

Nov. 25, 2018
Psalm 139:1-18
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Soul of Aging

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

As some of you are aware, my husband, Ron and I attended a Center for Courage and Renewal Seminar last April in which we were exposed to their new curriculum called the Soul of Aging. Using this material, Ron has led a group this fall at Thornton Oaks and I've been leading one here at church. It is a multi-week series which invites participants to reflect on their own experiences of aging and to share those reflections with others in a safe and supportive setting. We utilize silence, readings, journaling, poetry, and one-on-one, small group and large group conversations. People only share what feels appropriate to them.

Today, for our reading, I have chosen Psalm 139, which gives poetic expression to God's steadfast presence along life's journey.

SERMON

Those of us who have lived many decades can resonate with Dr. Seuss who said,
How did it get so late so soon?

In our culture, when we speak about aging it is often with a negative overtone. This reflects our tendency to idolize independence and our fear that we might lose that independence. But such a perspective on independence is really a falsehood. We never make it all on our

own. Offering and receiving support are part of what makes us human. We are social creatures.

In our group conversations instead of focusing on dying we talk about living. We have discussed:

- What our ancestors taught us about aging
- How our images of God have evolved
- claiming undeveloped parts of our lives
- embracing the good, the bad, and the ugly
- forgiveness

This whole series is based on the work of Parker Palmer, a Quaker educator and spiritual leader, who is now in his 80s. He wrote the session on what I call embracing the good, the bad, and the ugly. He called it being fierce with reality, which is a quote from Florida Scott-Maxwell. At 85 she wrote a book called *The Measure of my Days* in which she said,

You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done...you are fierce with reality.

Parker reflects on how he has used meditation, journaling, and therapy to help him be fierce with reality. But he also suggests:

- Spend time in nature. *That "mess" on the forest floor – like the mess in my own life – has an amazing harmony and hidden wholeness to it.*

- Move toward whatever you fear. *I remember advice I was given on an Outward Bound course when he froze with fear on a rock face in the middle of a one-hundred-foot rappel: "If you can't get out of it, get into it."*
- Reach out to the younger generation. *Not to advise them but to learn from them, gain energy from them, and support them on their way.*

Our covenant within the group reflects our church covenant with a focus on listening.

- to do justice** by listening deeply to other people's stories. (no fixing or solving)
- to love kindness** by listening deeply to our own stories.
- to walk humbly with God** by listening deeply for the presence of the Spirit.

This class is not an experience that lends itself to dropping in and out. However, we will be starting again in January (here at church) to do the second half of the series. We will be forming new small groups, so this is an opportunity for others to join us. If you would like to know more, I'd be glad to talk with you.

The topics we are exploring are not generally ones we share with others, even though we all think about them

Coming themes are:

- slowing down
- the constancy of change
- our changing relationship with time
- the "thin place" of death
- the legacy of our lives

I'll leave us with a blessing from John O'Donohue. We used an abbreviated version of it at the beginning of our service today. Here is the full blessing.

For Old Age

May the light of your soul mind you.

May all your worry and anxiousness about your age be transfigured.

May you be given wisdom for the eyes of your soul to see this as a time of gracious harvesting. May you have the passion to heal what has hurt you, and allow it to come closer and become one with you.

May you have great dignity, sense how free you are; above all, may you be given the wonderful gift of meeting the eternal light that is within you.

May you be blessed; and may you find a wonderful love in your self for your self.

John O'Donohue
*To Blessed the Space Between Us:
 A Book of Blessings*