

**On letting go of what is, to be ready to love what comes next
And on letting go of what comes next, in order to love what is!¹**

John 12:20-25 (Jesus talks about a non-attached way of loving our lives.)

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I thought I'd share what one of you told me this week. Your grandson called to with you a happy birthday. The grandson asked, "How old are you?" You answered, "Today I'm 72." The boy was quiet on the phone for a moment, and then he asked, "Did you start at 1?"

Today we are focusing upon one teaching of Jesus that applies to all of us, no matter what our age—8, 18, 38, 58 or 97. It is recorded that Jesus offers this teaching at the very end of his public ministry; he is anticipating his own death but Jesus is advising his disciples about life. Here is the passage again: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. *Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*"

This biblical passage can easily—at first glance—seem depressing. It seems that Jesus is saying to hate life, not to love it. The more that we ponder, and the more I read what biblical scholars pointed out, the more, to my relief, we can realize that Jesus is not saying to hate life. Instead of being depressing, this advice of Jesus is actually wonderfully inspiring—for each of us, no matter what our age. Using today's jargon, Jesus is basically saying that *we are wisest to live in the moment in a non-attached manner*. We can understand his words as saying that we *might as well LOVE our LIVES as they change*, rather than to be overly attached to the way things are today. In other words, *Jesus encourages us truly to live, by letting go of what is, so that we can be ready for what comes next*.

In the New Revised Standard Version, Jesus' message sounds like this: "If we love our life, we lose it; if we hate our life, we keep it." Just to be sure that I wasn't pushing Jesus' words in an unreasonable direction, I checked a few other translations. *The Message*, a translation that tries to use very contemporary language, translates this passage similarly to my understanding: "*Anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.*"

Let's say we are 28 years old today. Say we like being 28; we're no longer carded, and we don't yet have any grey hairs. So, when we think about 30, two years away, we lack some enthusiasm. If we are extreme in our preoccupation with dreading becoming 30, we might say we love our 28-year-old life in a clinging way. We're not trusting that we can lose our 28-year-old life, to become 30 and still love our life as much in the future.

If we are *not* attached to being 45, when we are close to becoming 46, then we can "lose our 45-year-old life," that is, sort of, "die" to being 45, while embracing, yes, even loving 46, when it comes!

Clearly, Jesus was not a life-stage psychologist. He was facing his imminent potential death, but he was talking about HOW TO LIVE.

What at first seems like a confusing passage that tells us to hate our lives turns into a liberating passage about loving all of life, by loosely holding any particular day of life. Each day we are not attached to that day, that age.

Jesus did die, yet the religion he transformed in the world bore crazy good fruit! What a harvest, from Jesus' life!

Every new year, whether that is measured by a birthday, by January 1, or by the beginning of a new school year, we face the fact that something is falling into the past. Summer vacation is past; school has started--for teachers and principals as well as for students. Yet, as we let summer go, and the previous year of school go, we realize that we can--will--bear much fruit in the next year.

When I served my first church, I was 30 years old when I became friends with a woman whom I learned was 40 years old. After a couple years, I began to think about aging with some lack of enthusiasm—or at least some uncertainty. This sounds ludicrous now, but I remember thinking to myself, as I observed my friend, “She looks like she’s happy at 40.”

I was having difficulty imagining just 10 years older. And, I was identifying 40 as old!

One Saturday this summer I decided to walk to the post office to mail a small package. On the way to the post office, I became quite thirsty, so I went to the McDonalds and ordered a 99-cent coke. I wasn't sure about the tax, so I said, “Is it \$1.07?” The young woman on the other side of the counter said, “Yes.” Then she looked at me again and said, “64 cents.” I said, “\$1.64?” thinking to myself that the price had gone up. No, she said, “64.” I looked at her and said “64 cents?” “Yes,” she said, “It’s 64 cents for seniors.” “Oh, I said, less happy for the financial deal than I was sad for the recognition of senior status.” I had a follow up question for her, “How old is a senior?” “55.” “Whew, I thought. At least I qualify!” From now on, I plan on taking full advantage of the senior special!

Really to live, Jesus proposed, we must let go of what is, to be ready for what comes next. Fortunately, other people who are happy at other life stages help us get ready.

Four years ago, Oprah interviewed Maya Angelou, when Angelou was 70+. When Oprah asked Maya Angelou what she thought of growing older, Angelou responded that she was “excited.” She had even written a funny poem about being older...It is the source of the title of this sermon. Here’s a little of that poem.

Though my hair has turned to gray
And my skin no longer fits,
On the inside, I’m the same old me,
It’s the outside’s changed a bit.²

When do we start wanting to be a different age than we are? Teens sometimes want to grow up, to be older, right? (Though plenty of teens, when they think of what is required of adults, are happy to grow older as slowly as possible.) There’s a bulge of desire to be older as teens approach driving age and 21. Then suddenly, in a very few years, without ever saying to ourselves, “this is the optimal age,” we might be tempted to want to stall the aging process.

Probably any hesitancy to age has something to do with death. We are not eager to get there. However, we are also aware of little “deaths” at every single age. So Jesus’ advice is very useful no matter how old we are! When we are a toddler, we have to “die” to being fed, as we are required to feed ourselves. As we become teens, we sometimes need to get our own dinners. That can be exciting, but it’s a little “death” to being taken care of, too.

Jesus’ advice does not have to relate to age or to grades in school. We can be single and hold onto singleness in an attached way, or as single we can be attached to the idea of being married. We can be married and fear losing our partner, that is, be attached to being married.

If we truly love life as it flows along with all its changes, then *we never lose our love of life*, even though we lose each stage or situation as we move on to the next one.

Remember Maya Angelou said her skin no longer fits. Yet, in the very same poem, Angelou said that she has “learned that whenever I decide something with an open heart, I usually make the right decision.”

There are researchers with a particularly Christian perspective who focus on how churches can care for and minister to all of us. At first glance, just saying we are different and have different needs when we are different ages seems so obvious it does not even need to be mentioned. However, once we really explore how we feel and the issues we face, we discover what a blessing it is to learn from others and to be able to help each other.

We all become each other’s role models. At our picnic next Sunday we’ll be able to visit with 97-year-old quilters, 84-year-old hikers, 40 year olds starting families, 26 year olds working on degrees, 18 year olds making big decisions, 16 year olds making great band music, and 3 year olds filled with imagination.

When retired persons offer childcare or teach the third grade Sunday School, they’re *gaining and giving* a blessing across life stages. When young adults help with youth groups, they are *gaining and giving* a blessing across life stages. When children present a Vacation bible Arts musical for all the rest of us, they are *gaining and giving* a blessing. When youth serve young adults in Youth Hope meals, they *gain and give* blessings.

Loving our life means living it unattached to the present, living with an open heart, ready for what is and will be.

You all laughed at the grandfather who told of his grandson wondering whether he started counting at one. You laughed at me, as I experienced a senior moment in McDonalds. One of the evidences of non-attachment, of losing our lives in order to gain them, is to poke fun at ourselves—at any age.

Remembering the Message translation of Jesus’ words from this strange passage, “*Anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll love it forever, real and eternal.*” May we laugh, love, and live life to its fullest—not losing a moment by attaching ourselves to any particular moment!

¹ The children’s message: 1. Ask children what grade they are in school or pre-school, then ask them in which grade they think they are or will be or were the happiest. 2. Give some children the microphones and ask them to ask some people in the pews the age they were/are/will be the happiest. 3. Conclusion? People will likely like every grade and every age...

² Maya Angelou, *Don’t Break the Elastic*....In April 2004