

A Matter of Principle
2) “Advocates for the Aging”

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July 17, 2011

I am—as are some of you—a “child of the sixties.” I became of age in a time of turbulence and turmoil, a time of protests and demonstrations, a time in which it was deemed most appropriate to “question authority.” Filled with the heady energy and passion of our youth, we did precisely that as we affirmed the motto that stipulated: “Never trust anyone over thirty!”

Now that many baby boomers have reached an age that more than doubled that fixed estimate of the onset of “old age,” we have reason to reconsider and yes, revise our original thinking about the matter of age. It’s funny what the advancing years will do to change one’s perspective about life and what it means to live it well. I think that at least a few of us have adopted a “sliding scale” when it comes to our suspicions about age. As for me, I firmly believe that it’s not wise to trust anyone who is twice as old as me!

It was George Burns who once describe old age by saying, *“Old age is when you don’t have to own antiques to sit down on something that’s over 80 years old.”* Agatha Christie observed that *“An archaeologist is the best husband any woman can have: the older she gets, the more interested he is in her.”*

We are thinking this morning about the reality of aging and what our United Methodist Social Principles have to say about this matter. You will find that statement printed on an insert in your bulletin. As I mentioned last week, the Social Principles are not intended to serve as church law, stipulating what United Methodist can or can’t do. Instead, they are intended to serve as guidelines that will help to inform and shaped the decisions that we make in response to the great issues and challenges of our day. The Social Principles are grounded in the Wesleyan commitment to consider the witness of scripture, tradition, reason and experience in the choices that we make. (Review Bulletin Insert)

The brief statement in the Social Principles related to the rights of the aging is quite clear that in an age that worships youth, we have, as a people of faith, the responsibility of honoring and including the aging in the life of our community and the life of our culture.

Certainly, one would be hard pressed to disagree with the premise that ours is a culture that values youth while often denigrating or neglecting those who are old in years. Watch television for any length of time or pick up most any magazine or newspaper and you will likely see advertisements that depict young and attractive models displaying the clothing or the jewelry or whatever it is that is to be sold. Marketers know that if they can capture the “young demographic,” they have found the key to their future success. It’s all about the young!

Now, the reasons for this fixation upon youth are, of course, many and varied. I suspect that if we were to “drill down” to explore the basic underlying reasons for this focus, we would discover that many of us would just as soon live in denial of the reality of our aging. As the message on so many birthday cards indicates, we have a hard time coming to grips with our own advancing age. As a result, we have little time or little patience to take seriously the aging issues of others and the needs that the present. We would just as soon not be reminded of what lies ahead.

And yet, this is an issue, a reality that we cannot afford to ignore or deny. The fact is that due to stunning technological advancements in health care, we now have more people living longer than ever before. While this is obviously very positive news, it also creates its own set of questions and concerns. Will the increase in quantity of years be matched by an increase in the quality of those years? Or will our elderly simply find themselves viewing their increased longevity more as a curse than as a blessing? These are, I believe, fair questions to ask—even if they do not lend themselves to simple or easy answers.

One of the tremendous challenges of our day is faced by those family members who are entrusted with the responsibility of caring for an aging loved one who is suffering from deteriorating health conditions—including various forms of dementia. Some of you here this morning are faced with the challenge of making the very best decisions that you know how to make concerning the critical variables of care, comfort and cost. These are often very difficult and even painful decisions to make and it is important for you to know that you are not alone in this process, that there are resources and the experience and wisdom of other people that can provide assistance and support.

Our United Methodist Social Principles call us, as people of faith, to be intentional about providing that support even as they encourage us to be advocates for the rights and needs of the aging and their families.

In our lesson from Mark’s Gospel this morning, Jesus challenges the religious authorities of his day for being so hung up on observing the letter of the law that they have allowed their obsession with their tradition to obscure the true intent of God’s commandments. Moses, Jesus points out, had commanded them to “honor their father and mother.” He had likewise instructed them that “whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.”

The law and its tradition clearly stipulated a respect and honor for parents. But, as Jesus points out, the religious authorities had found a loop hole that allowed them to escape responsibility for caring for their aging parents. They could simply make an offering to God (Corban) that absolved them of the law’s demand to care for their parents. Jesus, of course, had little patience with such a gross misuse of the law and its intended good. He was not about to let these authorities off the hook for their responsibility to care for their parents.

My premise then, is that we do have a fundamental responsibility—not only as family members, but as members of the family of faith—to care for the aging; to be their advocates as they negotiate the challenges that come with the later years of life. Our advocacy is needed at both a personal level and also at a social level.

1) Let's consider, first of all, the importance of advocacy on a personal level. In a culture that often ignores the needs, the hurts and the hopes of the elderly, advocates are those who pay attention to these needs, these hurts and these hopes. Advocates notice the need and respond to it.

Perhaps the best way to pay attention would simply be to ask ourselves (if we happen to be younger) the question: **When I am older, how would I like to be treated? What needs might I have? How would I like people to respond to me?**

It seems so basic and so obvious, doesn't it? But the truth is that these are questions that often go unasked by many in our culture. Our willingness to ask them of ourselves is, I believe, an important first step in opening our eyes to the problems and possibilities that our aging population faces. Advocacy begins with our willingness to pay attention.

But there is, of course, more to it than that. Advocacy also includes our willingness (if we are younger) to be more intentional about forming relationships and friendships with those who are older in years. It is difficult to be an advocate for someone else unless you have taken the time to cultivate a relationship with them. Now, obviously, the cultivation of a relationship (friendship) needs to be a two way street. But it wouldn't hurt to take the initiative of reaching and connecting with those with whom you might not normally connect with, those whose age and interest might be different from your own.

Your choosing to reach out might be as simple as having a coffee hour conversation or sharing a table at Grill and Chill. It might involve providing transportation once a month for an older person who would like to attend worship or some other church event. Or, it might involve helping to cook, serve or clean up at one of our Senior lunches. There are, of course, many ways through which one can cultivate deeper friendships. The important thing is to find one and do it.

2) As important as it is, there is more to being an advocate for the aging than what we may experience at the personal level. There is also a need for those who will be social advocates; for those who will be advocates for senior employment rights, health care benefits, housing concerns and pension support. We need those who will choose to be a voice for those who have lost their voice and perhaps, their ability to grasp the finer points of the ever changing complexity of law.

In this social arena, there is a fundamental need for those who will be advocates of the right

of the aging to put in place guidelines and procedures that will provide for their wishes concerning the care they receive when they are no longer able to make decisions for themselves. Given our technological ability to keep people alive far beyond our former expectations, it is important that individuals have the opportunity to clearly outline their expectations for end of life care. These, of course, are not necessarily easy conversations to have, but they are conversations that are vitally important.

Laura Sanchez recently made me aware of a document that is gaining increase popularity among those who wish to adopt a clear set of guidelines that will outline their wishes as to how they will be treated when they become seriously ill. Appropriately enough, it is called, "Five Wishes." This movement began with the work of a man by the name of Jim Towey who worked for a year under the direction of Mother Teresa. Inspired by this experience of working with the dying, Jim Towey began to develop a way that patients and their families could plan ahead to cope with serious illness.

The five wishes outlined in this document are as follows:

- 1) The person you want to make health care decisions for you when you can't make them yourself.**
- 2) Your wish for the kind of treatment you want or don't want.** This would include your wishes concerning life support, pain levels, medication and food intake.
- 3) Your wish for how comfortable you want to be.**
- 4) Your wish for how you want people to treat you.** These wishes can be as specific as you want to make them.
- 5) Your wish for what you want your loved ones to know.** This might include your feelings about your own death as well as specific plans for a memorial service and burial.

Obviously, there are many other options that one has in terms of creating a will and it is not my intention to advocate one over against another, but merely to emphasize how important it is for us to intentionally communicate how we wish to be treated when we cannot speak or act for ourselves. Our willingness to be specific about our wishes will go a long way toward ensuring a certain clarity and simplicity in this decision making process.

In the midst of a culture often inclined to worship at the altar of youth, we have the opportunity and yes, the responsibility to be advocates on behalf of those older individuals who too easily and too often have been pushed to the margins--forgotten, neglected and ignored. It is for us, as a people called Methodist, a matter or principle—the principle of working together to ensure that those who are aging receive the honor and respect, the rights and privileges, the love and acceptance that is their rightful due. While this is work that has larger cultural implications, it is also work that can begin right here and right now within our own family of faith in our every day choices to become advocates for the aging. Amen.

