... And here again, the strength and vitality of the faith of some older people should be an inspiration to the rest of us in the forenoon and ~~afternoon~~ of life. From them, we receive encouragement in the nurture of our own faith.

How fortunate it is that in the New Testament we have both Jesus and Paul. Of Jesus, we sing, "O young and fearless prophet". And we think of him always as a young man whose earthly life was interrupted by a cross. Nothing can ever detract from the splendid strength of his youth - but then came Paul, for whom it was almost noon-day when his ministry began, and then for the long years he lived and labored until one day he wrote those immortal words and sent them to Timothy, the young man: "I have fought the good fight - I have finished the race - I have kept the faith". "Henceforth then is laid up for me the crown of righteousness".

Earlier ^{WE} referred to Browning's formula for the future and seemed to dismiss it as a kind of romantic optimism. But the trouble is that we do not often take the time to follow that quotation on in the context of the faith in which it is set.

"Grow old along with me.
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand,
Who saith, 'A whole I planned',
Youth shows but half; trust God:
See all nor be afraid."

To which the mature Christian should be able to say - "Amen, Amen"

LET US PRAY Grant, we beseech Thee, O God, that the words which we have heard this day with our outward ears, may, through thy grace, be so grafted inwardly in our hearts that they may bring forth in us the fruit of good living, to the honor and praise of thy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen