

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
May 25 & 26, 2013
Rich Phenow
Valuable: Senior Adults
Psalm 90**

We are in the midst of a sermon series entitled “Valuable, Why We Need Each Other”. We’ve been looking at the value of our uniqueness created by God. Two weeks ago Deb Manning talked about women in leadership and women in the church, coequals with men. Last week we talked about singles and affirmed the reality that we are all equal in Christ, that we are one in Christ through faith. Our mission here at CPC is to inspire all generations, people of all colors, all sizes, all genders, to follow Jesus. It doesn’t matter what shape, what age, or how we look. Our mission is to follow Jesus, love one another, and live out that call to serve those in need in our church, in our communities, in our city, and around the world.

Today I want to talk about a vibrant and amazing group in our church, senior adults. This is a group close to the hearts of Jody and me. We came to this church over 26 years ago fresh out of seminary, out of graduate school. Hadn’t been married 5 years when we came here, and the folks who greeted us and cared for us and worked really hard at accepting *me* were the seniors. We felt enveloped in their love. We felt engaged in their hearts. When we started having children, these were the people who sent the first cards. They were the ones who knitted the booties and the caps. They were the ones who had lots of great advice—especially for *me*. They were people who were seasoned with life, seasoned with life experiences. The seniors in this church have witnessed the unfolding years of their faith. They have been the most grace-filled and encouraging, the most-hard working souls at CPC.

Not long after coming here, I thought I would push the parameters of the church and some of the people of the church, so for Jody’s birthday present, I got my ear pierced out at the Mall of America. She didn’t see that as much of a birthday present. I think it is still in my personnel file that an elder, a younger man named Dennis, told me that I wasn’t called to this church with an earring and questioned whether I was still called or not. That would be Dennis Hykes. But I remember that those who embraced my venturing out and accepted me were the seniors. I call this group, the seniors, the gap generation because to me these are the people in our church who see a need and then they do something about it. They respond to that need.

Our seniors are involved in so many places in the life of this church. We have a once-a-month gathering called Edynamoes where about 120 seniors get together for fellowship and a program and for fun. It’s a ball. You should come, and it’s the cheapest lunch in town. We have seniors worshipping here on Sunday morning. I love the fact that we have busses that bring them, and there are rows of walkers at the back of the sanctuary. I love the fact that seniors also come for a mid-month traditional service. I love that because that’s a sign of our vitality and our health. On Tuesday afternoon we have a women’s senior Bible study. We have a Wednesday senior Bible study for men and women. We have a Vernon Terrace Bible study and a Friendship

Village Bible study, and I lead a Bible study at 7500 York once a month where we get 25 to 35 seniors. These people are serious about studying God's Word, about digging deep. Seniors of all ages come to that. There's one guy, Chet, who is 102 years old. He's not a member of our church but comes to that study. Chet loves the Bible. He's in three different Bible studies. He has more wisdom, this guy does. Frequently I have to remind him that I am teaching the Bible and that I'm getting paid to be there and he's not. We have senior circles of women. Our garden group has seniors in it. Seniors are infiltrated throughout this church.

About four or five weeks ago we had a Serving Saturday, and we had 300 folks of all ages come together. Our seniors came and do you know what they did? They wrote notes to seniors graduating from high school and college. A parent happened to give me one of these notes. Listen to this. I love this.

Dear Andrew,

Congratulations on your high school graduation. This is a real milestone in your life and the beginning of a whole new adventure. Oh, to be your age again and to have the knowledge that I've gained in my 85 years of life. I know the best advice I can give you is to have you read and reread Jeremiah 29:11.

¹¹ "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good... to give you a future and a hope."

Andrew, stay close to your church and make your friends there. You are truly fortunate to have your church beginnings at CPC. May God continue to bless you in all you do. In Christ,

Audrey

Senior to senior. That's a heart of wisdom, a heart of wisdom developed over time. Audrey has a heart of gratitude. She doesn't even know what a hard heart looks like.

Now I want to look just briefly at a few of the stats of our church. We are blessed because we have a lot of seniors at our church, and they declare God's power. They declare marvelous deeds in their lives and to us, the next generations. Over 10 percent of our total membership is over the age of 70. There are 306 of our folks who are in the ages of 70 to 80. There are 175 who are 80 to 90, and there are 51 over the age of 90. That's a total of 532 over the age of 70. That's the size of a big church. The fact of the matter is, if we go back to the age of 60 and said they were seniors, we would double that number. I think that's a gift. I would say that 25 percent of our total active membership, I'm talking about people who come to church and study God's Word and are developing as followers of Jesus, probably 25 percent of those people would be seniors over 70. These people are torchbearers. These are people who bring light. These are people who bring life. They bring their stories of hardships and challenges and they are treasures. They are a valuable gift to this church. They are in the game and they are on the field. We need you seniors.

I had a flashback moment this spring. I remembered being about 17 years old and soon to graduate from high school. The only bathroom that we had in our household of eight was occupied by my dad at this particular moment. The door was open, and he was shaving. He was listening to WCCO, Boone and Erickson and Maynard Speece and the farm report. I remember

thinking, “Wow, is my dad old!” His hair was dusted with gray. His belly was well-rounded and developed, his muscles no longer tight and formed, and I wondered to myself. “How much longer is he going to live? The guy is over the hill. Death has got to be around the corner.” Well, things have changed for me. I am now exactly the same age he was at the time I made that assessment, 57 years old, and I’m thinking differently. In my delusional mind, I think I look young. I know I feel young. I think I look rather extinguished, I mean distinguished.

I have an exercise for you, just a simple exercise. I want you to humor me a little bit this morning. In just a moment I’m going to ask you to stand up. I just want you to stand up if you are able. Go ahead and stand up. Now if you made any noise when you stood up, if there was any grunt or squeak or queak at all, if you took longer than two seconds, if you grabbed the pew in front of you, I saw some of you do that, then you’re aging. Okay, go ahead and sit down. Now if you just made another noise.... Did you hear the sound of people sitting down? There were sighs everywhere. There was a sense of relief when landing happened. I want you to know that that is confirmation to you that you are aging, that you are aged, but again, you are not ancient. You are here and you are still in the game. You are an amazing gift to us. You are a witness to God’s faithfulness. You are a holder of the past, a holder of history. You are a living legend and a legacy. Your story is one we need to hear because you have been shaped by life’s experiences. We need to sit in your presence. We need to drink from your well of wisdom. We need to rub shoulders with you to show you how valuable you are, but we also need to rub shoulders with you to remind us of how much we need you.

Those of you who are over 70, I want you to repeat after me: I am a living legend.

(All:) I am a living legend.

I didn’t say to say it tentatively. I want you to repeat after me with boldness. I am a living legend.

(All:) I am a living legend.

I am a legacy.

(All:) I am a legacy.

I am valuable.

(All:) I am valuable.

Hey, you’re losing steam here. You’re acting your age. Now come on, get pumped up a little bit. You need me. I want to hear that.

(All:) You need me.

Good. A little better. I am God’s story.

(All:) I am God’s story.

I am God’s story of His faithfulness.

(All:) I am God’s story of His faithfulness.

And you need me.

(All:) You need me.

Did you hear that? We need you. You are valuable. You are the story of God's unfolding faithfulness. We need you. Here's what Leviticus 19, verse 32 says.

32 Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD.

Hear that? Those of us who aren't 70 should be standing in respect to the elderly. To continue to build this case, I want us to look at Psalm 90 together because I think it is a profound psalm that will help us. Psalm 90 is considered to be the oldest psalm in the Book of Psalms. It was written by Moses. Moses is talking about our human frailty, and he is talking about the eternal nature of God. He reminds us that we are limited by time but that God isn't. He is telling us that we have to use our time wisely to make a difference. Look at verse 1.

¹ Lord, through all the generations you have been our home!

For all generations, God has been our home, our dwelling place. He has been our foundation. Now for some of us the image of home is a broken image. Maybe in your home, there was sin and there was fighting and there was lots of pain. But the truth of the matter is that God gives us the image of His faithfulness as our dwelling place, a place of security, a place of protection. There is no place like home. Now, many of our seniors have witnessed this generational nature of God. Their grandparents and their parents were dependent on their faith. Their descendents were followers of Jesus and when our seniors married, they did their best to create followers of Jesus in their children. Not perfectly, but they exposed their children to faith. I know many of you seniors are grandparents and great-grandparents and you are doing the very same to your grandchildren and great-grandchildren because on Sunday mornings, I see you bringing them to church and Sunday School.

I visited a senior couple in their home this week, Mac and Barb. Barb said this, "My grandmother brought me to church every Sunday because my mother had to work," and Mac said, "There was no optional nature to Sunday School or church. We went every Sunday." Mac and Barb caught the values of faith by the elders in their lives. They were led by examples. In verse 10 Moses says this.

¹⁰ Seventy years are given to us! Some even live to eighty. But even the best years are filled with pain and trouble; soon they disappear, and we fly away.

Verse 12,

¹² Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom.

Another translation,

12 Teach us to number our days, that we will grow a heart of wisdom.

Do you want to know why you are 70 and 80 and 90 years old? Do you want to know why? You have lived for the purpose of gaining a heart of wisdom. Not a heart of wisdom to hold onto, but

a heart of wisdom to share. And you've gained that heart of wisdom not just through the good times but through the hard times and through the bad times. Moses is saying that our lives are about making our days count. It is about making a difference with our lives. The seniors I know in this church, and I know many well, they know about the fragility and the brevity of life. I hear them say all the time, "Where has the time gone? It's flying by. Every day I'm alive, it seems to be moving faster." Our seniors have hearts of wisdom that have been shaped over time, not just time but in hard times and in times of trouble, in pain along with the good. We can't escape those hard times because I think the hard times are some of the best teachers for us.

My 95-year-old mother has known great pain. She has experienced the losses of 5 of her 8 children along with the early passing of her husband. She has experienced divorce in her family, in my family. She has experienced alcoholism and drug addiction and incarcerations in her family. Even her husband, my father, was an alcoholic, but she has a deep and abiding inner faith, a trust in God that never waivers. She has seldom questioned the hand of God upon her life in the pain and trouble. Now she is in advanced memory loss but the remnants of her faith and spiritual practices are still the foundation. She attends daily Mass. Her sight is compromised and her hearing is almost totally gone, but you should sit next to her at Mass. The words roll off her tongue. She can't remember what she had for lunch or what season we are in but, man, can she remember the Lord's Prayer. She can pray that rosary, every word of it. She talks about her readiness to go home daily. She is asking God to take her home in His time. Her faith is reduced to a simple task, a simple rhyme, a rhyme that she created herself. Multiple times when I visit her, she will say, "Richard, have I told you about the rhyme that I've created?" And each time I act surprised and say, "No, Mom, I've never heard it," though I've heard it hundreds of times. She says simply this, "Richard, God is good and God is just. He will help us if we trust." A simple mantra spoken out of a heart of wisdom, out of life's experiences, good and bad.

Psalm 90, verse 14 says this.

¹⁴ Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad to the ends of our lives.

Not only do you senior types have hearts of wisdom, but you have hearts of gratitude. You have this uncanny ability to look back at life and sing for joy at God's faithfulness and His unfailing love. There is this strong sense in you that through it all, you've learned to trust in Jesus. You've learned to trust in God. Doris Lee, 98 years old, the only living charter member of this church, is sharp as a tack. She is determined. She is independent. She is still living in her home, and she has faithfully worshipped at this church every time she has been in town for probably the last 56 years until this past winter. This winter her heart weakened, and Doris can no longer be here on Sunday mornings. Visiting Doris is a trip. She tells stories about the early days of CPC. She talks about her husband Bob. Those of us who knew him remember this sweet, little man. She talks about him with such tenderness and love. I love hearing her tell stories of the early days of Roger [Roger Anderson, Pastor Emeritus] in this church. Her husband Bob was an elder, and it was his spade that went into the ground to start building that little church on the hill on 69th street, Christ Presbyterian Church. Every visit she tells Jody and me how grateful she is for this church, for her husband Bob, for her daughters, for her neighbors, for her buddy who brought her to church and sat behind her and with her. Doris Lee, 98 years old, is a complete inspiration to me. She is a fully-developed person with a heart of wisdom and gratitude. She is satisfied by God's unfailing love.

My challenge to you this morning is simple. Those of you who aren't seniors, I want to encourage you to engage in a relationship with a senior. I want to encourage you to be mentored by your grandmother or your grandfather, by your older neighbor, by an aunt or uncle. I want to encourage you to be in a developing relationship where you can learn from a heart of wisdom and a heart of gratitude. I want you to sit and listen to their hearts. I want you to listen to their life experiences that have taught them and deepened their faith. I want you to sit with them and ask really good questions. Not about what they had for lunch but I want you to ask really good questions like, who shaped their faith and their lives? Who spoke into that? What were the values and principles taught to them as they were growing up? I want you to ask them what they are most thankful for. I want you to sit and listen and take the time to hear the story of God's unfolding faithfulness in their lives. Why? Because it is going to build your faith; God's faithfulness and how God has shown up for them will deepen your faith. So, if you are young and you need to lease a grandparent, we've got them here. We've got over 532 of them, and the number is growing all the time.

If you are a senior, here is my challenge to you. I'm talking to you seniors, you 70- and 80- and 90-year-old folks. I'm challenging you to finish well. I'm challenging you to invest in somebody who is young, to mentor your grandchild, to mentor a young man or woman at this church because we have a lot of them here. I want you to tell your story, your valuable story of God's faithfulness. Don't wait to be asked. If you are a senior and you are not mentoring somebody and sharing the story of God's faithfulness in your life, then get going and start telling your story. You see, for you this is about finishing well. For you, this is about sharing the legacy, the history of God's involvement in your life. This is about generations together, young and old, loving and receiving life, giving hope and sharing wisdom.

One of my new favorite authors is a guy named Bob Goth, who wrote the book *Love Does*. He says that love is not a theory because love does things. "You don't have to be special," he says, "to be used by God. You just simply have to say yes." Let me end with this text from the prophet Isaiah in the 46th chapter, 4th verse.

⁴ I will be your God throughout your lifetime—until your hair is white with age.
I made you, and I will care for you. I will carry you along and save you.

I want to illustrate for you in the next few minutes what I'm talking about and what I want you to do. I'm going to have my buddy Lex Schoonover come and sit next to me. Lex, come on up. Lex is a member of our church, almost 90 years old. Lex and his wife Ann started visiting here in 1962 and joined the church in 1964. Lex and Ann raised two children here, Susan and John. This guy has a great story, a lot of things to tell us about God's faithfulness in his life. The reason why we are sitting down here is Lex is nearly blind. He can't see well. Last night he almost did a nosedive after the service so I said, "Lex, I need you for two more services. I can't let you fall yet." So we got him a chair and we're sitting down here.

Now just let me give you an illustration of what I'm talking about and how important this is. Lex and I are going to visit just briefly. We've had this conversation three or four times already. One time when I was visiting him, I said, "Lex, when you were a child growing up, you had all kinds of experiences. What are some of the experiences that shaped you? What did you learn from those early years in your life?"

(Rich:) Now nobody is here but you and me, Lex. We are visiting at 7500 York and you are talking to me. What has helped you? What shaped you as a child growing up? What kinds of things did you learn?

(Lex:) Well, as you know, I was born before the Great Depression. My father was a very successful entrepreneur. He had two businesses, but he didn't make it through the depression. He went bankrupt and lost everything, and we had to start over. We had nothing, but we had a good family relationship to keep things going. The first job he got was in Washington, D.C., so we moved there. It was a very fortunate move for us children because we were able to see many things and learn many things. From the beginning, our parents insisted that we take advantage of any situation. We had to learn. They made us very aware of how important education was, likewise, religion.

As soon as we got to Washington, we went to a new church and new Sunday Schools and began meeting new people. It was an interesting life there. It was a challenge to us because we had never had to make friends and meet new people, but we did. We also had the opportunity of going to the Smithsonian Museum frequently and going to the Capitol to see the Congress and the Senate in session. These were experiences that we never forgot. These were the types of things my parents did. They always insisted that we have a religious background and that we follow the leading of the Lord.

(Rich:) So for you faith was important. And the reality was that you learned about perseverance. Your family lost everything but your parents were all about creating opportunities for you children to learn and grow. Okay. Now some of these people know this, but some don't. Lex, you were a prisoner of war.

(Lex:) That's correct.

(Rich:) You were injured from the shrapnel of a bomb. You were marched quite a distance and put on a train with 60 other men. Locked on the train for four days and you couldn't go to the bathroom. You stood for four days on that train because there wasn't room to lie down. Eventually you made it to a prisoner-of-war camp. You spent six months in the same clothes. For six months, from November until you were liberated in April, you never changed clothes. I know this from sitting with this guy listening to the stories. In the morning he would drink a cup of tea and for lunch have a bowl of soup that was flavored with beef. For dinner they had 1/6th of a loaf of bread. I'm telling your story, Lex, because I know it. The guy was 98 pounds when he was liberated. That was hard stuff. It could have been hopeless stuff, a despairing, painful time. What did you learn from that time in your life?

(Lex:) I learned that my prayers were answered because I spent a great deal of time praying, hoping that I'd live through it and come out a whole person. The Lord was good to me. We also had church services in there which you and I didn't talk about, but every Sunday someone would lead a sermon and we would pray. We would do it together. Most of us got religion in the foxhole, as they say, those of us in the service.

(Rich:) So through an unimaginably hard time, faith! Lex told me they would think about food and talk about food just to pass the time. They would create menus and talk about great restaurants. Okay, we're bringing this home here because of time. You've been

married twice, Lex. I knew your first wife Ann. You were married, I think 55 years.

(Lex:) That's correct.

(Rich:) You were married to your second wife Jean for 12 years. I had the privilege of doing both of their services. You were married for 67 years to two amazing women. Holy buckets! Now this is an easy one, buddy. You can hit this over the fence. What are you thankful for? As you reflect on life, what are some of the things you are thankful for?

(Lex:) So many things, it's difficult. I'd been married to Ann before going overseas so it was especially important to me to live through that prison camp experience. That's what I prayed for. I'm very thankful that I got home to spend the rest of her life with her, 55 years, and also that we were fortunate to have two fine children and to educate them and to teach them what we had learned. One of the things I think I impressed on both of them was that they should do their best, and nothing is tough if they believe in the Lord.

(Rich:) Okay, we are going to end with this and that is simply, this is good stuff. I love this. I learn from this guy just like we can learn from seniors all around us, 70-, 80-, 90-plus years old. Hearts of wisdom. Hearts of the story of God's faithfulness. Okay, Lex, so you are grateful for wives and children. You have five grandchildren, I think, four at least, and five great-grandchildren.

(Lex:) Four grandchildren.

(Rich:) Four grandchildren, five great-grandchildren. Okay, here's a tough one and I know this is one you don't like, but give us a little wisdom. I know you can preach it, brother, for the next ten minutes, but just give us a couple of kernels of wisdom. What is important?

(Lex:) Well, we are in a changing world, and I think we have to be flexible and change with it and accept the changes. But more important, we have to believe and pray to the Lord and take advantage of whatever situation we are in and do our best. If we are working and it's a job, study and do hard work. If we are in school, getting a diploma is not going to solve the problem if we don't have the effort and the fortitude to do a good job and to work hard. I think those things are extremely important. If they have families, to pass on to their children what they have learned and what they have gained from being a religious person.

(Rich:) Now it's important for you to know that I didn't coach him in those answers. I didn't tell him he had to say this. I would have had him tell you that I am one of the best looking pastors on the staff. I would have primed him with some good answers, but these are all things that Lex believes with his heart. I want to say that we need the Lex's and the Joan's and the Joyce's. We need these seniors with the white hair. The Bob's. We need the Judy's. We need you to tell stories because it connects us to God. This is a story about a heart of wisdom. It's a story about gratitude. We need to hear these stories, people. Let's pray.

Lord God, thank You for my buddy, Lex. Thank You for the story of his life and Your faithfulness in it. Thank You for all the white-haired folks in our church, those who are 70 and 80 and 90. They are valuable. And, God, thank You that You are the God and foundation of our faith, the God of ages past, the hope of our future.

Thank You. Thank You for the stories of our seniors, for their hearts of wisdom, their hearts of gratitude. Help us younger folks to be mentored and ask good questions. Thank You. In Your holy and awesome Name, I pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.