

A few weeks ago, I decided that rather than developing a series of sermons based on a single topic, I would pay attention to the events in daily living, hoping it would cause me to be more observant, and not just go through life in my customary, Diet Pepsi induced haze. I'm calling the series "Listening to Life." Our last time together I said, "What we honor, we become." Whatever a person or culture honors or treasures, whether it is war or generosity or compassion, is what that person or culture becomes. What we honor, we become.

This morning, I want to speak about a rumor I heard this past week, concerning someone I love. It was on Wednesday evening, Joan and I were coming home from the library, and my phone buzzed, signaling an incoming text. It was from our daughter-in-law Jessica, informing us our granddaughter Madeline had just taken her first steps. They were visiting my parents. My sister Chick was there, along with my brother Doug, and Madeline supposedly, allegedly, purportedly walked five steps. Since we weren't there and didn't see it for ourselves, we're treating it as a wild rumor. Because I'm sure Madeline wouldn't have done something like that unless her grandparents were there to see it. We asked Spencer and Jessica to bring Madeline to our house, which they did. We spent the next hour in our living room, watching to see if Madeline would do it again, but she wouldn't, which was proof it didn't happen.

So there we were, in our living room, trying to get Madeline to walk. They eventually had to leave, but I could have stayed with it all night. Because there are some things worth waiting for. So you're just patient and you wait and you wait.

The next day, I went to visit my mother, and she wanted to look something up on the computer, which she keeps in her bedroom. We were in the living room, so Mom had to walk the twenty steps from her living room to her bedroom. I was standing behind her, ready to catch her if she fell. About every fifth step, Mom would stop to point out something, and I would say "Yes, that is nice," but inwardly I found myself growing impatient and frustrated. Of course, I didn't say anything out loud, but I felt it inside. It took us about a minute to walk from the living room to the bedroom, and if that had been my granddaughter, I would have been elated and laughing and taking video of it to post on Facebook. But when it was my mother, I wanted to go buy her one of those electric scooters so I didn't have to waste the one minute it took us to get from the living room to the bedroom.

On the way home, I thought about my different reactions to the similar events. Both involved people I love, both involved people slowed by their physical limitations, but one person's walk was celebrated while the other person's walk was the source of great frustration.

So I've been wondering why it is the affection and affinity we feel toward the young is often absent in our encounters with the elderly? I was at a restaurant last month, there were two women sitting at the table next to me, and I overheard one of the women, who appeared to be about my age, describe her elderly mother's physical appearance as "gross." But the very next moment she was describing her baby granddaughter as "adorable."

Then last week, we heard Donald Trump, who is 69, say about Carly Fiorina, who is 61, "Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that?" Would Donald Trump have said that about any of his Miss America contestants? Of course not. But in our culture, in the society you and I have inherited, and are even now helping to create, in that society, let a woman pass middle-age and she becomes an object of disgust and derision.

As long as a child is cute, as long as a woman is physically attractive, we happily include them in our lives. But let that first wrinkle, that first silver hair, that first infirmity appear, and her cultural value and importance plummet. That is wrong, and not just wrong, but foolish and short-sighted, because you know what else comes with wrinkles and silver hair and infirmity? Wisdom. Insight. Strength. Devotion.

When any culture denigrates its wisest members, watch out. There go the voices of compassion, of experience, of charity, of reason.

Am I saying all elderly women, all elderly people, are paragons of wisdom and virtue? Nope. There are some real humdingers out there. I've met a few, and so have you. But...there are some truths that must be grown into, truths bestowed by time. So when we diminish the elderly, when we grow impatient and dismissive, and our culture does just that, we are simultaneously diminishing and dismissing the gifts they bring.

When the Law was given to the Israelites, the first four commandments had to do with our relationship to God. The rest of the commandments had to do with our relationships with others. The very first one of those concerns our treatment of the elderly, because if we don't get that right, nothing else works out, which might be why this is the only commandment attached to an outcome or a promise. *Honor your Father and your Mother, so your days may be long in the land.* Do all mothers and fathers merit honor? No, of course not. But I don't think the Law was referring to specific mothers and fathers, as much as it was referring to a specific generation. Honor the generation that produced your generation. Listen to them. Learn from them. Don't dismiss them. So your days may be long in the land. The ancients believed that one's age was a sign of God's favor. If your days were long in the land, it meant God favored you. So honor the generation that produced your generation, so you will enjoy the richness and fullness of life. That's how I would interpret that commandment today. Honor the generation that produced your generation, so your time on earth will be lovely and full.

The walk of the child and the walk of the elderly, and our reaction to them, reveal our walk with the One who loves them both.