

That Our Days May Be Long

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26 April 2015

Since I am here today in place of your intern minister, let me tell you a few stories about when I was an intern minister. It was more than thirty years ago, in Oak Park, Illinois, just outside of Chicago. The church building was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The sanctuary was like a theatre-in-the-round: preaching, one had people not only in front, but to the right and left. And there were balconies all around, so one had to look up as well as down. But, intimidating as was the worship space, and the congregation it contained, my supervisor was even more so. I had to sit with him every Sunday on the bench behind the pulpit, even if I had not been assigned any particular part in the service. I knew that at any moment he might whisper in my ear, “You’re up next. I hope you are ready with a good prayer or meditation.”

The time I remember most vividly was when he said, “Get ready to do the offering.” Now the thing about the offering at Oak Park was that it had to be introduced by a joke or a funny anecdote. Well, I didn’t have a good stock of jokes, but at the last second I remembered that my grandfather, who well into his nineties, was ever ready to make an impromptu speech, always led off with a joke. He told them so often, that eventually I remembered a few of them. But I had to come up with one that would be suitable for an offertory. His old chestnut about the hansom cab wouldn’t do. But the rush of adrenaline, generated by my supervisor’s expectations, didn’t fail me. I pulled out the whiskey joke.

A tourist goes into a bar in England and asks for a whiskey and soda. The bartender pours him the drink and the customer says, “My, this drink is awfully weak! Are you sure you put enough whiskey in?” The bartender then says, “You must come from America. What you will be wanting is a double.” So the customer is given another drink, but still complains that it is too weak. The bartender then exclaims, “Ah, you must be from Canada. What you want is a double double.” Then I asked the congregation, in honour of my grandfather, to fork over double, double in the offering plate. I didn’t count the money afterward to see if my extravagant appeal worked out, but I got a laugh, and that allowed me to pass my supervisor’s test.

I remember that my supervisor asked me to read a few books that would give me insight into the relationship between a congregation and a minister. One of these assigned readings was a mystery novel by Harry Kemelman, *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late*. One of the bit of wisdom I got from the book's detective, Rabbi David Small, was that you should not first write a sermon and then go looking around for readings to support it. He said that that was like shooting an arrow at the side of a building and then painting a target around the spot that you had hit. Now I've painted lots of targets around sermonic arrows in my time, but I always think of Rabbi Small when I do it.

My text today is drawn from the scriptures—Muslim, Christian, Jewish—and these no doubt reflect many others. It is about honouring and caring for one's parents. Why ought we to do this?

Well, we often love them. And some of us might even like them. But these are personal things. People and relationships are different. Some people are harder to love and to like than others. Why should we still honour and care for even them?

What is our theme this month? Anyone?

Sustainability! We honour our parents because this sustains life. This same honour will sustain our own lives as we too grow older. If we no longer honour and care for our elders, who will care for us? And who will care for our children when they are old? And our grandchildren? The honour of parents and elders is nearly as much a part of what preserves and sustains life, moving from one generation to another, as the care that we must lavish on the young. Care for the young makes continued life possible; care for the old makes the continued quality of life possible.

Just think of all the extra babysitters one would have to hire if there were no grandparents. And all the great stories about double whiskeys and hansom cabs that we otherwise might not know. And history books tend to be written by old people like me. And for every Mozart, writing masterpieces in his thirties, there are several composers like Vaughan Williams, writing most of his symphonies after he was sixty-five. And what would happen to the volunteer economy if it were not for retirees? And who would remind us what war is like, but those older folks who fought and suffered through them?

Life is productive in all its stages, but it is more frail in some than in others. As we get older we need more and more help. I know I do. My parents, who are still alive and vigorous in mind, have just moved into an assisted living apartment here in Toronto, and will need more and more help from my sisters, my brother, my wife, and me. If the relatively young do not care for their elders, an important stage of life, with its wisdom, productivity, and enjoyment, is lost. So we care for our parents, and others older or needier than us, because we all want to sustain lives full of loving possibility as long as they can be sustained in comfort and dignity, and because the sustained continuation of human culture depends, in part, upon the gifts of all people, old as well as young.

And, last but not least, we honour and care for others, because we ourselves are most fully human when we consider the good of others as an essential part of our own well-being. Because to care for and respect others is part of our care for ourselves: it makes up our self-respect. Being human, growing into human-hood is what being a member of our species is about. We don't just possess cleverness and opposable thumbs, which by themselves might lead us only into mischief, but we have the possibility to dream of the highest good, and a genuine desire to bring it about.

Some of that dream of the highest good is contained in our various religious scriptures—along with other things of lesser or dubious value—and some of that dream is still being dreamed. We are not always getting better, but, I believe that our dream of the highest good can, and does improve. Our vista, and our corresponding moral embrace, gets wider and wider. Our call to humanhood is now a much higher one than once it was.

Therefore, let us now make a metaphorical jump.

We are accustomed to thinking in parental terms when we think about the world we live in. We call this planet, “Mother Earth.” We have called a number of the aspects of deity, pictured as epitomizing and controlling various aspects of the universe, father and mother. This is fitting, because we are born of the earth and our life is sustained by the sun. These parents don’t age and die, at least not like we do: they continue on for billions of years. But this world upon which we live, and its condition favorable to a variety of life, does call for the same kind of respect and care that we ought to lavish on our parents. We care for parents so that “our days may be long in the land,” and we care for the earth, that our days, and those of our fellow creatures, may endure long and as pleasant as they can be. Should we neglect our generational elders, our own days will be short and unpleasant; should we neglect our parent, the Earth, our species’ days may be short and disastrous, and, should we survive, what our children inherit may be less worth having.

And why do we toil upon the earth, except to make a better world for our children, and those others who come after us? And why do we care for others? Because the fulfillment of our humanity, our potential, our self-respect calls for us to be caring, to strive for the highest good, even for those people, cultures, species, and places that we do not personally know. Respect and care for the old, including for our parent, the earth, is then also respect and care for the young, and for the future. May their days too be long and good.

Accordingly, whatever programs we may adopt to care for our families—and for the planet in which we live—as long as respect, honour, and care are our guiding words, our life and the life of the world in which we live can and ought to be sustainable. May your days be full of respect, honour, and care. And may your days be good and long upon the earth.

Readings:

Exodus 20: 12

Honour your father and your mother, that yours days may be long in the land.

Quran 17:

Be kind to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say no word that shows impatience with them, and do not be harsh with them, but speak to them respectfully, and, out of mercy, lower your wing in humility towards them and say, 'Lord, have mercy on them, just as they cared for me when I was little.'

Benediction:

from the Prayer of St. Francis:

Make me an instrument of peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is despair, hope;
And where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;