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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Retirement

– *A Spiritual Path*

December 2019

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Over the past few years I have spent some time with a variety of people who are over sixty five and mostly officially retired. As I listened to their stories I regularly heard some struggles. These have to do with a loss of purpose, a dwindling sense of achievement and usefulness, loneliness and a desire to find an answer to the question, ‘Who am I now?’ Underneath these struggles I detected a longing for a spirituality that will provide meaning and connection at a new stage in life.

In this article I would like to offer a spiritual path for those in retirement. I am of course aware that retirement can happen at different ages. For most people it occurs around the mid-sixties, while for clergy and religious it is usually much later. What happens when our career comes to an end, when we have lost the thing or things that gave us significance and esteem, when our lives no longer have a clear focus and sense of purpose? Is there a meaningful and accessible spirituality for those who find themselves in what is now referred to as the third act? I would like to suggest that retirement in fact offers an opportunity to claim important things that are at the heart of the Christian religion. The things I want to focus on are three in number: (1) a deeper surrender, (2) a way of seeing reality and (3) a way of serving.

A DEEPER SURRENDER

Let me begin with what I believe is the most important and perhaps the most difficult: surrender. Retirement is an invitation to a new depth of surrender. A wise mentor once said to me that growth in the spiritual life is proportionate to deeper levels of surrender and trust. Surrender becomes much more relevant and indeed necessary in retirement. One of the big challenges of aging is our willingness to choose surrender. The words of the risen Jesus to Simon Peter are apt: “When you were young you put on your own

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belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old *you will stretch out your hands*, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go” (John 21:18).

Choosing surrender in retirement in fact brings a whole new freedom and indeed an inner peace. For the surrender we are invited to choose at this stage in life is the acceptance ‘finally’ of unconditional love. The core truth of Jesus’ teaching is this: The Father’s love is gift not achievement; our salvation is God’s work in us; Christianity is not a requirements religion but a relationship religion. As we get older most of us prefer or perhaps need to take the lift rather than climb the stairs. This indeed is a good image for the spiritual life. In retirement God is inviting us to take the lift. In practice this means that we stop trying to earn our salvation by our good deeds and instead let ourselves be loved by God as we are. It also means that we let go of the control of our lives and allow God to take care of us.

The invitation to a new depth of surrender in retirement is an invitation to a new way of praying. Rather than coming to God in prayer with our own agendas, we simply sit in God’s presence with open hands. Indeed not only do we come to God with open hands, we also come with empty hands. God prefers our poverty to our achievements. Our weakness and our helplessness allow God to fill us with all that is best for us. As St Paul discovered, it is when we are weak that we are strong (see 2 Cor 12:10). What is more, coming before God with empty hands is an acceptance that all is gift, all is given, all is grace. This acceptance which is non-negotiable if we want a close relationship with God is probably the most important and significant thing for those who are retired. It certainly should be less of a struggle for those who are retired. One of the best descriptions I know of the experience of surrender and trust in later life has been written by Macrina Wiederkehr. It is called ‘The Sacrament of Letting Go’.

Slowly she celebrated the sacrament of letting go.
 First she surrendered her green,
 then the orange, yellow, and red.
 Finally she let go of her own brown.
 Shedding her last leaf
 she stood empty and silent, stripped bare.
 Leaning against the winter sky,
 she began her vigil of trust.
 Shedding her last leaf,
 she watched it journey to the ground.
 She stood in silence
 wearing the colours of emptiness,

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her branches wondering,
how do you give shade with so much gone?
And then,
the sacrament of waiting began.
The sunrise and the sunset watched with tenderness.
Clothing her with silhouettes
they kept her hope alive.
They helped her to understand that
her vulnerability,
her dependence and need,
her emptiness, her readiness to receive,
were giving her a new kind of beauty.
Every morning and every evening they stood in silence,
and celebrated together
the sacrament of waiting.

I have used this reflection to stimulate group conversation for people who are retired. It is no surprise that most find it to be a source of inspiration and indeed reassurance. It expresses their experience of the difficult but rewarding process of surrender.

A WAY OF SEEING

“What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare.” Many of us are familiar with this verse from the poem by William Henry James. Many of us too are familiar with the experience the poet is describing. We may not have much time to stand and stare in our working life, but there is no reason why we don’t in retirement. Making time to stand and stare is a good and necessary thing and it can lead to a new way of seeing which some people refer to as contemplative awareness. Contemplative awareness is our capacity to recognise the presence of God in all things. God’s presence is revealed in and through the totality of our human lives. We cannot limit God’s presence to the ‘religious bits’, to what happens in church, to times of prayer, to the celebration of the sacraments. God’s presence is manifested in our encounters with other people, in our relationships, in the inner stirring of our hearts, in art and music and nature, in the events of our daily lives. All these things and more are sources of God’s revelations. They are the window that looks inward to God.

The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich once wrote that, “No piece of reality is excluded from being the bearer of the holy”. Busyness and frenetic activity aren’t particularly helpful in recognising the holy, but leisure and relaxation are. The slowing down that comes with aging provides us with opportunities to become more aware of the ways God is present in our world and in our personal lives.

The rhythm of retirement allows us to take a “long loving look at the real” which is how the late William McNamara described contemplation. This long loving look at reality brings new insights and new wisdom. It can also be an experience of communion with what it is we are looking at. To enter into communion with the world around us helps us to ‘see’ God who is the Creator of all that exists.

Retirement offers us opportunities to make time for play and to rediscover the value and art of playful activity. The Anglo-Saxon utilitarian work ethic which dominates western culture may not give us ‘permission’ to play but the truth is play is good and necessary for the human spirit. It certainly fosters a way of being that helps us to listen to life from a different source and to notice things that we may otherwise not see. Play is a way of losing ourselves in non-pressured time. This forgetfulness helps to stimulate our imagination which in turn cultivates our capacity for contemplative awareness. During times of play it is not uncommon to hear people say, “I never noticed that flower before,” or “Isn’t that a beautiful view,” or “I just had a wonderful idea!” These expressions reflect a new kind of attentiveness to reality. They are experiences of deeper levels of awareness which often have a contemplative quality. Play can help us to experience reality with a contemplative mind and heart. This is God’s desire for us. We are made for this kind of seeing.

God wants us to recognise his loving and life-giving presence in ourselves, in other people and in the world around us. It seems to me that retirement may be a better time to do this than the earlier stages of our lives. To know that God is truly with us brings a peace and serenity the world cannot give. It is this peace and serenity that many people who are retired say they really long for.

A WAY OF SERVING

We know that service is essential to spirituality. Our lives are not just for ourselves, they are for others too. It is necessary that we reach out beyond ourselves and become involved in the lives of other people. So what form might service take when we find ourselves in retirement, particularly if we are no longer as active and energetic as we used to be? I would like to suggest that service in retirement can take the form of compassionate presence.

In the later stages of life we have no need to be busy doing many things. Going around helping others in all kinds of practical ways may no longer be possible. It is certainly not necessary. What we can do is simply ‘be with’ people especially those people who are struggling and suffering. One of the best gifts we can give to another is the gift of presence. To be truly present to another is deeply

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affirming. When this presence is filled with compassion the other person not only feels accepted but understood. Compassionate presence has the power to sooth the pain of the human condition. There is a story told about the French diocesan priest known as the Cure d'Ars. When the only son of an elderly widow died the Cure came to visit her. People expected him to help her make sense of her loss. Instead he simply sat beside her, put his hand on her shoulder and let his tears flow with hers.

The gift that the retired can bring to relationships is beautifully expressed by counsellor and psychotherapist Brian Thorne:

“To be in the presence of someone who does not pass judgement but who extends deep understanding and total acceptance is to be able to relax into being. In such company it is possible to let go of anxiety and to be freed from the need to perform or to achieve”.¹

Being unhurried and non-judgemental is surely part of the experience of aging.

As we get older we naturally slow down and become less ‘rushed’. The experience of life especially the experience of human weakness and failure also makes us less and less judgemental. Sitting with someone in an unhurried and non-judgemental way has the capacity to heal their hurt and pain. To bring an unhurried and non-judgemental presence into the company of others is to offer compassion. Compassionate presence is what Jesus did and did so well. This is why those who spent time in Jesus’ company knew they were experiencing the presence of God. In retirement we may feel worthless because we can no longer achieve much. The truth is we don’t really need to be ‘doing’ much. We can be with and for others in the form of compassionate presence and this is enough. The life and teaching of Jesus testify to the fact that compassionate presence is one of the best ways of serving people.

CONCLUSION

Retirement may be an ending, a closing, but it is also a new beginning. Retirement can be an opportunity. It is an invitation to move into a new stage of life where new possibilities await us. It is a time to discover that there is another way to live our lives. For those who have faith this other way can be built around deeper levels of surrender and trust, a way of seeing called contemplative awareness and a way of serving known as compassionate presence.

1 Brian Thorne, *Infinitely Beloved*; Darton, Longman and Todd; 2003; p. 68.