

“Marion, you’re just old!” As I write these words, I smile, even as I am amazed at the way they redirected my mother’s later years. I had taken her to see the doctor after hearing her talking about her aches and pains. Figuring that something might really be wrong since she usually gave very short shrift to such things I took her to see the doctor. She went, not reluctantly, but apprehensively, because she did not know what was wrong with her and was concerned it might be something serious. As I sat waiting for her to come out of his office I had some growing concern. But it all disappeared as the door to the office opened and she came out wearing a huge smile. “Mom, what did he tell you, what’s wrong?” The smile grew even bigger, leading to giggles and a hearty laugh. “He said nothing is wrong! He said, “Marion, you’re just old!” It was a relief to her! She would later remark, “How could I have missed it?”

Getting older often brings aches and pains in places we don’t even know we have. They obviously need to be diagnosed by a doctor before simply being dismissed, in case they are signs of something significant. But there is a relief in knowing “Marion, you’re just old!” There is relief in honesty and realism. There is relief in knowing that the aging process is normal and, as such, no reason to sit and fret, obsessing over what we cannot change.

That doctor redirected my mother’s later years. He led her back to her normal attitude of enjoying every moment of her life. Even when the aches and pains would be more pronounced she didn’t worry. She would, at such moments, often smile and remark, “I guess he was right, I am just old.”

What a departure from so many peoples’ approach to aging! How often I hear someone say, “Don’t say that word to me! I don’t want to be old!” And how often I say, “Why not? Being old is not a disease to be avoided! We all get there someday if we live long enough.” Pastors, family members and other caregivers do a person a disservice by not acknowledging the reality. Being older is not a curse; it is simply a new phase of life. It can be full and meaningful, but not if we run from it, not if we skirt the issues it brings, not if we see it as off limits for discussion. The truth is that aging often brings limitations we did not have before, but that does not mean it is not rife with possibilities for new experiences and new possibilities for growth. These possibilities will not be explored and discovered without first acknowledging, “Marion, there is nothing wrong with you, you’re just old.”

So, in your caring for an older adult, be honest! Acknowledge the aches and pains, the limitations that might be there! But encourage them to be seen in context! “There is nothing wrong!” Encourage them to be seen as reasons for adjusting what and how we live our lives, not as a reason to stop living our lives! Encourage an attitude that sees beyond the aches and pains, the limitations and the frustration that often accompanies such things! Encourage an attitude of life as a journey down continually changing paths, down paths replete with new possibilities.

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