

“You’re Only Old Once”5th in series “*The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*”

Leviticus 19: 32

Sam Jones UMC 05 30 2010

Pre-Introduction

Today we conclude the May worship series entitled *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*. Over the past weeks, we have looked at the gospel message from a slightly different perspective. The sermons have included *Oh, the Places You Will Go*, *Because a Little Bug Went Ka-choo*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, and *The Cat in the Hat*. We finish this morning with a book for much older “children” entitled *You’re Only Old Once*.

Scripture Lesson: Leviticus 19:32**Introduction**

*One day you will read in the National Geographic
Of a faraway land with no smelly bad traffic*

*In those green-pastured mountains of Fotta-fa-Zee
Everybody feels fine at a hundred and three
'cause the air that they breath is potassium-free
and because they chew nuts from the Tutt-a-Tutt Tree.
This gives strength to their teeth, it gives length to their hair,
And they live without doctors, with nary a care.*

*And you’ll find yourself wishing that you were out there
In Fotta-fa-Zee and not in this chair
In the Golden Years Clinic on Century Square
For Spleen Readjustment and Muffler Repair.
Just why are you here? You’re not feeling your best . . .
You’ve come in for an Eyesight and Solvency Test!*

Theodor Geisel—better known by his famous pseudonym of Dr. Seuss—published *You’re Only Old Once!* in honor of his 82nd birthday on March 2, 1986. It was one of the last books he wrote before his death five years later in 1991.

The subtitle of the book reads: “***A Book for Obsolete Children.***” It is a poignant and yet humorous examination of aging. The book’s dust jacket asks:

*Is this a children’s book? Well . . . not immediately.
You buy a copy for your child now
And give it to him on his 70th birthday!*

Children of ALL ages will enjoy the book. It provokes both laughter and tears. While turning the pages, Dr. Seuss teaches us some important lessons about growing older.

I. Growing Older

I must confess that the title of the book is a bit problematic. *You're Only OLD Once!* I've found that a person can get in big trouble **defining the word "old!"**

In a previous church, I was preaching about acting childlike at any age. Then I described watching a mature woman kicking through a fall leaf pile like a little girl. My critical mistake came when I described her as **"an older woman in her sixties!"** Every woman in her sixties who was present at worship met me at the door after church!

"Old" is a sliding scale depending upon who you ask. Some folk panic on their 40th birthday. Adults become eligible for the AARP on their 50th birthday. (Actually, I started receiving multiple invitations two years beforehand). Medicare kicks in at 62. Sixty-five is the traditional age for retirement. In the United Methodist Church, clergy must retire by age 72.

In the name of self-preservation, I will let you determine for yourself if you are old. Like those warnings on car mirrors, however, it's closer than it appears! As one person told me, "I knew I was going to get old—I just didn't realize it happened at such a young age!"

For those who are uncertain about your age-status, here are some guidelines. **You might be getting older IF:**

- You get free coffee at McDonald's without asking!
- Pretty girls call you "sir" at the mall!
- When you bend down, you stay awhile in case there's something else that needs doing at floor level!
- When the only part you exercise is caution!
- You make the same noises as your coffee maker!
- Your retirement portfolio is heavily invested in metals: you have silver in your hair, gold in your teeth, a steel socket in your hip, and lead in your pants!

Age is ultimately relative. After all, **OldER** is a comparative term. OldER than who or what? Older normally means older than ourselves. However, older gets younger in a hurry! In my own experience, ages I once considered OLD are now MUCH YOUNGER!

I knew a group of World War II veterans who enjoyed meeting for breakfast at the local Kentucky Fried Chicken. A member of their group was about to celebrate his 90th birthday. One friend kidded the birthday boy by saying, "I don't know that I would want to live to be 90." Without hesitation, the man replied, **"You would if you were 89!"**

II. Contemporary Culture

Regardless of one's definition, there is no doubt that our nation is growing older. The **"Graying of America"** is an important demographic trend. The United States has one of the oldest populations in world history. According to the last census, 35 million Americans—1 out of 8 people—are over 65 years old. There are now more people over 65 than under 18.

The first Baby Boomers born in 1946 turn 65 next year. The transition of this huge group from the work place to retirement will have a tremendous impact. The Census Bureau predicts that senior citizens 65 years plus will **DOUBLE** by 2030.

This dramatic change in the United States' demographic make-up signals a sea change in our society. The impact is seen in health care, independent living facilities, retirement homes, investment funds, political influence, social services, and much more. The change provides both challenges and opportunities, not only for our **culture** but also the **church**.

III. Honor and Respect

The **Bible** addresses the topic of older adults quite extensively. In contrast to cultures that abandoned the old and infirm, the Hebrew people revered their elders. Both the Old and New Testament teach that older adults are a valuable resource to be cherished and treasured.

The commandment to "*Honor your father and your mother*" primarily addresses the relationship between parents and children. However, the spirit of the law is based in a reverence for older adults in general.

In our Scripture lesson today, Leviticus 19: 32 commands: "*Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God.*" Note the linkage between honoring the elderly and revering God. To do one is to do the other. And I would propose that you can tell a lot about a culture by the way it treats the elderly.

We respect the aged both for who they are and the virtues they possess. One of the prime attributes associated with "seasoned citizens" is **wisdom**. Younger people possess intelligence, knowledge, energy, ability, and talents. However, we intuitively recognize that wisdom is a gift that only comes with the passing of the years.

Wisdom does not *automatically* come with age. People can be like the job applicant who claimed to have twenty years of experience but had changed jobs frequently. Following a lengthy interview, his potential employer finally said, "You don't have twenty years of experience. You have one year of experience twenty times!"

Simply surviving to an old age will not make you wise any more than saving a bottle of Welch's grape juice will transform it into a vintage wine!

Wisdom is gained as you go through the four stages of personal development:

- Stage 1: You believed your parents knew everything.
- Stage 2: You believed you knew everything.
- Stage 3: You learned that you really didn't have the answers to most of life's questions.
- Stage 4: You finally know most of the answers, but now nobody asks you the questions!

Spiritual wisdom comes through a long life of following in the footsteps of Jesus. Those who have been there and done that have the wisdom to prove it. Their experience gives them a longer-term perspective on life than younger people have earned.

There are different ways to **define wisdom**. From a Scriptural perspective, wisdom means both knowing God's Word and then acting upon this knowledge in the world. Mature men and women of God have learned wisdom through hard-earned experience. In turn, they can teach these lessons to those willing to listen.

IV. Challenges

God instructs us to honor and respect those who are older than ourselves. The Bible also addresses **older adults directly**. The Lord has special instructions for us as we age.

I'm not sure who first said it, but growing older is NOT for sissies! Ted Geisel certainly recognized this. He wrote from his own experiences of physical ailments. After our poor hero in *You're Only Old Once!* has been poked, prodded, and paraded naked around the Golden Years Clinic, he must then submit to the **"pill and bill drill!"**

*For your Pill Drill you'll go to Room Six Sixty-three,
Where a voice will instruct you, "Repeat after me . . .
This small white pill is what I munch at breakfast and right after lunch.
I take the pill that's kelly green before each meal and in between.
These loganberry-colored pills I take for early morning chills.
I take the pill with zebra stripes to cure my early evening gripes.
These orange tinted ones, of course, I take to cure my charley horse.
I take three blues at half past eight to slow my exhalation rate.
On alternate nights at nine p.m. I swallow pinkies. Four of them.
The reds, which make my eyebrows strong, I eat like popcorn all day long..
The speckled browns are what I keep beside my bed to help me sleep.
This long flat one is what I take if I should die before I wake.*

And the older people of God say, "AMEN!"

One of the first churches I served after seminary was Emory Chapel UMC outside Newnan, Georgia. I'm not saying it was an elderly congregation, but the president of the youth group was 72 years old! Each week we gathered before worship for an **organ recital**. People would talk about their hearts, lungs, kidneys, livers, and bladders!

Growing older brings with it unique challenges and blessings. Yet we believe that our Lord is with us in **every age and stage of life**. Too often we look forward to the future or reminisce about the past rather than living for God in the present. The only time we can serve God is TODAY.

The Bible also challenges older adults to continue a life of fidelity and service. There is **no earthly retirement plan** for Christians. But the benefits are out of this world!

I always enjoy watching the Summer **Olympic Games** and the variety of events. The athletic events remind me how important it is to **end well**. In gymnastics, a high score is dependent upon "sticking" the landing without a step. In diving, an athlete can do a back three and one-half tuck with a twist, but if she does not hit the pool vertically, the large splash is a major deduction. Sprinters and marathon runners have lost the race when they slackened the pace at the final moment.

Using the same Olympic Games' imagery, Paul wrote about fighting the good fight and running the good race. We are challenged to cross the finish line at full speed and run our best in the beginning, middle, and end of the course. Psalm 92: 12-15 declares:

*"The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God.
They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming,*

‘The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is not wickedness in him.’”

I like another version of this Psalm that says the mature person of God is **“ever full of sap and green!”** The mature man and woman of God is green and sappy—not a bad combination!

OldER adults also set an example for the church. They teach by their words and actions what it means to live as a mature men and women of God. Let me say to those who are older than me that you are my **pioneers** of faith. You are traveling a road I have yet to reach. And your example teaches me what it means to live as a Christian in your 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and beyond.

My greatest heroes and heroines of faith are older Christians I have been privileged to know over the years. Their words, actions, and attitudes have shaped my understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ in every age and stage of life. They teach me how to live—and how to die—as a person of faith.

Life begins with limitless potential. An infant is the embodiment of future possibilities. If you graphed a life, then two lives would diverge at birth into ever widening arcs. Possibilities expand exponentially as a child matures.

At some point in midlife, however, the arcs peak and then begin to narrow. Future possibilities contract rather than expand. People sometimes experience a mid-life crisis as they realize all of their hopes and dreams may not come true. At this point, folk must face the fact that they may not be President of the United States, hit .400 in Major League Baseball, appear as a fashion model on the cover of Vogue, work as CEO of their own company, or win a gold medal in the Olympics.

Aging brings all sorts of challenges. We are not able to do what we once did. Some enter into a second childhood. The two lines ultimately come back together at the point of death when all future possibilities seemingly end.

However, we as Christians believe that death is simply another stage of life. Jesus said: *“Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”* Death actually opens up infinite new possibilities for an eternity spent in God’s presence.

And if you continue the graph, what you discover is that our lives take on the shape of a fish—the symbol of Christianity, the sign of growing ever more mature in the Lord. <>

Conclusion

You’re Only Old Once! concludes after the “pill drill” is complete. Dr. Seuss tell us:

*When at last we are sure you’ve been properly pilled,
Then a few paper forms must be properly filled
So that you and your heirs may be properly billed!
Whereupon . . . if you’re smart,
There’s a very good chance that you’ll meet soon again*

*With your socks, coat, and pants.
And you'll know, once your necktie's back under your chin
And Norval has waved you Godspeed with is fin,
You're in pretty good shape for the shape you are in!*

We are called to serve God in every age and stage of life. We also honor those who are older than us for their wisdom and example. As pioneers of faith, they blaze the path into a future. If we live long enough, we will some day join them. You're only old once—make the most of it while you can.