

As I write, it is two short weeks until Christmas. They will pass quickly because there is so much to get done between now and then. As has been true for over forty-five years, I have been and will continue, for the next two weeks, to preach about waiting and preparing. But as is also true that as a person who preaches two or three times a week, there is very little waiting in my life. It is more about rushing to the next season than it is about waiting for it. Any preacher knows it is an ironic irony of ordained ministry that the one thing we need most is the one thing we have trouble finding – time to sit and wait, time to contemplate and prepare.

What a different experience than that of one of our residents at Wicke Health Center, who just yesterday was stating, what to her was, an absolute fact, “I have nothing to do but wait!” She was not particularly complaining, but rather resignedly commenting on her state of mind. Like many older adults, she senses that the most meaningful part of her life is already behind her. Her family of origin is gone, her best friends are gone, even her adult children are gone in the sense that they live out of state and rarely visit. Her dreams are largely of past events, rather than future ones. She struck a chord deep within me, because I suspect that she speaks for a large group of older adults, not just those in nursing homes, but those living in their own homes or with family. The sense of life being over runs deep through this age population. Visit any Senior Center and listen to the number of people who tell you they go to all the activities, “Because at least it gives me something to do, it passes the time away.”

While applauding the fact that such centers exist and offer valuable services, and while applauding all those who seek to help older adults ‘enjoy’ their days, I nonetheless cannot help thinking that the Church is missing a golden opportunity in not addressing this issue of waiting for this age group. Our sense of the sacred worth of each life ought to cause us to wonder whether it is ever good enough to offer anyone – even older adults – a way too pass the time away. Would our ministry with and for such folk not be more faithful if we witnessed to such sacred worth by challenging them to be about service at least part of each day? How often I’ve asked one of our residents to do so, and how often their ultimate response is that of gratitude and fulfillment.

Aging does not have to be about waiting – at least not for the majority of people. Even with physical and cognitive limitations, there are always ways to enable service among this population. I have seen severely handicapped people patting another resident on the back, encouraging a brighter outlook! I have seen people in wheelchairs knitting and crocheting for someone they have never met! I have seen our residents walk, or ride alongside a lost resident so that he might find his room! I have seen more people with limitations reaching out to others in service that I am convinced ministry with this age group would do well to focus on encouraging and enabling such behavior as the requisite response to God’s love. And that goes not just for those ministering in nursing homes and the like, but for churches as well. How often do we not ask for help in our efforts from our older members simply because they are old? Each time we do, we encourage and enable the attitude of my friend, “I have nothing to do but wait!” We do not want to do that!

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