

Falling Upward

July 9, 2017

Genesis 18: 1-16

Corinthians

The Oaks of Mamre hosts our passage today. Mamre, near to Hebron in today's Palestinian West Bank, was known for its trees: strong, large trees, probably a terebinth or the more familiar oak. One of these trees was known as "Abraham's Oak". Two other episodes in the patriarch's life took place there besides the one you are about to hear. That this story takes place beside a tree makes absolute sense: long before Abraham hosted the three birth- announcing strangers, strong, old trees had been the site of visitations from other ancient near-eastern gods.

Listen to this story from Genesis 18:1-16

Genesis 18The Message (MSG)

18 ¹⁻² GOD appeared to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent. It was the hottest part of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing. He ran from his tent to greet them and bowed before them.

³⁻⁵ He said, "Master, if it please you, stop for a while with your servant. I'll get some water so you can wash your feet. Rest under this tree. I'll get some food to refresh you on your way, since your travels have brought you across my path."

They said, "Certainly. Go ahead."

⁶ Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. He said, "Hurry. Get three cups of our best flour; knead it and make bread."

⁷⁻⁸ Then Abraham ran to the cattle pen and picked out a nice plump calf and gave it to the servant who lost no time getting it ready. Then he got curds and milk, brought them with the calf that had been roasted, set the meal before the men, and stood there under the tree while they ate.

⁹ The men said to him, "Where is Sarah, your wife?"

He said, "In the tent."

¹⁰ One of them said, "I'm coming back about this time next year. When I arrive, your wife Sarah will have a son." Sarah was listening at the tent opening, just behind the man.

¹¹⁻¹² Abraham and Sarah were old by this time, very old. Sarah was far past the age for having babies. Sarah laughed within herself, "An old woman like me? Get pregnant? With this old man of a husband?"

¹³⁻¹⁴ GOD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh saying, 'Me? Have a baby? An old woman like me?' Is anything too hard for GOD? I'll be back about this time next year and Sarah will have a baby."

¹⁵ Sarah lied. She said, "I didn't laugh," because she was afraid.

But he said, "Yes you did; you laughed."

Usually sermons on this text center on offering hospitality—even to strangers. But this morning, I want to speak about aging. An aging tree, an aging man and laughing, aging woman. I see a creative God giving old age a new face. A face not of uselessness, incapacity, and apathy, but one of possibility, purpose and value. In their old age God continues to invest in Abraham and Sarah and God continues to invest you and me as we age.—even if pregnancy at age 100 is extreme (geriatric pregnancy used to refer to a mother over 35). Don't criticize Sarah for laughing: A sense of humor is imperative when speaking about or living through aging.

In the 1991 movie “City Slickers” a father (Billy Crystal) participates in his grade school son's class exploration of “What does your father do”. He is facing, not so well, the reality of his 40th birthday. In his angst this is what he says:

“Value this time in your life, kids, because this is the time in your life when you still have your choices. And it goes by so fast.

When you are a teenager you think you can do anything ...and do.

Your twenties are a blur.

Thirties, you raise your family. You make a little money and you think to yourself, ‘What happened to my twenties’?

Forties, you grow a little potbelly. You grow another child. The music starts to get too loud. One of your old girlfriends from high school becomes a grandmother.

Fifties, you have a minor surgery. You call it a procedure but it's a surgery.

Sixties, you'll have major surgery. The music is still loud but it doesn't matter because you can't hear it anyway.

Seventies, you and the wife retire to Fort Lauderdale. You start eating dinner at two o'clock in the afternoon. You have lunch around 10, breakfast the night before. You spend most of your time wandering around malls looking for the ultimate yogurt and muttering, ‘How come the kids don't call? How come the kids don't call?’

In your eighties you'll have a major stroke. You end up babbling at some nurse your wife can't stand but whom you call 'Mama'.

Any questions, class?"

Aging.

Don't tune out if you are not yet an AARP member or receiving Social Security.

If you aren't what you consider "older" you do have parents or grandparents or friends who are—and you will likely experience these years yourself, eventually, so this sermon is for everyone.

Sarah and Abraham, after providing traditional, generous Middle Eastern hospitality, hear a shocking announcement: Sarah, who had been promised a child years before now, finally, will become pregnant "Yeh sure", she says from behind the tent flap— "Those days are long gone." She laughs.

Is it a haha, a cynical "hah" or is it hysteria? Whichever it is it's not received well by the visitors who call her out on it.

Aging. We need to keep a sense of humor, but it's no laughing matter.

NO, "aging isn't for sissies". Yes, "pain is part of the deal". We want to believe "successful old age is old age without old age." And thank you, Robert Browning, that we will grow old together, the best is yet to be the last of life for which the first is made. So many clichés. Let's be realists:

There is a four letter word associated with aging and it starts with an 'L'—LOSS.

Loss as death, that is, of spouse, siblings, peers. For some of you it's a funeral a month, or even a funeral a week. That's heart-wrenching.

There's also loss experienced from the end of paid employment, work that used to offer rewards: financial, professional, social.

And loss the body of a 20 year old, sagging, bulging, aching...

And... loss of personal dignity: who knew you'd need so many devices and gadgets and aids and wires and pill bottles and specialists.

Loss of independence—loss of the ability to drive safely, among the most difficult.

Loss of time left—the end of life feels “present” rather than “future” as it was in one's youth and middle age.

Tragically, many experience the loss of a sense of lovability- that they are less able, less attractive, have less to give others, less to contribute to the world or family or church.

Loss in older age needs to be acknowledged, grieved, maybe even bitched about, but it doesn't need to become the only show in town.

When John Quincy Adams was well past the usual span of life, a young friend met him on the street and asked "How is John Quincy Adams today?" Adams replied:

“John Quincy Adams is very well, thank you. But the house he lives in is sadly dilapidated. It is tottering on its foundations. The walls are badly shattered and the roof is worn. The building trembles with every wind, and I think John Quincy Adams will have to move out before long. But he himself is very well, thank you.

Loss, yes, but there is more.

Opposites can coexist! There is such a thing as loss and gain coexisting, a luminescent darkness, decline and growth, a bright sadness: Eastern Orthodoxy believes that religious art isn't really religious art unless it has a bright sadness about it.

I'll talk about two this morning: A new way to think about growth. And the reality of love.

Morrie Schwartz; Remember Tuesdays with Morrie? Morrie's wisdom fills this volume by Mitch Albom, a journalist who interviews Morrie through his dying process. Reflecting on his years Morrie says: “Aging is not just decay, you know. It's growth. It's more than the negative that you're going to die; it's also that positive that you understand that you're going to die, and that you live a better life because of it.” (Tuesdays with Morrie p 118)

Pearl Buck. Author of The Good Earth

“Would I wish to be “young again? No, for I have learned too much to wish to lose it. It will be like failing to pass a grade in school. I have reached an honorable position in life because I am old and no longer young. I am a far more valuable person today than I was 50 years ago or 40 years ago, or 30, 10, or even 10. I HAVE LEARNED SO MUCH SINCE I WAS 70... This I suppose is because I have perfected my techniques so that I no longer waste time in learning how to do what I have to do. “

Richard Rohr. I’ve become a fan of Franciscan priest Richard Rohr. In his recent best seller Falling Upward (which I highly recommend) he describes the first and second halves of life. In the first half, a person creates a container for their life, commonly motivated by academic achievement, professional success, family responsibility, maximizing appearance and psychologically “winning”. This phase of life relies on right/wrong dualistic thinking, following rules, and developing ego.

The tasks of the first half of life yield in the second half of life to new tasks. Rohr calls it “falling upward” which results from the gradual process of surrendering what was important in the first half of life but whose time has drawn to an end, served its purpose. The transition from the first half of life to the second is the transition from necessary, needed ego work (being stronger, smarter, more successful, more attractive) to soul work, which Rohr says is a movement to “broader and deeper world, where the soul has found its fullness, is finally connected to the whole and lives inside the Big Picture.”

Falling upward: surrendering to a changed body, and growing, with humor, accepting limitations.

Falling upward: surrendering the need to be best and growing into acceptance of imperfection.

Falling upward: surrendering pride, and aggressive confrontation and growing into forgiveness, and gentle persuasion

Falling upward: surrendering black/white thinking and growing into the gray

Falling upward: surrendering self-sufficiency and growing into a deeper understanding of what it really means to “Lean on the Everlasting Arms”, trust in Jesus,

Falling upward amazes, energizes, delights, because one is still growing, not by striving in the way of youth, but by surrendering, embracing grace always has been present but maybe not needed so much!

Maybe this is what Paul is getting at in his 2nd letter to the Corinthian church. Our outer nature which is falling away is the persona and physique we develop early in life; but the inner nature, what can not be seen, i.e., is a growing soul is built with God A gestating soul with lasting power.

So yes, there is loss... but there is also a generative pathway toward personal and spiritual growth that has to wait for the gift of years.

There is more than loss: there is a continuing love.

God’s love never ends. God didn’t start loving us because we were cute as children, got an A on an algebra test in high school, graduated from a good college, won bonuses at work, or still weigh what we did when 18. It is not God’s nature to look at the wrinkles, age spots, gray hair or trembling hands. It’s not God’s way to dish out love because we are smart, attractive, productive, pious or even well-behaved. God loves us throughout our every stage and phase of life not because of what we do or who we are but because of who God is. This is unconditional, divine love! We receive God’s love not because we are worthy, not because we respond with gratitude or service. God just loves us. Period.

It may be that only in older age that we can grasp truth that we've heard for years-- that God's love just IS. What we used to think we could do to earn God's love is simply no longer physically or cognitively or mentally possible. And it doesn't matter!

God's unconditional love is an invitation to love ourselves at every age. Even the ancient rabbis taught that, "An elder and child equally reflect the divine image with all its potential for growth in accordance with the extravagance of God's love."

I took the liberty to paraphrase Paul writing to the Roman church:

Who, What will separate us from the love of Christ?

Will walkers and hearing aids?

Macular degeneration or dementia?

Bunions or weak knees or A-Fib?

Insomnia or Senior Moments?

Depends or Preparation H?

No, I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor aging, nor fear of dependency nor loss of first half of life success will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Loving the aging self— you know, it may just be an exercise in hospitality. (Yes, we found our way back to our Genesis text). Hospitality to the older friends and family and strangers of course. But to also

Welcome and greet and embrace the stranger when she's your aging self;

Wash your weary feet, bathe achy backs and soothe the stranger... when he's your aging self.

Satisfy the stranger at table with good food, meat, breads, (low salt, low fat, even pureed) when she's your aging self.

Sit down together with the stranger, yes when the stranger is that unrecognizable aging face (and body) you see in the mirror, AND to listen for the wisdom that stranger speaks—it might just be the voice of God inviting you to journey into a surprising and unexpected season of life.

And yes, you can do it all with laughter.