



## Who's afraid of ... growing older?

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**Reflection:** As a country we remember Dr. King's life this weekend. I was young at the time he died, I was only a boy in New Hampshire. I remember my parents being effected. I also remember the pastor of my church had marched with King in the south. But beyond that I was too young to know much of what was happening. My corner of the world was very white indeed. And so my memory of Dr. King's work is small, but on the other hand my respect for his words is great. You just saw a few moments of the way people once were treated in this country, in my lifetime. Some of you perhaps have lived through those times, but for many of our teens those things look as if they came from a foreign land and a far off time. I suppose that's a good thing in some ways.

You just heard Dr. King read from his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. In this letter he made a case for a vision of freedom in this country, not by tearing the country down but by building it up. He spoke of hope, though he spoke at the time from a jail cell. The letter was written originally to eight white clergymen who had published criticism of King's nonviolent protests. They were concerned that he was rocking the boat too much, that he was making things worse instead of better. They asked him to be patient and wait for justice. Dr. King's response included many memorable lines. For instance he claimed that

*we have a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws  
injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere  
justice too long delayed is justice denied*

Of course, those were only some of the words with which Dr. King roused a nation's conscience. There were many others, including those words he used which echoed the words of Jesus himself. I have told you this before but it bears repeating, it bears remembering always ... that in the face of oppression, in the place of those who would let resentment direct their responses, Dr. King asked us all to respond to one another by what Jesus had said in one of his most famous speeches. You may remember Jesus had said:

### **Luke 6:27-30** (The Message)

*"To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously."*

King, in his own way said it like this:

*"To our most bitter opponents we say: 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.'"*

Today we do more than remember. Dr. King calls on us still to look at who we are together. You know, it's amazing what can happen when we do that my friends, when we see each other equally as children of God. Look at last week, for instance. A plane went down into the Hudson River. By all accounts the pilot did an amazing job. He's a real hero, but then he was not alone. His crew worked to keep the passengers safe. The passengers themselves helped one another instead of pushing and shoving each other, and when one woman fell into the icy cold water, others rushed to help her back up onto the wing, and gave her a coat to keep warm. Ferry boats and small craft rushed to the scene in order to help rescue people from the plane before it sank. It was an amazing thing, and one that was only possible because people worked together. It's a great thing when people can look at one another and realize what binds us together is so much more than what separates us.

Only ... why does it take a crash or a crisis or a cause to make us look at one another as brothers and sisters? Why is it only tough times that remind us to work together for the common good? After all, that was the plan Jesus had for us from the start. From the start. So ... what if we started living like Jesus and following his ways? Imagine what we could accomplish then ...

***Insert prayers for the nation here and worship music***

## From Psalm 31 (The Message)

*I run to you, God; I run for dear life. Don't let me down!*

*Take me seriously this time!*

*Free me from life's hidden traps; let me hide in you.*

*Desperate, I throw myself on you: you are my God!*

*Hour by hour I place my days in your hand,  
safe from the hands out to get me.*

*Warm me, your servant, with a smile;  
save me because you love me.*

*O God, your love is the wonder of the world.  
I've put my life in your hands.*

*You won't drop me, you'll never let me down.*

*I hate all this silly religion, but you, God, I trust.*

### In your hands

*I'm so secure, you're here with me,*

*You stay the same, your love remains*

*Here in my heart, so close I believe*

*You're holding me now, in your hands I belong,*

*You'll never let me go*

*You gave your life in your endless love,*

*You set me free and showed the way*

*Now I am found so close I believe*

*You're holding me now, in your hands I belong ...*

**Intro to message:** How old is old? I have learned it all depends on your point of view, or actually, it all depends on your current age. I've learned the older I get the older old seems to get ... because no one is ever really old so long as there are older folk out there. I talk with my mother most Sundays, and some weeks she'll tell me she helped take some of the older ladies from church out to eat or she's been to visit some of the older shut-ins from church. And my mom is in her mid 80's. I've also been told that old is a question of attitude. I'm not sure I like that idea. If you're only as old as you feel, I'm feeling a lot older than I want to these days. I've got rheumatoid arthritis, and a white beard, progressive lenses and what the barber calls lots of highlights in my hair these days. And before you chuckle too much at me, remember, each of you is growing older at exactly the same rate as I am.

So that leaves you and me with the big question ... is growing older OK? I remember getting an emergency appendectomy when I was 20. I remember waking up and being told I had had an operation and had a scar. I spent some time thinking that through and wondering if I really wanted a scar. Didn't matter I already had one. I still wanted to think about it. Some things just take some getting used to. Like growing older ... there's a time when you look forward to each birthday. I think one of the sure signs of growing older is that you no longer measure your age by the birthday that's coming next. You know how kids will tell you they are 4 and a half ... very few people say *"I'm 49 and a half."* Though I did learn something last year. Once you are 49 and a half you qualify for AARP. (Keep that in mind Henry because your day is coming ... very soon). What was a real downer though was finding out I can't qualify for senior discounts at Denny's for another 5 years. I guess by then I'll really be old. But how do you feel about aging? Do you have questions about it, worries? Do you ever wonder what it will be like when you're 49 or 55 or even when you're 64 ...

## When I'm 64

*words and music by the Beatles*

*When I get older losing my hair, many years from now,  
Will you still be sending me a valentine,  
birthday greetings bottle of wine?*

*If I'd been out till quarter to three would you lock the door,  
Will you still need me, will you still feed me,  
when I'm sixty-four?*

*You'll be older too ... And if you say the word, I  
could stay with you.*

*I could be handy mending a fuse  
when your lights have gone.*

*You can knit a sweater by the fireside,  
Sunday mornings go for a ride.*

*Doing the garden, digging the weeds,  
who could ask for more?*

*Will you still need me, will you still feed me,  
when I'm sixty-four?*

Thank you Eli ... We've already looked at some of our fears in this message series. What we've really been doing though is looking at the reasons Christ Followers have confidence in the face of their fears. I started a couple of weeks ago by looking at our fear of the future. I told you I don't think it's really the

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future that bothers us so much as the unknown, and of being out of control. You want to have some control over what happens next in your life, right? But you don't. Luckily each Christ Follower knows who does ... and trusting God means putting your future in his hands. That's not a

bad place for it to be you know. Next I looked at the real fears you and I have these days about our finances. There's a lot less security in money than there was last year at this time. Rich or poor, you have less money and more worries than you used to, I am sure. But there again, the problem you have is not with money so much as it is in trying to gain security in the things you can have and hold, in the things you can buy and collect and put away for a rainy day. Yet here again, it's a tough lesson to learn, but a good one, that your money can not make you secure. It sure can help you pay the bills for your medicine and food and all the rest. But it's not the real source of your security. As you know, money so quickly can disappear. Your sense of security comes from knowing God has promised to provide what's needed for those who seek him first. As Jesus said, *"For your Heavenly Father knows you need all these things and he will provide for your needs."* OK not your wants but your needs.

Today as we look at growing older, let's look at what it is that is really scary. When you think about growing older, it's not that

time is passing, but time seems shorter than it did before. So, when we talk about aging, certainly we have to deal once again with the future and questions of being out of control, of the unknown and of security. But there's one more thing about aging you have to deal with, and I think, this is what scares us most about getting older.

Most of you have to deal with aging on two different levels. If you are like most people in this country, at least one of your parents is still alive, but growing older, and dealing with all the issues that come with aging. Aging means dealing with new limitations. Your parents may not be able to do what they did before. How do you know when the right time is to step in and say, "Dad, I don't think you should drive anymore because you're dangerous." When do you have to face the question of whether your parent should be living at home or living in a retirement home? And how do you deal with health issues, or with end of life issues? There's just a lot of things here that are

new for most of us. That's the first level of aging, and the second is like unto it ... at the same time you watch your parents grow older you may notice that you are growing older too. Limitations come for us all. How well are you dealing with those? Can you

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accept your limitations or do you fight against them, or perhaps just ignore them? And does ignoring the fact you're getting older really help you?

I've aged a lot in the last ten years, and during that time my new limitations have been a hard thing for me to deal with. It took me a while (because after all, like the rest of you, I am still learning what it means to grow older and how to do it), it took me a while to realize what was behind my anxiety about growing older. So, I've had to deal with changes ... for instance, you may not have known this but before coming here I played a lot of golf. I played whenever I could in Maine. When I was in Massachusetts right before coming here, I could play free any day I wanted on the course less than a half mile from my house. I could get 9 holes in before heading to church each day for morning prayer at 8:30. But now the only kind of golf I can play is on my Wii. With my arthritis I simply can't hold the clubs. No great loss I suppose, just a thing to get used to. But last summer I had to change a flat tire on my car and realized I could no longer work the jack and the lug wrench by myself. My hands won't do it anymore. It's frustrating. I'm a man but I can't change a tire. I'm not an old guy, but there are more and more things I have trouble doing ... like using a can opener, or writing with an ordinary pencil or pen. Luckily I've already had a lifetime to prove I'm lousy with tools so no one expects much from me there. But as these things begin to mount up I recognized the feeling they brought out was sadness, grief. I think grief is one of the biggest issues you and I have yet to deal with, and we're simply not trained in how to grieve well. I'm not talking just about the grief of watching your parents grow older,

or of saying good-bye when they die. There's also the grief that's everyday, a grief that comes when your dream of playing a round of golf, or of being self-sufficient or of having the stamina that you once had is no longer possible. There's the grief that comes to people who are 20 and 30 and 40, when a dream you had for the future gets broken and you have to learn how to leave it behind for another dream if you can. There's grief when you divorce or when you are laid off. While grief comes naturally, learning how to grieve well does not. You have to learn how to do it. Have you?

I think the secret to learning how to age gracefully is all in learning how to grieve so you can move on from your grief and move back into the joy of living. I've need to learn how to accept limitations when necessary, and find the new sense of peace that comes from finding new dreams, especially when these new dreams are the dreams God has for my life and not just the ones I thought up for myself. Above all, aging has to do with finding peace in the present, and making peace with your past. It's all about peace. Peace. That's a good thing, because that's what God has to offer you. Again and again in the Bible we hear that God offers us his peace:

#### **John 14:25-29** (The Message)

*Jesus said to them, I'm leaving you well and whole. That's my parting gift to you. Peace. I don't leave you the way you're used to being left—feeling abandoned, bereft. So don't be upset. Don't be distraught. You've heard me tell you, 'I'm going away, and I'm coming back.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I'm on my way to the Father because the Father is the goal and purpose of my life ... I'm telling you these things while I'm still living with you. The Holy Spirit ... will make everything plain to you.*

Jesus talks with his followers shortly before he gets arrested, tortured and killed. In one way he is preparing them for what's about to happen. But in another way, he's talking to you and me, offering each of us the peace that can make us well and whole too. But what's this peace? When you look closely at what Jesus has promised, you see peace comes from two things ... first peace comes from finding your purpose for your life and second it comes from finding God's presence in your life. Purpose and presence make for peace, the kind of peace this world can not give. You can try to make peace a lot of other ways, but they won't last through the years. This does. How? (1) Start by remembering what your purpose in life is. If my purpose were to play golf, I'd be failing. If my purpose were to stay young forever, I'd need a lot of lipo and plastic surgery along with some hair dye. In either case I'd see growing older as the enemy to my happiness. Only folks, that's an enemy you can't defeat so you're bound to fight and lose. So then, if I thought life had no purpose I might just try to grab what I can while I can and not give a flying rip about you. Lots of people try that. I don't think they look very happy, do you? I've learned in this that life is not about me so much as it is about God. As Rick Warren writes in his famous book *The Purpose Driven Life*: "Many people try to use God for their own self-actualization, but that is doomed to failure. You were made for God not

*vice versa, and life is about letting God use you for his purposes, not your using him for your own ... As the Bible says, "Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life."* [Romans 8:6].

There is a great sense of peace that comes when you learn to stop telling God what to do, and when you stop expecting God to do what you think is right. You can feel at peace when you stop working against God and starting working with him, as a partner. Not only does life make more sense, but you will find you have a reason to get out of bed in the morning that is not spoiled by your age or your limitations. Since God still has a purpose for you, there's still a good reason to live. It's when you lose sight of your purpose, or when you think life has no purpose, that everything seems too hard. As Warren writes, *"When your life has purpose you can bear almost anything; without it, nothing is bearable ... The greatest tragedy is not death, but life without purpose."* And today of all days you should be able to see that purpose means so much. Look at Dr. King and his sense of purpose. Look at the pilot of the plane in NY, even the help given one another by anonymous New Yorkers. Purpose changes life. And in the end, no matter what happens, it gives you a sense of peace.

(2) Peace is also a product of being in God's presence. It's amazing what a sense of God's presence can do to change your whole outlook on life. Jesus told his worried followers, *"Peace. I don't leave you the way you're used to being left—feeling abandoned, bereft. So don't be upset. Don't be distraught."* God is not going to abandon you either. You and I have the power to walk away from God, but God has promised never to walk away from us. There are things you do that can make it hard for you to experience God's presence, and his purpose, and so his peace, in your life. Sin does that. Live in a way that separates you from god, and go figure, you're not as close to him anymore, and you may not find peace in your life. But turn around and return to God and the added benefit is that

you can find peace because you'll find your way back into God's presence. Or seek God in the ways he has told you work best ... like meeting with others in his name, whether in small groups or in worship, and seek him out by serving others, or by praying. Those are the paths of peace, my friends, the ways in which you can live more fully whether or not you can no longer do some of the things you once did.

God's peace, a sense of purpose, a sense of God's presence ... each of these comes down to a simple fact of life. When your life is about more than yourself, it becomes more than you can see. In fact, when your life becomes more about God you have more and more of a sense of life ... and then a day comes when you realize that life is not governed by calendars or years. Indeed, with God's peace and presence you discover your life is meant to be eternal. And growing older then makes no difference, has no meaning, not when what really matters is finding what really satisfies ...

### **All that matters**

*You are all that matters, all that satisfies  
All that gives me life and stands the test of time  
You are my portion, my only passion,  
you mean everything to me ...  
I give you all I have, Lord I love you and adore you  
I come just as I am to worship  
with my whole heart, Jesus, Jesus  
You are all that matters, all that satisfies  
All that gives me life and stands the test of time  
You are my portion, my only passion,  
you mean everything to me ...  
Lord, my life is in your hands,  
would you fashion, would you form me?  
Fulfill your purpose and your plan,  
I'm surrendered to your ways  
you mean everything to me ...*