

“My wife, I came to realize, had given me a choice: either I could be bad at trying to be the person I’d been before I got sick, or I could figure out who I was now and learn to be good at that.” Edward Readicker-Henderson (AARP, The magazine, July/August 2007).

In talking about his journey with Crohn’s disease, Readicker-Henderson makes this provocative statement. Provocative because it forces new thoughts to mind! Does anyone ever stop being the person they are, no matter what happens to their mind or body? A major piece of me affirms that we always are who we are and that illness and frailty are used as excuses for not living out that personhood. But I also affirm that, in some very tangible ways, illness and frailty change us. So what do we make of this statement? Reading the entire article reveals that Readicker-Henderson is who he had always been, but has had to find new ways of being so. He had to acknowledge the facts of his life. He had to decide if they would cause anger and resentment or whether they would lead him in new ways of being who he was.

That is a major crux of ministry with older adults. So many are ill and frail, so many can no longer do the things they once did. They need help in many areas. Some need assistance with personal hygiene; some need it with managing their finances; some have memory issues; some are physically limited. Helping older adults move beyond anger and bitterness, beyond depression and resignation in response to their limitations is a key in such ministry. Who is better equipped to do so than those entrusted with a message of hope, a message of abundant life?

The task of such ministry is to find ways to witness to our faith that life doesn’t end until we draw our last breath and that God is always present to help us “figure out who I was (*am*) now and learn to be good at that.” Helping the older adult to find new things to do, new ways to serve, new avenues of interest is always a challenge. But in so doing we give witness to our faith in a God who is always creating. It is helping the older adult discover in her/his new day, as our hymn writer puts it, *This is a day of new beginnings.*”

We are about a ministry that acknowledges the reality – age often brings limitations with it. We are in a ministry that enables people to face those limitations because they are a fact of life. But we are also about a ministry of challenging people to see those limitations as a call to continue being who they were and are. It is a ministry that helps them to see that the limitations do not define them as unique persons unless they choose to let them do so.

How we do that is as different as the person and the setting. That we do that is not an option if we are to remain true to our faith in a ever creating God.

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