

When Pastor Rob invited me to be part of the grief series, the message on losing health and vitality seemed best for me to take, given that I've seen more birthdays than either Pastor Rob or Pastor Lisa. I didn't anticipate how hard this would be. Because the number of birthdays and health challenges for many of you surpass mine, you would be better suited to share the message than me. Thank you for being here this morning and for listening, and for praying for me that we walk away having experienced some truth-telling about grief, and some hope.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts carry us into your presence, Holy One. These things we ask through Jesus, our brother, friend, Savior and Lord. AMEN.

I once visited a church member who at the time had moved to Wesley Willows in Rockford. Though she appeared to be in her 80's she was actually 108. So vital she was both physically and mentally that she lived independently in one of the duplexes. She was beyond spry! *I love that word, which means able to move quickly, easily, used especially to describe an older person.* Members and friends of our own congregation are spry in their 90's as well and we want to be like them. As time passes some of us will, and some of us won't.

At younger ages we can dose ourselves with a feeling of exceptionalism. I'm going to be exceptional like that independent 108 year old. I don't want to face the health issues and challenges I see in others. But then, we do.

In early March I lost my balance and broke my wrist. Given that I was defending our smaller dog from a larger one who came at us, the story I spun for myself ~ I'm healthy, vital, and it all happened in the line of duty. By mid summer I was healed up and back to my old self. A few weeks later I was walking too fast, slipped, fell and fractured my left wrist. Perhaps at a younger age I could have fallen without a fracture. This time there were no illusions or delusions to make me feel better. Forced I was, to acknowledge my own declining bone health, my own vitality. How could I help but grieve?

Many of you have suffered worse than I have. Hips, knees, shoulders, in the orthopedic realm, eyes, and a host of things with lungs and heart. Some of us are cancer survivors, or are living with cancer this very moment.

With all of this in mind, what about our brains, our minds? Do our short term memory issues mean we're soon to be among our sisters and brothers struggling with dementia?

Erik Erickson's theory of life stages defines the last one as integrity vs. despair. These two things are not at war with one another. It's more that they are in tension. We can waver back and forth. In our later years we look back. We make judgments. Of the good we've done we can be shockingly forgetful. Our regrets can loom large. I could have done this. I didn't do that. When we look back at who and what we were it's natural to become emotional, to grieve, to mourn the diseases, the accidents, the missteps, the mistakes.

Some of you know the phrase, perhaps our own parents used it, "snap out of it." What if we honestly see no way to snap out of it? Where does that leave us?

Our grief and mourning can be similar to that of the disciples, mourning the death of their beloved Rabbi Jesus. Who can blame them for being fearful for their own lives given how Jesus was executed him. In the midst of this despair and grief they soon would find out it's God who has the last word. Our risen Lord came to them and things have never been the same since!

Maybe a way to be in this is to consider that we are in something like the upper room. We are in a waiting room, waiting for what OUR next chapter might look like.

What might it have been like for Simeon, waiting all those years on a promise that he one day would see the Messiah? As it turns out, he did more than just observe. It was Simeon who confirmed Jesus, confirming for his parents the hints they had about him from the angel's visits and the dreams. Taking Jesus from his parent's arms, he holds him and sings a prayer. I'm set free now. I can go in peace, for with my very own eyes I have seen the savior of the world, light for the nations.

Is he an older man? Many think so but we can't say for sure. He does sing that he can now die peacefully.

Anna on the other hand, is a fixture in the women's court of the Jerusalem Temple. Like many 84 year olds, she is strikingly beautiful. She is a teacher, a prophet, someone to whom people have been looking and listening for years. When she lays eyes on the baby Simeon holds, she knows the time is near for change, for something new, for her nation to be pulled back and out of the troubles that so plague it. That's what redemption means.

Anna and Simeon were no longer able to run races or stay up until the wee hours of the morning, or work long hours at physical or mental

labor, or keep up with toddlers and young children. But by this time they had seen many families bring their babies to the Jerusalem Temple and this day they knew who and what they saw. In their greater years they made the most important contribution of their lives. They confirmed Jesus is the one, and he is the one. As sure as his execution was not the final word, wherever we are right now is also not the final word. In times of grief we wait, we hope, we trust. Amidst our grief our Lord isn't finished with us yet, so why should we be?

Pastor Mary Gay McKinney