

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
HUMAN RELATIONS SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“A REALISTIC VIEW OF GROWING OLD”
John 2:1-11
JANUARY 17, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

Our daily lives are dependent on the work of people we take for granted and seldom see. Many of these are underpaid and overworked. Many find little fulfillment in their daily lives. These are those who live largely on the hope for a better day.

The first miracle of Jesus was turning water into wine. This may strike us as a terrible misuse of divine power. But the miracle was a sign that the grace of God was like fine wine compared to the mere water of legalistic religion.

In his famous poem on old age Robert Browning has Rabbi Ben Ezra say, “Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be, / The last of life, for which the first was made: / Our times are in his hand / Who saith ‘A whole I planned, / Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!’” What a wonderful and encouraging sentiment, until you realize that the poet was only forty-three years old at the time.

The last thing people need is a Pollyanna perspective on growing old. It is best to be realistic about aging, especially at a time when people are living longer than ever. For a realistic view of aging there is hardly a better place to look than the Bible. The last chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes is an extended poem on old age. It begins, *“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them.’”* The writer of Ecclesiastes chronicles the losses that old age brings. *“The sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened,”* referring to fading perceptions. *“The keepers of the house (the hands) tremble, and the strong men (the legs) are bent.”* The *“grinders (the teeth) cease because they are few.”* This

is only the beginning! Read the rest of the chapter and see if you can decipher the symbols.

Long before most of us experience old age ourselves, we are called on to deal with the aging of our parents. This always has its challenges, and sometimes it is too much for us to manage alone. Most of us never thought about having to tell our parents they could no longer drive, or live alone, or take independent action. We are even less likely to be prepared for our own loss of mobility and autonomy. Add to this the cultural worship of youth, and even the respect due the elderly seems at risk. The **“golden years”** are often the most difficult years of all, for everyone involved. For many on the human journey, the **“best”** of one’s earthly life is not **“yet to be.”**

Jesus was constantly indicating that the best part of his good news had not yet been fulfilled. Consider today’s Gospel lesson. According to John, the first miracle of Jesus was turning water into wine. Jesus and his disciples went to a wedding in Cana. It must have been a festive occasion, because the wine was gone some time before the celebration was over. Jesus’ mother, Mary, told him about the problem. He provided a marvelous solution. At his instruction, six stone jars were filled with water. These jars were large, each with a capacity of as many as twenty gallons. They held water for Jewish purification rituals. When the chief steward tasted the water, it had become wine. The wine was of such quality that the steward said to the bridegroom, ***“Everyone serves the best wine first, then, when all have drunk their fill, the lesser wine is served. But you have kept the good wine until now.”***

Perhaps few of Jesus’ miracles have been given as many interpretations as this one. An obvious one is that Jesus did a gracious and generous thing for the wedding party, who would have been humiliated by running out of wine so early in the celebration. But this hardly explains why over a hundred gallons of wine were needed! The largest consensus gathers around the interpretation of the miracle as a dramatic contrast between the inadequacy of religious laws and the superiority of grace. The scribes and Pharisees saw the essence of faith as the keeping of laws. Righteousness was understood to be meticulous obedience, not only to the Mosaic Law, but to an astounding number of derivative laws that had accumulated around the Law of Moses. Empty rituals of ceremonial cleansing were part of this network of requirements, all of which had little to do with one’s relationships to God and the neighbor. So, the most likely meaning of the miracle is that Jesus transcends the tasteless water of legalistic religion by offering the indescribable wine of God’s grace.

Jesus clearly embraced life and found joy in it. He could have withdrawn from the world and refused to be a part of it. He could have shunned sinners, as a way of keeping himself pure. He could have mortified his body in order to nurture his soul. These things have been done by many who seek holiness. Jesus saw things differently. Our human needs and hungers are gifts from God. They should not be overly indulged, but all of them can be enjoyed. Each of them can add to the fullness of life. Jesus drank deeply from life's cup of gladness, but he was not intoxicated by it. Jesus mingled with all sorts of people, but remained a consecrated spirit. Jesus embraced life, and invites us to do the same.

The first disciples, like millions of followers since, discovered that life with Jesus becomes an ever-increasing joy. They experienced sorrow, suffering, and terrible privation, but none of these things threatened the peace that ruled their hearts. Many died as martyrs, most triumphantly. Others died to self, and lived sacrificially, as their Lord had done. Countless multitudes came to see the approaching end of life as a new beginning, and death lost its sting. For these, life never ceased to be an upward way, and they would have insisted with every step they took that the best *is* yet to be.

When Robert Browning's father was dying, past eighty years of age, his cheerfulness was disconcerting to the attending physician. The doctor asked a family member, **"Does the gentleman know he is dying?"** The old man heard, and said, **"Death is no enemy in my eyes."** The poet-son shared his father's spirit. Shortly after the death of his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, he wrote *Prospice*, which begins with a question: **"Fear death?"** He wrote, **"I was ever a fighter, so - - one fight more, / the best and the last!"** He concluded, **"O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again, / And with God be the rest!"**

Jesus was easily moved with compassion. He perceived what was happening beneath the surface of people's lives. Our own compassion may be stirred in the same way. Unfortunately, the people with the greatest needs are often the people we are least likely to see. Every person is made in God's image and is a child of God. To grow in grace is to grow in our awareness of the needs of the world. We can begin by looking at those we often ignore and by seeing them as persons of worth. We can pray for them. Revolutionary movements have started from such small beginnings as someone noticing a simple need and refusing to look away or forget.

Look at the senior members of our congregation; they have much to teach us. They know how to embrace the blessings that are available to them. They know how to enjoy the company of good friends. They know how to embrace the celebrations of life. And they know that one of their greatest joys has been in serving others.

If you feel that you have much to learn from the seniors in your life, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.