

The Aging Christian with New Identity  
Sermon - July 9, 2017

Did you have moments when you noticed that you were getting older or you were aging? Was that a good feeling? Why did you notice that? Is it easier just to tell yourself that you are aging or is it as easy to tell somebody else that you are aging?

I was only 40 when my children, coming home from school, said that I am old, much older than their classmates' parents.

Lately, I heard my children saying: "Oh my Lord, I am already 25 or 23 – I am sooo old." Do we think that if they are 25 or 23 they are old? Not at all.

I am sharing with you what I often heard from my mother, that I would like to be again 30 years old, but with this head and with as much experiences. Many things I would do totally differently.

As we are aging step by step, we have different responsibilities and different obligations. At almost every decade, our identity is changing according to our responsibilities and possibilities.

How do we see God, and how do we see ourselves? God is eternal, but our human lives are limited. As Psalm 90 says: "For all our days pass away; our years come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong." (Psalm 90:9-10)

I know that age and aging is not an interesting topic, but we still have to learn about reality and we cannot hide our heads under the sand. As long as we learn, we are not old.

We have to realize that, day by day, we are aging. We all **MUST** expect the unexpected, that one day things will change and we have to make changes accordingly to our age, to our possibilities and abilities. We have to consider these changes **today, here and now**, in order to be well prepared for those changes. Then the changes should not surprise us or overwhelm us too much. I would recommend to all of you to take the necessary steps **TODAY** to be prepared tomorrow to do the right things in order to prevent you from uncomfortable situations or depression.

Our human life had four big stages: childhood including the teenager years; mature active life; "retirement stage" when we still enjoy the golden age, from which often the gold is missing and we are faced only with the passed ages; and the fourth is the "resting years", when our possibilities are much limited.

Those who are in middle age often are having really frightening thoughts about our middle age because we know that we will grow out of it. We have to know that, based on our responsibilities, our Lord Jesus Christ wants to change our identity and He will transform us as we grow old.

Please think about these questions for a moment:

- Are you open and flexible to be transformed by Jesus Christ day by day?
- Are you ready for changes?

- Or are you one of those people who don't want to give up what they have right now and they don't want to face with aging?

I was, and I am still, one person who has said: "I work hard like I will never age or die." As I am encouraging my brother, who is 62, he says: "Just wait until you will be 60. Then you will have a better understanding about aging".

I met a gentleman who turned 70 and he said that he still feels like being 40.

Do you remember how active Lorna van Mossel was in her 90's? We admire those members here at Calvin who are around 90 and they are here worshipping with us.

When we are close to 60, we start to think about retirement. Is that a good feeling? Probably not. I met a minister who said that she is 62, she will retire in 3 years, and she already started to work on her feelings and to prepare herself that one day when she has to close **a good permanently** behind her.

I am encouraging myself, and all those who one day will retire, to start to think about those years and days now in order to be well prepared to accept the truth that one day they have to step down. We have to develop in us a strong character until then, to be prepared for retirement and to step down with heads up - being thankful for God for what we have done and to pass our chair to another person.

I meet people who struggled a lot with aging. They have often said to me:

- "Reverend, I cannot accept that I became who I am just because I am getting old."
- "I cannot accept that I am not the same person today as I was 10, 20 years ago."
- "I cannot accept that I cannot do the same things I did before."
- "I am mad, angry and frustrated, and I simply cannot accept my age and the changes."

I met another woman who had some issues and her whole body started to bend over. She gave up coming to the church because she was too proud and she was not able to accept her physical look.

I also knew people who reached an advanced age and, even though their bodies were crippled, they still attended the church services, they read the Bible, they prayed regularly and their lives were full with enthusiasm knowing that they are God's children and soon they will be HOME in heaven.

In our Old Testament scripture reading, we hear about Joshua, who was the judge of Israel. He led God's people for long decades. As he reached an advanced age, the people of Israel asked Joshua to step down and to be replaced by a king. Joshua realized it was his time to step down and let the people of Israel make their own decision about their own future.

As we are growing old, one of our biggest problems is that we don't want to acknowledge that there is time to change, to give up things, or to step down from different positions. I met ministers who retired but they decided to live in the church's area. The new minister's life was

poisoned by the retired minister and his wife's negative comments about the new minister's ministry.

A French writer says that "The old begin to complain of the conduct of the young when they themselves are no longer able to set a bad example." (Francois de La Rochefoucauld).

As we are aging, it is wise to re-evaluate our service and our commitments. We have to recognize that there was a time when we were able to serve, but the time can come when our service is not helping the community but can cause more frustration. We need wisdom to realize that, over a certain age, we cannot work as we did 10 years ago and we don't have the same enthusiasm anymore. We need wisdom to admit that we served our time as Christian parents, grandparents, co-workers, ministers or elders, and it is time to now step down from our role. We need wisdom to realize that we cannot create a new society with new rules for the next generation, but they have to create their own society and their own church. Wisdom helps us, not only to offer our services, but also to step down and to withdraw in a noble way from many things. Wisdom helps us to say: "Now it is time for me to retire...and you folks to take over."

#### PPS 9&10

I have a question to all of you. Please raise your hands:

- if you have an iPhone
- if you use FaceTime
- if you have a blog
- if you are on Facebook
- if you use Snapchat
- if you Tweet
- if you have an Instagram account.

For those who did not raise their hands at all, do you understand what these things are? If not, then I am concerned if you can understand the millennials and their way of thinking, their challenges and their needs. If we don't understand them, then how do we advise them or be part of their leadership teams?

There are generational distances. We have to accept that we don't understand the newer generation as well because we are not in their shoes. We lived in a different society 30-60 years ago when the rules were different, the personal connections were different, and our way of thinking about almost everything was different. For this reason, we cannot allow ourselves to create future plans for them. We have to allow THEM to create their own goals. We can give them gentle and kind feedback on how we might see things and what our experiences were in the past. But we have to let them lead and create the future because it is THEIR responsibility to shape their own children's future.

A decade ago, one of my favourite theological professors, at the age of 70, was invited to a workshop to create a new Order of Service for the Hungarian Reformed Church. Being a very wise person, he thanked them for the respectful invitation, saying: "Thank you for thinking of me. I was teaching these things at the university for 40 years and I knew what my generation needed in the church. Now I am 70 and I don't want to influence or even tell your generation and

your children how YOU should worship God and what kind of Order of Service YOU should have today.”

We have to realize when it is our time to step down from a position and to give our chair to somebody else. This way we do a favour to our society and to ourselves as well. We have to be prepared, when the time is coming, to close our door behind us with respect and dignity.

Let's consider the risk if we don't want to step down. What are the risks if we won't withdraw?

People will notice that we have issues such as:

1. we don't hear everything well
2. we don't remember things since we have memory loss
3. we are confused when they will face us with our issues
4. we feel awkward when they will remind us that we don't remember something
5. making more mistakes, after a while, we won't be welcomed into a group.

One of the main questions is: “How do we want to close a door behind us?”

- Being appreciated and missed and remembered for our great achievements?
- Or being told that “it was time to leave because of the mistakes we made?”

Some people are good to step down, some are terrible, and this is why there are a guidelines which are forcing people to step down – professors, ministers, other professionals who have a hard time to stop doing what they did for decades. Do not ask me or others if you should step down. At a certain point, there is evidence which is telling us to withdraw or step down. Listen to God and watch the signals which are telling you that you have to make changes. YOU have to have the wisdom to know when your time is to resign. You have to feel that it is TIME. If you wait until others tell you, then you will feel hurt.

Joshua did not wait until others were telling him to retire. If we will decide to step down, it won't be as traumatic as if others would ask us to step down.

As we look around our churches, most serving people retired long time ago and they are occupying themselves serving God and serving God's people and they are rejoicing serving. As we serve we have to find out what type of service is still suitable for us and if there is time to serve in a different role where I am still capable or more capable to serve.

A few days ago, I had a shocking experience. As I was standing at the main door of a high-rise building in downtown Kitchener, visiting one of our parishioners, a sweet and kind elderly woman was standing at the door with car keys in her hands. She asked me how she can open the main door with those keys. I told her that those are car keys and she needed different keys. She looked at me, shocked, and she said: “I think I lost my home keys”. She went back to her car and found her home keys. Then she asked me how she can take her car into the garage because she forgot where the parking garage is. In her car, she wanted to start her car with her home keys but those did not work. She started to panic, asking me if I can help. I told her that she should not drive but ask her children to deal with her issues. Then she said to me: “I know you. I saw you

somewhere. Who are you?" I introduced myself and she said: "AHA – I am still an active elder in such and such church".

As I was looking at her, I asked myself, who can tell her that she should give up some things or she should step down from eldership, where she has to create policies for the church and a more contemporary future for the next generation.

I met grandparents who were extremely bitter because their children did not allow them anymore to baby sit their grandchildren or great-grandchildren. The grandparents thought that they still had the ability to care for young children, but in reality they did not.

Asking people to step down because of losing their ability to serve positively can be a shockwave. Did the shockwaves come around you already? You have to prepare yourself years, or almost a decade, ahead to step down from your present position. You have to realize when you cannot babysit your grandchildren anymore because they need more attention, more physical help than you can provide, you cannot prepare their favourite food, you are not patient as much as you were, etc. Maybe when your children told you, your feelings were hurt and you made an effort to show you still can do things.

In the past, I witnessed turmoil in some churches because some people were not able to step down. Some people were convinced by so called "nice people" who were still feeding their self-esteem with wrong advice, saying that "oh, you should just continue, you are doing well, just keep going and you will be fine". Instead they should be telling them the truth: that they think that you should be thankful for what you accomplished in the past and now it is time to change your activities in a different direction.

Once, I witnessed a woman telling another person how nice and pretty she looked in her new dress. Then, behind her, she said: "Oh my Lord, how ugly this dress is; she should not wear this one." Those people who love you will tell you the honest truth.

We don't have to be afraid that nobody can replace us. Everybody is replaceable. If you see that it is your time, you don't have to be mad, saying: "Ok, then I go to hell." Resignation is not called DESPERATION. Just make peace with yourself. This is one of the hardest roads you have to take.

Some said that resignation will kill people. It depends on our way of thinking. If we are thankful for what we already achieved, we should be thankful that we reached the point when we can resign.

Maybe the time will come when we have to leave our homes and we have to move into a retirement or nursing home. May the Lord help us to be prepared for all those changes. May we be thankful for the active years and for everything that we accomplished, and may we find our new identity in those resting years.

This sermon might create hard feelings and pain in some people. Some would say: that is tragic. From the other side, if we have a godly character and we take this from God's hand as guidance,

we should be thankful that God helped us to deal with one of our greatest issues. You won't make any mistakes if you will look in a vertical way and not only in a horizontal direction.

So many amazing opportunities arise when a chapter of our life ends. Stepping into a different life stage will transform our lives and will activate our energy in other areas. When we make these changes, it can be a blessing for us because a better experience is waiting to happen. We can invest our faith and energy in other things. If we are listening to our Lord, we won't be useless but we will find other ways to serve God and God's people.

It's all about perspective. Don't be afraid to take a big step down and to go into a different direction. In every step, a flower will bloom for you. Amen