

# God's Call in Later Life

BY BETH JACKSON - JORDAN

Many older adults find they are as busy in retirement as they were earlier in life. Though their schedules are full, they may struggle to find a satisfying purpose for this stage of life. How can congregations help us, in our later years, hear a special calling from God?

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Sue, a slim, athletic-looking woman in her late sixties, came by my office to talk. "I used to play golf every day," she said. "In fact, that's why we retired here from New York. My husband wanted to be in a place where he could play golf year round." She looked out the window and sighed. "But after about three months, I began feeling like there had to be something more. I don't think I'm going to be happy unless I find something more useful to do—something that will make a difference. I want more out of this time in my life than just playing golf."

Many older adults find they are as busy in retirement as they were earlier in life. The activities have changed from their younger years, but the schedule is just as full. Yet, like Sue, many struggle to find a satisfying purpose for this stage of life.

Historians note that retirement is a relatively new concept. Until the twentieth century, few people retired, in the modern sense of the word. Most people worked until they wore out. With an increasing number of people in our society today who can expect twenty to thirty years of life after retirement, and many of those years with relatively good health, we are faced with new questions about the meaning, purpose, and tasks of later life.

The retirement industry aggressively markets retirement as a time of leisure and play, but as people of faith, perhaps we should consider whether these years could be a time of spiritual growth and renewal. In his book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi suggests this is a

time for “harvesting life,” taking time to reflect on the ways God worked in our lives, celebrating the contributions we made and acknowledging the wisdom we gained through life’s difficulties and losses. It is also a time to recognize the unique and often undervalued gifts elders have to offer. Wisdom, compassion and story-telling are just a few examples.<sup>1</sup>

Most ancient cultures had honored roles for their elders. Important

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societal roles included “Repositories of Wisdom,” “Celebrators of Rituals,” and “Transmitters of Sacred Knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Our society deeply needs modern versions of these roles because our elders possess unique potential to address many of the deep spiritual needs within our communities. For example, elders can serve as mentors in

intergenerational activities in schools and congregations or encourage multi-generation members of a family to stay connected through reunions or other events.

How can we come to see the inherent potential in the role of “elder”? Perhaps we need to begin by facing and moving beyond our own fears about aging. We are created as beings that develop some measure of physical strength, wisdom and experienced judgment, and caring attitude, but only gradually and over a long time. We come to have much to contribute, yet all of these virtues we gain through dependency upon God as well as our parents, families, communities, and eventually, the younger generation. As we consider our own journey of aging, we may find ourselves asking, “What is the meaning inherent in this process?”

### **OLD AGE AS A SYMBOL OF BLESSING**

One strand within the Judeo-Christian tradition sees age as a “blessing” from God. Age is sometimes described as a reward for virtuous living, as indicated in Proverbs 16:31: “Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.” Elders are also presented as people deserving special honor and respect: “You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:32).

While these ideas of old age as a blessing from God and as deserving honor from others may serve to encourage respect and combat the ageism so pervasive in our society, they can also lead to idealizing elders in a way that is not helpful. Setting older people apart to preserve a cherished “saintly grandmother or grandfather” image becomes a stereotype that

can be limiting to older people who may not themselves experience age as a "blessing."

### **OLD AGE AS A SYMBOL OF LOSS**

As a crucial counter-balance to the idea of old age as blessing, there is another, almost opposite theological view also evident in the biblical tradition. Old age as a symbol of loss focuses primarily on the limitations of aging, as expressed in Ecclesiastes 12:1-5, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" (Or, as my friend Bea, an active, forthright retirement home resident, put it, "Getting old is hell!")

The writings of John Calvin also express a fairly dismal view of aging. Though he teaches that a long and blessed life is proof of God's favor, he also sees the physical decline of old age as a sign of God's punishment: "It is on account of our sins that we grow old and lose our strength."<sup>3</sup>

These grim views of aging impact our thinking and beliefs about the meaning and purpose of later life. It is important to note that these views reflect a time when those who survived into old age almost certainly endured disabling conditions, disease, and pain. Though we live in a time when science has found many ways to effectively treat and delay age-related diseases, old age still reminds us of our mortality and confronts us with the frailty of our physical body.

The theological dualism between age as blessing and age as loss manifests itself in many ways. While many acknowledge the time of retirement as a "reward" for persons who have worked for many years, there is also a growing trend to create retirement communities that segregate older adults from other age groups. Increasingly churches seem to believe that the only way to grow and flourish is to attract younger adults with families. Though we may credit the elders in our congregations and communities for their wisdom and faith, we often also see them as obstacles to progress and change and, at times, may relate to them in patronizing ways.

### **OLD AGE AS A CALLING**

We need a spiritual model of aging that goes beyond "Old Age as a Symbol of Blessing" or "Old Age as a Symbol of Loss." I find "Old Age as a Calling" helpful. Surely God has a special calling for those who in later life have many fruitful years ahead with a wealth of experience, learning, and gifts. What are the emotional and spiritual tasks of later life and how can our preaching and teaching address them? How can God use those whose bodies, though failing, retain a spirit and story that are often a hidden treasure?

The Bible provides us with wonderful examples of older adults who responded to God's call in later life. When Abraham set out with his people for the land of Canaan, we are told he was already seventy-five years old.

At the age of eighty, Moses led his people out of Egypt. And Joshua, at the age of eighty, succeeded Moses to become the leader of Israel. In the New Testament, we find the story of Jesus presented as a child at the temple to receive the blessing of the elders, Simeon and Anna. Anna, who was at least eighty-four years old, was so certain of her calling that “she never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:25-38).

### **CREATIVE MODELS OF MINISTRY**

As people of faith, we must begin to imagine the range of possibilities

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for continuing to respond to God’s call to share our talents, ideas, and dreams in later life. What would happen if older adults, younger adults, and church leaders began thinking together about reclaiming the role of “elder”? The potential for creative models of ministry and outreach is truly exciting. New mod-

els must honor the need to spend reflective time “harvesting life” while claiming the vision of “Old Age as a Calling.”

We must develop creative approaches for spiritual growth and contribution in later life. The practice of writing “Ethical Wills” is an ancient practice which many are rediscovering. In contrast to a legal will, by which we bequeath our material possessions to heirs, an Ethical Will is a document written at any point in life in which we record the beliefs and values by which we want to be remembered.<sup>4</sup> Older adults might wish to create versions of Ethical Wills to leave as spiritual legacies for their family and church communities.

In the spring of 1998, a group of approximately forty older adults from my church gathered for a retreat. Hosted by an older member of the church who had moved away to live with family, the purpose of the retreat was to tell stories about the earlier years of the church. Participants were given “prompts” ahead of time to help focus their storytelling. Video and audio recorders were set up and the stories began flowing, frequently accompanied by laughter or tears. Afterwards the tapes were made available to anyone in the church for viewing and the words were transcribed into a text that is kept in the church library. Since that retreat, several of these “living libraries” have passed from this earthly life. But because of the dream of one elder, the stories of friendship, faith, struggle, and hope

were preserved as a legacy for future generations of this community.

As a chaplain to older adults in a variety of settings, I have learned that older adults neither want to be idealized nor discounted. Openness to a new vision of God's purpose for those in later life is vital for the chaplain or pastoral caregiver ministering with older adults. Such a vision will expand the boundaries of our current aging ministries profoundly.

A few months after my conversation with Sue, I was walking down the hall of the skilled nursing facility where I worked. Hearing laughter from a room I was passing, I looked in and saw Sue, now a regular volunteer, in conversation with a frail resident. It seemed Sue had discovered a purpose in later life which could be fulfilled, not only on the golf course, but also in the room of one who needed what she had to give.

May God's call in later life transform and renew the expectations of aging for us all—a time for “harvesting” the spiritual riches of life.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1 Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1995), 57.

2 Robert J. Best, “The Spiritual Role of the Elder in the Twenty-First Century,” in D. Moberg, ed., *Aging and Spirituality: Spiritual Dimensions of Aging Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001), 21-30.

3 K. Brynold Lyon, *Toward A Practical Theology of Aging* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 35.

4 Barry Baines, M.D. *The Ethical Will Resource Kit: Preserving Your Legacy of Values For Your Family* (Minneapolis: Josaba Limited, 1998), 1-3.

5 A few paragraphs of this article are borrowed from my article “God's Call In Later Life: A Theological Reflection on Aging,” *Chaplaincy Today*, volume 17 (2001), 18-21. I thank the editor for permission to use the material.



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