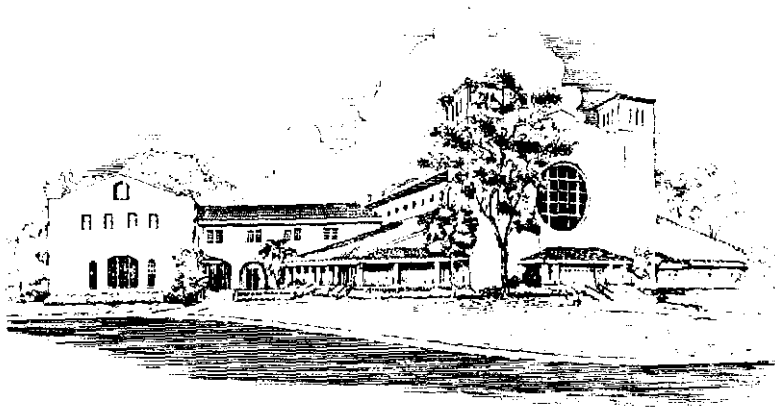


First Church Pulpit

"FIFTY'S ONLY HALF ENOUGH"

Text: "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places;
yea, I have a goodly heritage." — *(Psalm 16:6)*



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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On Wednesday, the Ninth day of April, Anno Domini One Thousand Nineteen Hundred and Eighty-Six, at 11:30 O'Clock, a.m., Eastern Standard Time, U.S.A., as the big old round spinning planet Earth whirred lazily on in its extra-ordinary rotation around the huge and blazing sun; and while remaining six billion plus neighboring souls who inhabit this marvelous portion of God's amazing universe kept on, I suppose, ambling through the paces of their ordinary stations and places, the inexorable big "5-0 Getter", got another one; as, alas, your Pastor and friend, in ticking off another day, turned into another decade; and without fanfare or fury, incredibly, he began his sixth decade of existence, toiling in the vineyards under the moon and the stars, on the aforementioned Earth. (In fact, it was a big week for Fiftieth birthdays here at First Church, for still another principal staff member, whose name and location are forever guarded, also got the urge to move on, and went.)

Back when I turned forty, ten years ago, of course, I preached a sermon (also the Sunday following my birthday) entitled "Life Begins at Forty - Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!". That was intended to be fun. I teased and toyed with the idea of the middle-years. Today, however, I bring you a not quite so hilarious portion of God's word for the surely middle-aged: Fifty's Only Half Enough - A Sermon Reflecting Five Decades of Life Upon The Earth. WOW!! There is so much to say, it would take fifty years to say it all. Fortunately for you, we will not linger

here that long!

I begin with a note of gratitude. Life is easy for some and, so far, it has been "easy" for me. At a little party up above the Banks of the Monongahela River, an old friend and I (he also over fifty now) figured out that we had both already lived longer than eighty-eight percent (a guess) of the human beings who, since the beginning of time, had ever been, or are alive. Not all that many human beings, in the immense journey to the present, have managed to greet the first morning of the second half-century of their lives. Usually in the eons of passing centuries, they were long gone to heaven, or at least to the happy hunting grounds. From that point of view, if hardly as a result of the party, the early Thursday morning rise and shine to drive the twelve hundred miles back to Fort Lauderdale was not all that bad. We made it.

"We made it"...a simple enough statement to be sure, but one which, at such a milestone, prompts me to reflect a moment. I often mention how fortunate I have been in all the grand and wonderful things which have come my way through the years.... But, oppositely, I thought a lot in driving South, of all the things which never happened to me and mine. They alone prompt me to be grateful to the Lord God above. I have had fifty years of good health, never had a serious accident, no broken bones at all.

I was introduced to "Middle-Age" ten

years and two months ago, when, between weddings on a Saturday afternoon, hurrying across the street to greet some friends, I, fully attired in my ministerial garb, tumbled off the curb-stone and fell onto my right shoulder into the path of an oncoming car. The driver, thankfully, screeched to a halt, jumped nervously out, looked down at me and said, "Oh my God, Reverend, if I hadn't been watching, I would have run over you!" (I was thanking God...and there he was taking the credit!) By the way, my right shoulder has never been the same again.

I chose the topic, Fifty's Only Half Enough, as a way of saying a million things, but especially that life has been so good, I pray God for as much more as He can give me: so good that I would love to live another fifty years - at least! It is probable that I shall not make or manage it, but who knows? What is for sure, as cranky old Clarence Darrow once predicted, "Whenever it comes, I will surely use my last breath to try to grasp another." And I shall. And Welshman, Dylan Thomas can relax, I shall never ever "go gently into that dark night", whenever it falls. And while I shall not "rage" as much as he, still while I believe in heaven's bliss and adoration (more than the most of you I would guess), but if our Heavenly Father offered me a certain spot on yonder shore this afternoon with happiness and bliss forever more, or gave me

the chance to move it on here for another year, I would choose to remain and live my last twelve months with all the grace and gusto He might allow. I would love to be in heaven, but not just yet!

In preparation for this sermon, I went to the downtown Fort Lauderdale Library to research the topic, as I frequently do. (By the way, the men and women of our Broward Library are generous and helpful to me always.) Naturally, I looked up "fifty" in the card catalogue, which in our new world is now called a "Microfiche". I expected to find some tremendous, even humorous, illustrations for use this morning, but it was not to be. First I found a book called Fifty Basic Exercises (a book which a fifty pound overweight fifty-year-old does not want to read!) There was a marvelous book entitled Fifty Years In The Dog House which I decided to save for our Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary (By the way, it was written by a breeder of Cocker Spaniels). Fifty Years On The Fifty, I discovered, was a history of the Orange Bowl. (Good title.) I got excited when I found Fifty Years Of Pleasure, until I discovered it was a vanity press history of the Publix Markets. Fifty years of this or that, but nothing for you and me today.

So then I looked under the heading "Old" where I found a thousand books and more, on how to grow old gracefully. But not being "old", I passed that up. I did note William D. Poe's The Old Person In

Your Home, which I decided to borrow for Peggy's use at 4609. One Maxwell Cagan did write a book called There's Gold in Your Golden Years, but some other fifty-year-old had apparently decided to be a prospector for it had been checked out already.

So, I was back where I began. "1936", by the way, was a very good year! To prove that books have longevity, too, Gone With The Wind was published, as was Dale Carnegie's How To Win Friends and Influence People. Life Magazine was begun by Henry Luce. "The Whiffenpoof Song" appeared, as did "Pennies From Heaven", to say nothing of "The Night Is Young and You're So Beautiful". Joe Dimaggio signed with the Yankees, Bobby Feller, with the Indians, Sammy Baugh left TCU for Washington, and our Jesse won four gold medals in Berlin.

Internationally, George V died January 20, succeeded by Edward VIII, who abdicated ten months later to marry a divorced American, Wallis "Wally" Warfield Simpson, and in turn he was succeeded by George VI. Hitler was beginning his way into infamy; but the urgent military news was the Spanish Civil War, where General Francisco Franco was about to gain a Fascist control. Just to show you nothing ever changes, there was a coup in Nicaragua on June 2, 1936, led by General Anastasio Somoza (Remember him?).

While Farouk ascended the Egyptian

throne, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia as his son-in-law expressed rapture at the beauty of bombs "opening like red blossoms". But Haile Selassie addressed the League of Nations in Geneva with the words: "I am here today to claim justice for my people... God and history will remember your judgment...It is us today...It will be you tomorrow." And it was.

F.D.R. was re-elected over Alf Landon. Chesterton, Houseman, Kipling and Unamuno all died. The following were born: Mary Tyler Moore, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Robert Redford, Gary Player, Chi Chi Rodriguez, Burt Reynolds, Jimmy Brown, even "Wilt the Stilt" Chamberlain. Roy Emerson, Engelbert Humperdinck, Joan (formerly) Kennedy, the Muppets' Jim Henson, Katherine Phillips and Ursula Andress all saw the first light of day. Meanwhile, back up north in Pennsylvania, a bad flood struck Johnstown again, just around St. Patrick's Day, which claimed the lives of many, but during the clean-up down in Pittsburgh, a little boy child was born to Harry and Margaret Cromie...fifty years ago.

Now grown up and growing old, let me say a few things to you in reference to the Gospel lesson:

I. The first thing I need to say is How quickly it all passes. I told my Dad once, some years ago, that I knew I was getting older because I could remember 1958 like it was yesterday. He

smiled, and said, "Rich, just wait and see, I can remember 1922." And my Grandpa Acker would chime in, "I can remember 1898. And, I met and shook hands with a man who had once shaken the hand of a man (Walter Rome) who had shaken the hand of George Washington." (Honest.)

At mid-course comes the realization that there are some things which you will never accomplish; some dreams and plans and expectations which must be released for good. That is not as bad as it sounds. But while youth can afford (as my research advisor once said) to pack for voyages they will never take. You cannot in the middle years. The debris will bury you. The weight of carrying extras will stagger you. You must learn to drop (or trade off) some of the least essential things. Dreams too, can be burdensome to carry. Spoken more honestly, it translates to say that by age fifty you realize that you promised more than you can ever deliver.

There were so many things I'd
meant to try
So many contests I had hoped
to win
And lo, the end approaches,
just as I
Was thinking of preparing
to begin.
(Valley of the Kwai, Gordon)

One secret key to growing older is knowing what to keep, but the other is surely knowing what to give up. A man

without a goal is like a world without a God. But, a man with too many goals is like a vagabond I saw the other day in Washington: He couldn't carry all he had.

Well, watch out. Your ship might still come in and golden years remain, but the next decade will get you before you know it. Time flies.

II. The second thing I want to hammer at is that however far and fast we travel, The same little person travels along inside. When asked how it felt to be seventy on her seventieth birthday, Katharine Hepburn responded, "I don't know, I have never felt seventy, and, I hope I never will." Whether fifteen, or fifty, or eighty, the same little person is crowded inside your hopes and memories. I still feel the same inside as when I first remember knowing me.

I sometimes think everybody knows that. But other times I feel sure that no one knows it at all. People almost never change. I can count the ones I knew at twenty, and they are basically the same three decades later. If they lied then, they are capable of lying now. If they made excuses then, they will make excuses now. If they worked hard then, they will work hard now. If you could count on them to be with you and for you then, they are for and with you now. If they could hit a golf ball then, they still can hit one now.

Any change of life's venue becomes a time for re-examination: a time to look within. I read once that oysters have periodic sheddings of their shells. In order to grow, for shells do not, they have to shed it, and grow a new and larger one. So, for a time, in between the shells, the oyster is vulnerable, and in danger. But he must take the risk for that is the only way he learns and lives to grow. Otherwise, he is encased forever inside the smaller shell.

How inter-related it all is. How the pattern develops. For the most part, you get back what you give, there are very few surprises. I have found some deepening secrets, but nothing that I did not know back then. I can unravel some with greater confidence now, and with Santayana, I mostly say it all in a softer tone of voice. But what is genuine and good, was as genuine and good twenty years ago and more. The same self with its grief and grandeur travels along.

III. The third thing I want to tell you is Biblical. As the text of our Scripture says: "The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places." If I had it all to do over, I would do it all the same again. My greatest testimony is personal. At fifty, I would do everything over exactly the same. I now determine to live on with gusto, but with grace, so that after fifty more years, I still shall be able to say:

"If I had it all to live over, I would do it all again." I would choose the same parents, same brother, same sisters, same wife, same three children, with pleasure, same occupation, same churches, same Fort Lauderdale.

The singer, Marian Anderson was once asked what was the greatest moment of her life. She had many: one hundred five thousand listened to her sing beneath the Washington Monument. She has had command performances at Buckingham Palace, and the White House. There have been famous tributes to her in painting and sculpture, and in verse. Honor after honor, after honor. But, when asked, she said the greatest moment of her life was none of those. It was the day she got her first big paycheck and went home to tell her mom that she "wouldn't have to take in washing no more!" "I'll help you now, Mama." It is simple at its best. So few things really matter

Dear Master, in whose life I see
All that I long and fail to be,
Let Thy clear light forever shine,
To shame and guide this life of
mine.

Though what I dream and what I do
In my poor days are always two,
Help me, oppressed by things undone,
O thou, whose dreams and deeds are
one.

Dr. John Hunter

Psalm Sixteen is a Psalm of fellowship with God: "The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. Yea, I have a goodly heritage." He was also speaking first-hand. God gave him counsel, he says, "How could I have ever known what to do without Him?" His happiness, he says, is solely due to the loving kindness of God. Not that his way is easy. The poor man has had struggles. Dreadful things are going on in his idolatrous nation. But God has spared him all that grief.

IV. By fifty, you are, or should be, free to select through the options and begin to isolate what really matters, without rushing off to get it done this week. You can worry more for you, more about the alternatives, less about impressing anyone. As a friend said this week, "If you haven't wowed them by fifty, you probably never will. So quit trying."

Such a sermon should include the acknowledgement that fifty is just another year, another milepost on the road. A milepost does not tell you very much, except how far you are from where you have been, or how far from where you want to go. It is just a reminder to make you take notice, like a punctuation mark, to make you pause or stop in a sentence, or as a sunset makes you mark the closing of the day.

Eda LeShan tells the sad story in The Wonderful Crises of Middle Age, of a

young woman who was dying of cancer. Her tears were reassured by another standing by. She said, "I'm not crying because I'm dying, I am crying because I have never lived." That leads me to say, quite importantly, that somewhere along the way of middle age, you come to realize that people are more important than anything on earth, and of all the people in your world, you yourself are the most important one of all. That sounds quite selfish, but it is not meant to be. It simply says I cannot give what I do not have. So I must find it first before I try to share it with the others.

Carl Jung once said, "As we grow older, we gradually turn away from what the other people think, to forming a good opinion of ourselves" -- or, at least we should. "I want to care for me", now can mean two different things.

V. The fifth and last thing I want to share with you (and you knew I would finally get here didn't you?), is that all of the priorities you select, you must choose to use and live the life God gives you. For the next thing that you see has been waiting for you all along: you get a closer look at your own finitude. That is a fancy way to say that one learns that life is not limitless. You simply must not let the joys of living wait. Far more than half-way home, you cannot imagine the world getting on without you, but you can imagine getting on without the world,

and that is a mighty difference.

It is like being away from home for a long walk along the cool and quiet, where the water touches my dear old Saint Andrews By-The-Sea -- just the way the game of golf was started. The eighteen holes are simply no more than that: a pleasant walk in the afternoon the length of nine holes out and nine coming home. Just long enough to be pleasantly tired, but not exhausted, and when you turn the loop towards the tenth tee, there is still all the time in the world to rescue even the worst of rounds -- remember the day when Arnie said, "Let's shoot a 33", and, aye, he did.

It is rather like the sun as it passes the middle of the day: the morning is barely gone, the sky is hot and bright, but the long and lovely afternoon is coming now, during which so many things will happen which the morning could not hold. It is really quite refreshing in the quiet of the evening. There is time to talk of other things when the competition of the morning and the afternoon is over. Who is to say what is better: The morning, or the afternoon? There is really not much you can do at ten that you cannot do at three. Our infatuation with the cult of being/looking young can torture us. It is not merely sentimental or some cutesy jargon just to tantalize you.

That is the problem that we have. If we do not live with fullness the age of life in which we live right now, be it child or young or middle aged, we spend

the next age seeking to go back. Nothing is really quite so pathetic as to see an old man trying to be young (or an old woman either). Nothing is quite so dignified and pure, as an aging woman walking tall and proud and unashamed of the life she has earned, and learned to live.

Whatever age you are, you must begin each year as if it were the first, or even better, the last year of your life. For as you cannot live in the past, you cannot really claim the future, either. Perhaps it is coming (it no doubt will, of course). But it does not always come. Just when you have retired and are ready to relax -- oh, glory be, it is suddenly all changed, and all those best-laid plans have gone astray.

You cannot let the joys of living wait. You are responsible for you. Earlier you might have blamed some other, but not now!

Well, let me close it with a little story one writer told: Early one April, George Santayana was scheduled to give an important speech to the students at Harvard University. He was to lecture on some topic unremembered now by anyone at all. Into the lecture hall he walked, and looked outside the window. The forsythia was in bloom, the daffodils and crocusses...the tulips, bright and colorful. The Cambridge Grass was green again. The bell rang. The class was underway. "Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," old George said with a smile, "I have a date with Spring." And, to their

mutual delight, he walked out the door into the waiting garden to behold the beauties of God's lovely world.

I hope that you say that now: "I have a date to keep with Spring." I have a date to keep with myself - to fulfill the purpose God had in mind when first He gave the gift of life. I will not waste it. I will not hurry it. I will not squander it away. I will use my time to find Christ's Inner Peace, to share His endless love, and to live within His Grace. For now and for fifty more, at least. Amen.