

“Spiritual Tools for Growing Old, Part 1” by Michele Frome

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Image adapted from Hokusai (1760-1849)
“Under the Wave off Kanagawa”

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
in the Tradition of Church of the Saviour
Lent 2018
The Foolishness of Faith

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Here at Seekers, growing old has emerged as a topic of great interest. Recently, I was talking about aging with a couple of other Seekers. We were discussing options when you can no longer drive. One person said, “technology can be a big help – for instance, you can order your groceries via Peapod.”

I responded by asking, “What if you’ve lost your vision and can’t see the computer screen, or you’ve lost cognitive abilities and you can’t manage a computer?” “Well, at that point you’ll need full-time nursing care” my colleague replied. I wondered to myself what that meant. Did it mean, “at that point, it won’t matter

Then a relative of mine put it more bluntly: “I’m planning for the part of my old age when I can still do things – once I’m in the nursing home, it’s all over, anyway.”

Is it “all over” once we go into a nursing home? Does it “not

matter” anymore?

I have been volunteering in nursing homes for almost fifteen years. Currently, I work as a volunteer chaplain at the Hebrew Home nursing facility in Rockville. In that role, I’ve been leading a Christian Bible Study class for over two years.

Living in a nursing home may not be the most desirable option. But is it the end? Does “nothing matter” once you’re living in a nursing home or dependent on others for fulltime care?

I have to say “no” to that question — I have to say “no, life still matters,” because that’s the message I try to convey to the people. I have to practice what I preach.

Life in a nursing home is not easy. For starters, most people in nursing homes have little or no money. Nursing home care is expensive, and Medicaid only pays for it once you’ve spent virtually all of your own money.

But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Once you’ve moved into a nursing home, you’ve lost most of your independence. Most residents are dependent on others for getting out of bed, dressing, bathing, and toileting. And they have little or no control over when these things happen.

The practical challenges are great. Today, however, I want to focus on the spiritual challenges. I want to share with you what I am learning about meeting those challenges from the people at the Hebrew Home. This is the first of three sermons I plan to offer on the spiritual challenges of growing old and disabled, and what I’m learning from my students at the nursing home.

Currently, there are about 18 Christians at the Hebrew Home who attend the Bible Study class I lead. These are some of the higher cognitively-functioning residents, although at least half have clear signs of dementia. Four are blind, two are

unable to speak normally. All of them are wheelchair bound, except for one woman who walks with a walker – she happens to be 106 years old. Many are in their 90s. Almost all of them have been at the Hebrew Home for at least 4 years.

These people aren't perfect – some deal with their spiritual issues well, some not so well. As I tell you more about them, I am going to fictionalize their names in order to protect their anonymity.

The spiritual issue I'm going to talk about today is the feeling of worthlessness – feeling no longer of any value, no longer OK as a person. It's common to feel a sense of inner diminishment when our minds or bodies no longer function, when we can no longer do what we have taken for granted – when we can no longer be the only person we have ever been.

A couple of examples: Terry is a nursing home resident who is not a member of my class. She always shares her complaints with me: "What good am I," she says, "I can't do anything." "What's the point of doing physical therapy, I'll never be able to walk again." Lillian was a woman in her 90s who died over a year ago. She said repeatedly to me, "Why am I still here – there's no point, I'm like a child, totally dependent."

When I reflect on Lillian's remarks, I remember that Jesus actually praised the state of being like a child, saying, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." When I see people like Lillian lose their ability to function like productive, independent adults, I often think that as the part of them that is "of this world" diminishes, the part of them that is "of God" increases.

This lesson about diminished ability to "do" isn't lost on me. I know I am guilty of structuring my life around doing things, and I like to measure progress in terms of the number of things I can check off my to-do list. But I know now that

“doing” cannot be my only source of self-worth, because my ability to “do” will not last.

I want to tell you about two spiritual tools I see my nursing home friends using to deal with this spiritual dis-ease worthlessness.

The first tool is ACCEPTANCE. The nursing home residents who are doing well spiritually don't question or complain about their diminishments, they don't feel angry or resentful or guilty or ashamed about them...but they don't deny them either. They accept them as a given. These know that they need live in a nursing home, with all its limitations. To illustrate: shortly after I met her, Becky went into the hospital with a broken leg. When she returned, she said to me “it feels really good to be home – this is home, you know,” referring to the nursing home.

The ones who are doing well spiritually seem to focus on living their lives within their limitations. Those who yearn for the life they used to have before those limitations are not doing well spiritually. I am thinking of Cindy, who wishes for the days when she was helping her daughter, instead of the other way around, or Caroline who misses ‘the way it used to be’ when she first came to the Hebrew Home, or Kelly who fixates on her former husband and the life she once had with him.

What about grief, you may ask? Yes, it is important to grieve our losses. Even the spiritually strongest of my friends go through grief when their condition declines and they lose yet another function. For several weeks, Fran told me how sad she was when she could no longer see to read a book or do her artwork. Becky talked about her fears when a broken leg prevented her from using her motorized wheelchair. But I have watched both of them move from grief into acceptance.

In this morning's scriptures we heard about Jesus, asking God

to save him from the suffering of crucifixion, but then conceding “thy will, not mine” be done. My friends at the nursing home suffer a lot –from losses, from pain, from inadequate care. The ones who are succeeding spiritually are the one who, like Jesus, have said to God and to themselves, “thy will, not my will, be done.” In other words, they have accepted their current diminishment as God’s will.

When a new level of diminishment confronts them, they usually go through the struggle again, but they eventually end up in a place of acceptance, or surrendering to God’s will once again. To paraphrase Jeremiah, they know their God, and they know that they are God’s people.

The second spiritual tool I’m learning about at the nursing home is GRATITUDE. It’s amazing how quickly gratitude can change someone’s state of mind from negative to positive. I have learned that the power of gratitude comes not from the amount of good things that happen to you, but rather on the amount of time you focus on the good things.

One memorable example: Leslie is in her 60s and suffers Huntington’s Disease, a fatal genetic disorder that causes the progressive breakdown of nerve cells in the brain and the loss of physical and mental abilities. Leslie’s sister is her only local family, and the one she relies on for contact with the outside world. Periodically, Leslie’s sister drops off the radar screen – no visits, no phone calls, no explanation. Each time this happens, Leslie gets extremely angry and depressed – it’s a pattern of hers that the staff know well. The last time this happened, I called Leslie’s attention to a beautiful poster that her sister had made for her and posted on the wall; the poster says, ‘everyone who has a sister has friend for life.’”

Leslie’s response was, “Oh, yeah, I forgot about that...that’s really neat.” Later that day, when I invited members of the Bible class to share, Leslie shared how grateful she was for

her sister.

Sometimes I nudge the members of the Bible Study class with a question like, “name one thing you’re grateful for.” I get answers like: my son got a new job, my old neighbor brought me homemade African food, I got flowers on my birthday, my granddaughter got engaged, I was able to get out of bed today for the first time in a week.

But the most memorable answer I’ve ever heard came from a wheelchair-bound man in his 80s: he said: “I’m grateful that God answers all of my prayers.” This came from a man in his 80s who can’t walk, can’t hear well, can’t see well, had little contact with his family...he can’t even eat – because a stroke paralyzed his swallowing muscles, he depends on a feeding tube. This is the one who said, “God answers all my prayers.”

Our theme at Seekers Church for this liturgical season is the Foolishness of Faith. The ACCEPTANCE and the GRATITUDE of my friends at the nursing home – people who have lost so very much – these are examples of really foolish faith. And, from what I’ve seen, it’s a faith that works.