

Some years ago Elizabeth Kubler Ross wrote a book, To Live Until We Say Goodbye. It was a photo journal of people with terminal illnesses who allowed her to document the way they spent their last days. It was a beautiful book, giving the reader a glimpse into seeing death from a new perspective, and therefore seeing life from that same new perspective. The book vividly showed people living full, creative lives right up until the moment of their dying.

I thought of this book the other day when I received word that Esther had died. Esther was 95, a retired congregational minister, who lived at the United Methodist Homes in Shelton, CT. She was one of my favorite people. She read and discussed all the most recent books in theology, she pushed us as a community to be more ecologically involved, she struggled with contemporary issues trying to decide what response was the most Christian, studied the Bible with an open mind and spirit, constantly sought new insight, and truly loved and lived her life right up until the last moment.

I will, and already do, miss her greatly. She was a unique gift to the world. Indeed she was a unique gift to me. Her life was, and will remain, a constant reminder of a truth to remember as we do ministry with and for older adults. Simply put – Value their gifts! Allow those gifts to be used! More to the point perhaps is the flip side of these positive statements. Do not infantilize the older adult! She is always more than an illness or an infirmity! Do not assume the older adult cannot be challenged to grow! He is always able to see life as a gift to be used as fully as possible!

All older adults may not have the intellectual capacity or curiosity with which Esther was endowed, but they can grow – even in the most difficult circumstances. Allow your ministry with and for them to challenge them to accept the gospel call to abundant living even in their senior years. Simply keeping them busy is demeaning and unproductive. Struggle to create ministries of service and of new experiences. How you do that will be as different as the person or group with whom you work, but not to do so is to miss an opportunity to put flesh on the call to abundant living.

Older adults are often sidelined by the inevitability of aging. The church needs to faithfully keep the vision of God in Jesus before us. God always sees beyond the limitations and sees a wholeness that we must accept for ourselves and which we must always offer to the older adult.

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