

Introduction to Bioethics
Trinity Baptist Church
February 26, 2017

Issues of Aging

Today we turn our attention to some of the issues and ethical challenges of aging. Too often I hear something like “We need to deal with the problems of aging” and I rancor at that for what we should ask is “How best to take advantage of the opportunities of aging.” In a Christian sense, how do I come to the end of life well and in a way that brings glory to God? In part this is an individual effort but in perhaps a greater sense it is a community effort and in our case a church effort.

First let us consider the two parts of aging. Here we distinguish body and soul. As our bodies age we experience more and more of the physical problems as our parts wear out. I believe this is all a result of sin and suspect that before sin the human body could continue to repair itself and enjoy health indefinitely. The fall led to the eventual deterioration of our bodies, introduction of disease and deterioration in our genetic code leading to aging and death. But when it comes to our souls aging allows for an increased knowledge of and experience with God which can be enriching. The challenge is to maximize the positive and minimize the negative.

Aging in today’s world provides a host of new opportunities. One statistic that graphically illustrates this is that at the time of the civil war a women lived an average of 3 years after her youngest was married, now even with people marrying later it is closer to 30.

I define aged as when the normal time related deterioration begins to compromise basic abilities. Or in a more lighthearted vein “When actions creak louder than words” and we go through the 7 stages of life, “spills, drills, thrills, bills, ills, pills and wills.” When people tell me they are getting older, I smile and say, “That’s good! for it means two things-you’re not old yet and you haven’t died yet so keep getting older.”

Demographics

With the length of life being extended and the birth rate falling the percentage of elderly increases. In 1900 there were 3.9 M over 65, in 2009 40 M and in 2050 the projection is 82M. By 2032 projections say there will be more > 65 than < 15. From a societal point of view the numbers drawing out social security will increase while those paying in will decrease destabilizing the entire system.

One other dramatic demographic change in the last half century that drastically effects the care of the elderly is the number of women employed full time outside the home. Fortunately at the same time the duration of functional deterioration prior to death has been significantly decreased allowing for more active productive years and less dependency.

Living arrangements

There are a number of living arrangements available for the elderly. No one situation is right for all. These include:

Independent--Most people want to live independently as long as possible. Many want to stay in their own homes but some are willing to downsize to make it more feasible. The state and social agencies are providing more and more assistance to facilitate this. From visiting nurses to full time aids, to meals on wheels there is much available. One of the down sides of living independently is social isolation particularly once they are no longer driving.

Living with children—This has many advantages, the senior can often find meaningful activity helping around the house and potentially have a positive impact on children. On the other hand their presence may inhibit many positive family activities or be rather isolating if the family is gone a lot.

Assisted living—These can provide many of the needs including basic care, meals, and social activities but they are expensive and rarely covered by state or long term insurance.

Group homes—Frequently one person or couple accept several elderly boarders and provide their care. Quality will go across a wide spectrum.

Nursing Home—currently 16% of those over 65 are in nursing homes. They provide full nursing care and are often covered by public aid once financial assets have been significantly depleted. One problem is that most states are not willing to cover the full cost of quality care and therefore they are often understaffed and provide a substandard level of care.

Biblical principles relevant to aging

God's sovereignty—even though the physical effects of aging are among the consequences of sin, God can work redemptively and accomplish his glory through the elderly years.

“God does not waste his time.” One of his goals is to wean our hearts from this life and long more for a new body, for him, his presence and his righteousness

God's presence—God is present through every stage of our lives he does not desert us in our old age..

Isaiah 46:3-4 “Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.

Psalms 23:4-6 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The elderly have wisdom

Job 12:12 Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length ourtheof days.

As we age our knowledge base may diminish but not necessarily our wisdom. But if we want more knowledge we can buy a bigger computer, if we want more wisdom we need to walk longer with the Lord. The challenge is for us to take advantage of that wisdom in whatever stage of life we find ourselves.

The elderly are to be respected

Leviticus 19:32 "You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

1 Timothy 5:1 Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father

The elderly are to be productive

My two rules for retirement:

Wake up every morning knowing what you are going to do that day

Go to bed every night knowing someone else was helped.

Consider Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Caleb, Simeon and Anna, Zechariah and Elizabeth

Psalms 92:12-15 The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Titus 2:2 Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness.

Titus 2:3-5 Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children,

Here the challenge is to help the elderly find ways to be productive. One of the greatest sorrows that I find in the elderly is the lack of meaning they have in their lives. I often share with my patients that we can live 40 days without food, 4 days without water and 4 minutes without meaning. I find that in our younger years we find meaning in all of the things we do, as we become less active our meaning is often in relationship with others, it may be confined to praying and encouraging. Then as life comes to an end it may be confined mostly to our relationship with God. These may be our most spiritually productive years.

As we get older we are not to give up but press on to finish the race well even as it becomes more difficult:

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Phil. 3:13-14 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 4:6-8 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Hebrews 12:1-4 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Note how the Scriptures teach us to continue to be productive even in adverse circumstances:

1 Peter 4:19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

They are to impact future generations

Psalm 71:17-18 O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come.

Psalm 145:4-7 One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness. They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

Psalm 148:12-13 Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children: Let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name alone is excellent; his glory *is* above the earth and heaven.

Longevity will at times reward righteousness

1 Kings 3:14 And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days.”

Proverbs 10:27 The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.

1 Peter 3:10-12 For “Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it.

Elderly years offer potential for spiritual growth

Peter tells us to grow in grace and knowledge (2 Pet 3:18). So long as we have any mental capacity left we can continue to learn and relearn basic lessons from scripture but we can also grow in grace as God continues to mold our characters. But growing in grace is more than a character issue, it also involves understanding how little we deserve God's love and how richly he extends it to us. Growth in grace seems to accelerate in the elderly

Fruit of the spirit-I have observed that there are often late blooming fruit that the spirit brings into our lives. Things like patience, gentleness and self-control may be seen more in our later years. God isn't through with us yet.

Spiritual gifts-Paul teaches that all believers have spiritual gifts which equip them to serve the Church. There is no age restriction to these. The elderly may not be gifted in the same way as in younger years but there are still activities where they can serve others and enrich the local church. I find that two of the big ones are prayer and encouragement.

Spiritual disciplines-Now that they have more time they may grow in their prayer life, fasting, meditating on scripture. They may spend time memorizing scripture even though they may not retain it like they used to. I recall one friend who complained "When I try to memorize scripture I feel like it just runs through like a sieve" but then she smiled and quipped, "but I have never seen a dirty sieve."

Personal holiness-We may not face some of the temptations of our younger years but we still need to be conscious of different temptations. I led a discussion with a group of seniors at a conference several years ago on the sins of the elderly. They mentioned such things as self-pity, pride, stubbornness, self-centeredness, worry, unholy discontent, anger, and lack of trust.

Gratitude-we need to focus on the many good things we can still enjoy in life and not on the losses we have experienced.

Sharing the gospel-early in life there are many obstacles to effectively sharing the gospel. Time is limited, personal relationships are often very goal oriented, we don't take time to get to know people on a more intimate level and at times it boils down to simply being "ashamed of the Gospel" something Paul was not (Rom 1: 16). These limitations may diminish in our later years.

Old age often leads to disability

Ecclesiastes 12:1-5 Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; (*gone are the pleasures*) before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened (*vision fails*) and the clouds return after the rain, (*going from one storm to another*) in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, (*weakness and tremors-? Parkinson's*) and the strong men are bent, (*spinal curvature*) and the grinders cease because they are few (*can't chew for lost teeth*), and those who look through the windows are dimmed, (*cataracts*) and the doors on the street are shut (*isolation*—when the sound of the grinding is low (*hearing loss*), and one rises up at the sound of a bird, (*early wakening, poor sleep*) and all the daughters of song are brought low (*decreased pleasure*— they are afraid also of what is high, (*fear of falling*) and terrors are in the way (*paranoia*); the almond tree blossoms (*grey hair*), the grasshopper drags itself along (*difficulty walking*), and desire fails (*sexual*), because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—

What advice are we given to cope with the physical losses of age? Remember or creator-remember that the God who made you is still in control through your aging. He knows what makes you tick, he knows what you need.

Being cold- **1 Kings 1:1** Now King David was old and advanced in years. And although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm.

Fatigued- **Psalm 71:9** Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent.

The elderly are to be provided for

Exodus 20:12 “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

The Rabbinic teaching was honoring primarily meant bearing the financial responsibility for the care of parents. Later with the development of the Talmud and even later of the Mishna this was strengthened to include providing for even their slightest whim. That was not the early interpretation.

Jesus emphasized the force of this command when he repudiated the Pharisaic practice of Corban, a legal loophole they would use to keep them from financially supporting their parents.

Mark 7:9-13 And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

Jesus provided for the care of his own mother

John 19:25-27 but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

Then New Testament emphasized the Church’s responsibility to care for widows:

James 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Acts 6:1 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

1 Timothy 5:3-10 Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the

sight of God. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

There are many things to be said here but note particularly that the primary care was to be given by family, the Church was only to be a back-up.

Dementia

One of the biggest downers of the end of life is dementia and this presents a host of ethical challenges. I will be dealing with this more extensively this summer when my most recent book is released *Finding Grace in the face of Dementia* but would like to make a few observations here.

If you will recall from our introductory lesson earlier this month, scripture teaches that all humans are created in the image of God and possess a unique dignity on that basis. That status is independent of their cognitive ability or functional level. The key point is that even the most demented person is made in God's image and should be treated with as much dignity as the most capable Nobel Laureate. How that is done will depend on their functional abilities. Early in dementia we may need to lovingly redirect them, help them find ways to serve and find meaning while being patient with their failures. Later in the course of the disease we will need to understand the world as they see it-in one sense be ourselves incarnate-and enter their worlds. It will not be wise to contradict them when they are wrong but out of respect for their dignity go along with them. So that when my Mom thought I was my Dad, I would not correct her but say "I love you Lois" which was very true. It means that when they ask the same question we patiently answer it, when they spit out their food we interpret it as "I don't like what you are giving me, would you be willing to try something else." When they undress in public we don't see it as exhibitionist but rather they are too warm or need to go to the bathroom. Out of respect for their dignity we will make sure they are comfortable and that their medical needs are provided even when they cannot communicate them.

Summary

Aging including dementia can present great challenges but it is also possible to experience it in a way that glorifies God.