

## THE GIFT OF YOUTH • THE GIFT OF AGE

### *The Gift of Age*

2 Timothy 4:6-9, 19-22

March 2, 2025

Several years ago, I led a men's retreat in the north Georgia mountains. Our theme for the weekend was taken from Parker Palmer's book *Let Your Life Speak*, which creatively uses the changing seasons as a governing metaphor for the rhythm of our lives. The last morning together, before worship, we reflected on which of the seasons best described our lives in that moment.

One man, recently retired from a long and successful career and recovering from an unexpected health scare, spoke up immediately. "I identify with autumn," he said. "In fact, it is the perfect description for where I am." I asked the man to say more, and he did so succinctly. He said, "I'm in the fall of life, which means I'm not done yet. But if I want to do it, I better start soon." His words have stayed with me. In the book, Parker Palmer describes autumn this way:

*"It is a season of great beauty, but it is also a season of decline: the days grow shorter, the light is suffused, and summer's abundance decays toward winter's death. Faced with this inevitable winter, what does nature do in autumn? She scatters the seeds that will bring new growth in the spring – and she scatters them with amazing abandon. In my own experience of autumn, I am rarely aware that seeds are being planted. Instead, my mind is on the fact that the green growth of summer is browning and beginning to die. But as I explore autumn's paradox of dying and seeding, I feel the power of metaphor. If I look more deeply, I may see the myriad possibilities being planted to bear fruit in some season yet to come."*<sup>i</sup>

Paul, writing from the autumn of his life, understood this paradox personally. His language in this letter is unusually intimate. Paul addresses the letter to Timothy, "My beloved child!" He writes, "I am grateful to God...when I remember you in my prayers night and day. And recalling

your tears, I long to see you." As a good mentor, Paul goes on to encourage and instruct Timothy throughout the letter, offering wisdom on life and ministry.

But then, in this final chapter of a heartfelt letter, the apostle turns from counsel to reflection. And here, his language shifts. We find a side of the Apostle Paul that we rarely see in his epistles to congregations or his passionate debates with other church leaders. "The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. Timothy, do your best to come to me soon...come before winter."

These words have resonated through the centuries. In October of 1915, Clarence McCartney, then pastor of Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, preached a sermon on this passage. He titled it "Come Before Winter." He was drawing from the final verse in the King James Version: "Do thy diligence to come before winter." From 1915 forward, Clarence McCartney would go on to preach that sermon forty times in forty years, always in October, first at Arch Street and then for two decades at First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. And, every year, each October, the sanctuary filled with worshipers hungry to hear familiar words most could recite from memory.

Listen to McCartney's reflection on Paul's phrase. "Before winter or never. There are some things which will never be done unless they are done 'before winter.' The winter will come, and the winter will pass. The flowers of the springtime will deck the heart of the earth and the graves of loved ones, perhaps the grave of a dearest friend. There are golden opportunities on this autumn day, and soon, they will be forever shut." When McCartney preached the sermon for the final time, just a year before his own death, he closed with these words, "Come to thy God in time; youth, manhood, old age past, come to thy God at last."<sup>ii</sup>

*I'm not done yet. But if I'm going to do it, I better start soon.*

Paul writes in the autumn of life. He addresses one whose future is filled with possibility but also uncertainty. What should Paul say to Timothy? What should one generation convey to the next? Remember Parker Palmer's description—autumn is a season of decline **and** the perfect time to scatter seeds with abandon. You see, the beauty of the season comes in the opportunity for a kind of courageous generosity, daring hope. Paradoxically, the fall is a season of new life and fresh possibility.

I think of how in this place, this congregation, Second Church, we have the opportunity to learn from the gifts of age and the maturity that comes only through experience. And how those among us who find ourselves in the autumn of life have the witness of Paul, who chose not to fade quietly, but instead boldly invested in the generation that was to follow.

Among the best books I've read in recent years is *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.<sup>iii</sup> The author is Father Richard Rohr, and he suggests that our lives can be divided in half. In the first half of life, we seek our identity. Or, as Rohr writes, "We create the container of our lives." But the second half of life is where the adventure begins. In Rohr's words, "We build the courage to ask, 'What is all this for? What am I supposed to do with this? What is the purpose of my life?'" It is at this turning point, whenever it comes, that we make a choice about the impact we want to have with the time we've been given, the legacy we want to leave. Rohr puts it plainly, "None of us go to heaven alone. Or hell, for that matter. We hold each other, and we hand ourselves over to one another." The second half of life is all about recognizing that our lives are not just about us. They are about the people we lift up, the wisdom we pass down, the grace we extend. The writer David Brooks describes this as the second mountain, when "life moves from self-centered to other-centered." Those on the second mountain have "committed themselves to a cause, to a people, to a faith."

Paul writes to Timothy from the second mountain. Paul is not done yet, but he has no time to tarry. To those in

the autumn of life listening today, I want to risk a pastoral word of admonition. Occasionally, I hear someone of more advanced age say something like this: "I'm just glad I'm not a young person today." Or, "With the state this world is in, I'm not sad at all to be leaving it soon." Now look. It's an understandable sentiment. But from the perspective of one who hopes to have a little time left, I want to plead with you this morning. Do not renounce this world. Do not abandon its future. We desperately **need** those in the second half of life who choose to keep sowing and building for a future you may not see. We need wise souls who have shifted from achievement to commitment, from individualism to interdependence. We need you, given the gift of age, to have the courage to keep growing, to keep listening, to keep speaking up for the vulnerable, to keep living the way of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who never stopped widening the circle or calling his followers to do the same. Yes, we need you.

In many congregations it is common to say that the youth are the future of the church. It's a good line, but it's not the whole truth. The truth is that the future of the church depends on those in the autumn of life planting seeds in the time that remains. The future of the church depends on you who run this race to the very last step, who pass the baton with a spirit of hope in those who follow. The future of the church depends on elders whose faith has been tested in the fires of experience, who have both the patience and the urgency that come with the passage of time. When one of you who have faithfully sat in these pews for many years make room for a first-time worshipper, you are offering a profound gift. When one of you who still knows how to tie a tie and wears one on Sunday morning, when one of you people high-fives a child wearing her basketball uniform, you are making a difference here. When you whose faith was formed decades ago choose to hear the voices of new generations and open your heart to change, the future of the church is made possible.

Bill Enright served as pastor of this congregation from 1981 to 2004. I'm going to embarrass Bill by sharing that he will be 90 years old this December. And almost every Sunday, what Bill says to me is, "My favorite part

of coming to church is the number of people I don't recognize here." The spirit of those who have planted seeds for a future, who now pass the baton to those who will follow.

The end of Paul's letter is interesting. It includes a list of names, and admittedly it is a bit of a tongue-twister for English speakers. But I love to read them. I love to read the names of Prisca and Aquila, the household of Onesiphorus. I love to think about Eubulus sending greetings along with Pudens and Linus and Claudia. Those names belonged to real people. When Timothy read those names in Paul's letters, images would have come to his mind. Faces and stories, experiences shared. You see, these were people Paul and Timothy knew and loved. And the truth is we know them too. Their names may be different, but their witness is the same.

And they're the reason you're here. They are the reason I am here. I am here because Aunt Gloria (not my real aunt) rocked me in the nursery and kept me in her home. I'm here because Uncle Ralph Moore (not my real uncle) gave me sticks of Juicy Fruit chewing gum in the pews to keep me quiet. I'm here because Ms. Julia Wetmore taught me to sing the songs of faith. I'm here because Miss Lena Cooper gave me a hug every single Sunday and offered to be my local grandmother if the school was having a Grandparents Day breakfast. I'm here because of the saints, the ones who prayed for me, taught me, encouraged me, slowed me down when I was running too fast in the hallways, laughed at my childish jokes. I'm here because of the household of Onesiphorus. I'm here because of Prisca and Aquila and Eubulus and Claudia. I'm here because someone else took seriously their call to show up in my life. And I would imagine that you are here for the very same reasons. Take just a moment now to think of those saints on your journey. To say their names in your mind. To remember their faces, the experiences you shared. They made space for you and your faith to grow. They have finished the race. They have received

their reward. And now you are called to take their place. You see, those blessed with the gift of age are the future of the church.

Paul wrote to his beloved child in the faith, Timothy, "Do your best to come to me soon." And I hope Timothy made the trip. I pray that there was reunion before winter. We need each other. We always have. Seeds scattered in autumn will bloom in the spring. One generation to the next. This is how faith lives on. This is how hope endures. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Jossey-Bass, 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1976/09/come-before-winter>

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. (Jossey-Bass, 2011).