

## ***Diminished Capacity***

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*Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are---  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.  
—from *Ulysses*, Lord Alfred Tennyson*

Reading: Acts 17:26-27

Now I know, we are continually asking members to become involved in the work and ministry of this congregation. And there are many opportunities to participate in the work and ministry here: from Ministry Teams to the Church Council to Faith Into Action groups to individual jobs to events to study groups to music and worship.

It was Paul who said, "Let all things be done for edification." (1 Corinthians 14) He was talking about the edification of the church, the body of Christ. Look, he said, you may do a lot of great things. But make sure that no matter what you do that you are "building up the church."

This is important not just for the church but also for each individual. Each one of us is called to ministry--to live out one's faith in real and tangible ways. Certainly this includes much more than service to one's church. But contributing to one's community of faith is one very important, if not indispensable, part of the Christian life of faith.

Now, I say this with the awareness that we are stretched—some of us to the breaking point.

And so this is what I want to reflect upon this morning. How do we deal with the demands of life when we experience a diminishing capacity to meet these demands? How do we cope with the expectations that we have for ourselves as our ability to meet those expectations and desires goes down?

Experiencing a diminishing capacity is an inevitable part of life. Unless one dies young, there comes a time when one must learn to live with less—less energy, less mobility, less strength, less ability.

Does this mean that life is no longer worth living? Of course not! In fact, many people express a greater appreciation for their lives and a heightened awareness of how dear and valuable their lives are to them. This reminds me of that great line from a Mary Oliver poem:

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?*

My hope is that each person can spend some of it on their faith community, building it up and getting involved.

I've known a number of people who have had to cope with diminishing capacity early in their lives for a number of different reasons. A few of them have had to deal with something called Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which can be a very debilitating condition.

One person described it to me like this: It's like having a very small and limited amount of things you are able to do each day. Let's say you have these six spoons that represent the number of things you can do. If you go to work that day, you may have to spend four of those spoons to do that. Let's say you have a meeting or errand to do on the way home. That's another spoon. You have one spoon left. And you can spend it on cooking dinner, but then that would be it. No more left, and cleaning up and washing dishes will have to wait until the next day. One has to be very intentional and thoughtful about how to use one's "wild and precious life."

And so this requires a kind of prioritizing that most people don't have to do. It demands a high awareness of what is necessary, what is important and what will have to wait. The paradox is that diminishing capacity can lead us to do more of what really matters because of this need to be intentional.

It occurs to me that churches experience diminishing capacity, as well. Congregations go through life cycles. All of them. Some of them grow quickly after they have started, expanding in membership, resources, energy and vitality. And then eventually, inevitably, they wane. Membership decreases. Resources diminish. The average age increases. The energy is reduced.

We are in one of those long waning periods right now. People have told me of the heyday of his congregation when there were several hundred members, lots of members with children, huge youth group, all of those Sunday school rooms filled and tons of energy.

This is part of a larger decline of our denomination and the mainline church in general. Since the peak in the 1960's and 1970's, the U.C.C. and other denominations have been steadily losing membership, resources and energy. As a body we have been experiencing diminishing capacity.

And so the question is, How do we deal with this? How do we understand it and make sense of it? Both as individuals, when it happens to us, and as a group.

Part of what I want to say today is that this is much more than a practical challenge. It is much more than a problem to be solved. There is a spiritual dimension that we often simply ignore.

It was Soren Kierkegaard who said, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced." Certainly we can do all we can to recover that vitality, to find a remedy, to increase our capacity. But we should not forget that life is so much more than a problem to be

solved and this should not prevent us from experiencing reality as spiritual beings, as people of faith, created in the image of the Divine.

And so I want us to focus on that spiritual dimension this morning.

There used to be a TV show called “Thirtysomething,” and there was an episode where Nancy, a young mother of two, has ovarian cancer. And there’s a scene where Elliot, her husband, visits a church and experiences many of the familiar sensations of his childhood.

In an exchange with a priest, the priest says something like, “Elliot, you are a very practical man. But you are discovering that all that practicality doesn’t touch the real meaning of life.”

Much of our existence—how we live our lives—is *determined by us*. Especially in the first half of our lives, we decide the parameters, the focus, where and how we are going to spend all of our time. We are in control (or at least have the illusion of it.)

But there are some boundaries which are *decided for us*. There are some limits, no matter how hard we try to avoid or overcome them, that are universally experienced by human beings. Try as we might to create our own worlds, we all eventually discover the boundaries of this one.

In our reading from the books of Acts, the author writes:

*God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth and allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of their habitation, so that they would search for God... for indeed, God is not far from each one of us.*

As we grow older many of us experience these boundaries, these limitations. We might experience them simply as a problem to be solved. But how do we deal with our diminishing capacity, meeting the boundaries of our habitation, on a spiritual level? We can meet them with despair, as *barriers to a full life*. We can panic, become impatient and angry. We can get frustrated and mad that we can’t do as much as we used to do. We can look for something or someone to blame. We can become depressed, feel inadequate or even give up.

Or we can take them as reminders that we are all creatures, shaped and molded by a Force much greater than we, and that a *truly full and abundant life* is measured by encountering this Presence. As the psalmist wrote:

*So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a wise heart.*

The diminished capacity, the limitations we encounter, can teach us a spiritual wisdom, *if we allow it*. We mostly do not attain this wisdom willingly. The ancient Greek poet, Aeschylus, (quoted by Bobby Kennedy at Martin Luther King’s funeral) wrote:

*He who learns must suffer.  
And even in our sleep*

*pain that cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart,  
and in our own despair,  
against our will,  
comes wisdom to us  
by the awful grace of God.*

It is within the boundaries of our habitation that the grace of God can become our source of healing, wholeness and salvation. It is within the limits of flesh and blood that the divine Word chooses to dwell. It is within the sounds of whistles and sirens that we still get up in the morning, surrounded by an incredible sense that the Sacred Presence is with us. And it is within the allotted times of our existence that we might search for God and sense that God is not far from each one of us.

There is a wonderful book by Richard Rohr called, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. He says that there are two halves of life. The first half is concerned with surviving successfully. It's about growing, achieving, striving, and moving up. But the second half of life is the growth of true spiritual maturity.

When he says that you will enter the second half of life, he doesn't mean it in a strictly chronological way. Some young people, especially those who have learned from early suffering, are already there, and some older folks never make it there.

And his main point is that the way down can really be the way up. This diminishing capacity we're facing? It's the way up. It really is. Coming face to face with the stark boundaries of our living can be an opportunity of deep spiritual growth and discovery. Rohr writes,

*Most of us tend to think of the second half of life as largely about getting old, dealing with health issues, and letting go of our physical life, but the whole thesis of this book is exactly the opposite. What looks like falling can largely be experienced as falling upward and onward, into a broader and deeper world, where the soul has found fullness, is finally connected to the whole, and lives inside the Big Picture. (p. 153)*

Friends, we are all invited to that further journey, a journey into the second half of our lives, a journey toward spiritual maturity. May this be a place where we do just that. And as we experience diminishing capacity in our lives, may this task rise to very the top of our list.