

Handouts for Four Weekly Discussion Groups

Reflections and Questions on Becoming Old in a Culture that Does Not Like Old

By Sonja Griffith, pastor of First Central Church of the Brethren, Kansas City, Kan.

Session I Living on the Edge

I used to play along the Drescher farm driveway. I used to run with the adjacent merry-go-round, my pigtailed flying. I used to gather eggs in the nearby henhouse with fear and trembling, thinking a black snake might be lurking in the far corners of the dark little cubby-holes where the hens laid their white-gold gifts. Someone with authority, my own age, had told me so! The kitties swarmed one's feet, the cows bawled and were milked into the latest technology — tanks that would keep this most perfect food cool until it could go to market. Tippy, the dog, was the noisy guardian of the place. On summer days, chicken necks were wrung, their feathers scalded with smelly and messy efficiency in order to pluck them out, and the naked birds then were processed for freezing and winter eating. The riches of the garden were there for the asking, if only one would do the work of planting, weeding and picking. The wheat was sliced off in waves and rivers of grainy goodness that would flow to the elevator. This central Kansas farm, was, after all, part of the breadbasket of the nation.

In my childhood, this farm was as near heaven as I could get! Yes, work had to be done, but play was intertwined, swirled like chocolate and vanilla in a marble cake. When we grew tired, home baked bread, homemade chicken and noodles, and orange kiss-me cake would greet us and renew our strength and our laughter. There was about this farm on which friends lived and to which we came to renew our bodies and souls, an air of serene timelessness, eternity. To the children, Larry, Merlin, Marcella and me, who lived and loved living and spent the evenings catching the elusive lightning bugs in jars, it seemed in our innocence as if nothing could make these days end. They would, of course, last forever. So we yearned that time would pass and we could grow up, never dreaming that as we grew older, so did the people and places we loved.

Now, somewhere between five and six decades later, I have come to this place to write about getting older or getting old. I am no longer the little girl with

pigtails, although sometimes I still believe I am! As the afternoon sun slants across the old farm grounds, through the trees hanging full with lumpy green hedge apples, and spots with shadow the driveway I could not wait to run along in my childhood, other things have changed, although some have not. The kitties still swarm, but they are many, many generations later. The wheat fields still are plowed furrows which have a cover of green, for the winter wheat has been planted. This farm and others around it are still the breadbasket of the nation! Now, the sentinel dog is named Cokie. The garden is still there but much smaller. Just so the house still abides, but it has been moved and remodeled, and another house added. Lightning bugs still flicker on summer nights.

We were wrong about nothing changing. The chicken house is gone. No more cows give their rich white milk in the suddenly smaller milk barn with the technology stripped away. Only the center stump of the merry-go-round remains. The pasture seems wilder. New appliances make life easier and more complex. The elders of this place are all gone. Now my friends and I are the elders of the place, long past running with carefree certainty. Life has given us the majority of the work and play, pain and pleasure that we so earnestly and unknowingly wanted. In place of a sense of timeless and eternal, we are stabbingly aware of the mortal and perishable. Our talk is of the legacy to be left to a world that has, itself, changed beyond description, even as it has stayed the same in the rolling seasons and the bread that it gives for life.

This seems, therefore, the perfect place to begin. Autumn is haunting the air and the trees, promising beauty before the dead of winter. I am on a sabbatical leave from being pastor of a church — a chance that has left me with just a taste of what it may be to retire, to find that I am no longer responsible for people, I am no longer **SOMEBODY** in the “working” world. Here it is that I can feel the years that have gone by, imagine what is yet to be, and hold in my soul what is temporal and what is timeless.

The idea for this writing, the germ that grew into a full-blown ailment that cried for healing, came from a film shown to those of us who serve the Older Adult

Ministries Cabinet of the Association of Brethren Caregivers, an agency of the Church of the Brethren. The Fellowship of Brethren Homes created a video to train caregivers in the Church of the Brethren retirement centers and nursing care facilities. Several core values of the Church of the Brethren were identified and then applied to the care given to senior citizens who were in those facilities. The juxtaposition was well done, and the tender solicitousness to the conditions of being old could not have been better. Of course, to show this professional and kindly care, the film must portray the people who need the care. I have seen them before. I also have been a registered nurse. I have made the nursing home calls to my church flock. I have taken senior high campers to help in a nursing home as a community project. But this time, something happened in the pit of my stomach when I saw the lady whose head was tipped to the side and drooling; the man who stared vacantly ahead while tasteless, featureless, formless, puree was spooned into his mouth; the person who plucked at passing sleeves, wanting something no one could figure out, or the person who just cried and moaned for reasons that literally only God knew; the people whose dementia left them nameless to themselves. As I watched the film and remembered persons I had seen on my visits and in my work, all of these and more raised tears in my eyes and a visceral reaction that prayed inside my soul, "Dear God, please do not let me ever, ever be like they are." And yet, I knew, even before the words were formed, that my chances of being so were spectacularly real. I had watched my parents and dear friends. I knew.

I knew, too, that my reaction had much to do with the culture in which we find ourselves, the milieu in which I am growing old. Growing older, after a certain point of vigor and ability, is recognized in every society, including Hebrew Bible and New Testament times, as troubling. More aches and pains, the failing of both body and mind, are inevitable if one lives beyond a certain number of years. Yet in many societies (especially the ones that still hold more community values) that decline is accompanied by receiving great honor and esteeming the old one for the wisdom and virtue acquired by the length of living.

Not so, one must conclude, in this present time, and perhaps not in our Western culture for some time back. Something of individualism, something of a capitalist outlook that values productivity, something of a removal from the cycles of life in agricultural settings, something of an unquestioned belief that the role of science and medicine is to keep us alive as long as

possible and that every person is entitled to medicine's benefits, all have contributed to an unfettered horror and loathing of old age and its pains, its decline, its ugliness (we have been told), its isolation from the esteem and care of a community, its non-doing, its nearness to death. That was the feeling I had in watching the film. I am living "on the edge" of that horror and loathing, fostered or at least not reined in by society, yet I am rapidly becoming that very person who is the object of that horror and loathing, or at best, patronizing niceness. And while I cannot claim any special wisdom of virtue from the years I have been on this earth, I do not want to be discarded as something with no more worth than a used-up Kleenex.

Have I made a stronger point than is warranted? The society that I know values older age if the person can still climb Mt. Everest at 80 or 90 years of age, runs the Boston Marathon into the 70s or otherwise stays alert, vital and active. Respondents to a small survey I took at the 2003 Annual Conference in Boise, Idaho, made that point quiet clear. The older one was in age, the more apt one was to say that old age was only marginally related to one's number of years. They said that one was "as old as one felt," or "as old as one acted." Only when one could not make decisions, run a computer, travel, or respond appropriately in conversations was one "old." People do not mind being "old" when they have free time, play with grandchildren, golf every day, can demonstrate for peace and justice with a nothing-left-to-lose attitude, or volunteer for something that catches their fancy. But they mind mightily when they are "slow and lame old," or "blind and deaf old," when they are "dementia old," or when they are "nursing home old." Older people are seen in advertising as the ancestors who caused our cholesterol problems, as needing laxatives and dementia medications, as consumers of At'm mobility carts. Meanwhile, the industry that eliminates the lines and wrinkles and heart disease of age is booming. Aging is no longer just inevitable. Aging is a "problem." Aging is to be "solved" with medicine and technology. More than I cared to admit, until I saw that film, I had been formed and shaped by the hands of the culture around me, molding me into hating what I was becoming. And though the church has been a great force for care of the elderly, it has too often been silent or complicit.

Age can and should be a time of as much enjoyment and mobility and continued learning and growing as is possible. Our God-given minds and hopes and spirits should have no less, and should work that there be no less. But age does make a difference. One may be "as old as one acts," but one cannot do at 80

years what one did at 20 years. Conversely, one cannot know at 20 years what one has discovered in the testimony of days and weeks and years that add to 80. The culture that does not value age, I suspect, does not truly value youth, despite our disclaimers to the contrary. But when the number of years can no longer be denied, when the end of life is far more tangible and real than it used to be, then what? When we have become babies again, needing total care and total love, yet knowing that we are considered “burdens,” objects of disgust or just a job in a nursing home, no matter how noble the purpose of the home, how can we make peace with that reality? How do I, or anyone else, live on the edge?

Much of the writing on aging and the spirituality of aging is done from the outside, looking in on the process and truths of aging. Statistics, research, overviews of Biblical aging, aging in other cultures, and experiences with seniors are becoming more abundant. Such insights are most helpful. I propose to speak from standing on that edge where the personal and cultural meet, from inside the very experience. I will be one mirror of many. I propose to speak of the expected harshness, the unexpected sweetness, the deepest yearnings of the heart, and the hopes for the church and for the fabric of society and for myself. And if the Holy Spirit in this writing should touch anyone else, then I rejoice! If not, then perhaps it simply will enable me to grow old in the best way I possibly can. Perhaps I will be healed of this dis-ease of the soul. In this place where life has flowed ceaselessly from youth to elderhood, where chickens, grain, cows, gardens and people gave themselves to life, and the end of life, and the beginning of life, where the temporal and eternal meet, may this be a word, a bit of bread, for today and a word, a crumb or two of kiss-me cake, for all time to come! May there be a lightning bug in the jar! Amen.

Discussion Questions

Where, in your lives, can you reflect on the process of growing older?

What excites you about the process of becoming an elder?

What scares you about the process of becoming an elder?

How do you respond to the characterization of this culture as one in which only productivity is valued?



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Session II — On Being Community

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A stroke, seizures and blindness, long before “old” should have been a factor, were visited upon Don Dresher, the owner of this farm home. As his wife, Marcella cared for him with devotion for 20 plus years, with day following day of dressing, eating, walking, answering the needs that he could no longer control by himself. Her world threatened to become as limited as his — just a kitchen and dining room, bedroom and bath, or maybe a porch on a nice day. Times when the sun on his face reminded him of hours harvesting the wheat or plowing or other things he could no longer do. The sweetness of the sun had a bitter lining that easily turned to querulousness and demands, staving off the remembrance of what had been and could no longer be.

When guests came, the conversation swirled around him but too often did not include him. He became an object to be avoided. Then one day, a break in the monotony came when a relative who lived in an intentional community setting (Bruderhof) came to visit. She was appalled at what she saw. “This would never happen where I live!” she said. Never would one person be the only source of care for another. All the people would take turns, rally, bring an overflowing basket of good wishes, news, entertainment, conversation and human touch into this home. Or the community would find room for him in the workplaces where he would be surrounded with the sounds and vibrations of ongoing tasks. The wife would have rich opportunity to renew her own body and soul. The husband would continue to be connected with that which gave his life comfort and meaning. Everyone who heard that pronouncement then and now pauses to think about what is true community and what do we want and need as we grow old today.

If community is merely the connection, the “knowing about,” our world today has become a global community. We are connected with news and instant information as never before. Yet, our world today has become, at least in this segment of the Western world, so individualized that each person is forced to become “a community of one.” Persons sit alone in their homes, their apartments, their rooms trying to be community with distant television stars, football players and talk show hosts. They “keep in touch” with their

telephone or comfort themselves playing their ipods and watching DVDs and losing themselves in soap operas and the sad circumstances of other lives shown on the news. Or they fool themselves into thinking they are in a community of people online “chatting” to others, whose identity is unknown and even concealed. People are committing suicide from being a community of one, sure that they are truly connected to no one.

At times, the thought of such solitariness chills me to the bone. After a day full of people and caring for and about people, I come home to being a “community of one,” and if it has been a rough or disappointing day, a day of spirit trauma, I want a community of listening ear, caring heart. I try gladly to be that for others, but to whom do I turn? Where is a community that truly cares, that will care when I am old and ill? Will I die alone, friendless and forlorn? After all, I am getting old. I have nothing left that “community” says I need to attract others. I am not witty; I am not lovely; I am not as productive as I was. Am I like the drone bee, having done my part for the “community,” and now the community wants me no more?

So easily, we grow nostalgic for the days when community, even at this farmstead, was a Sunday afternoon visit, an impromptu wiener roast. No longer is it taken for granted that when a farmer is too ill to harvest that instant and unquestioned help of the neighborhood will appear. Community meant when my young brother-in-law died of cancer, that the house was filled with so much food nobody had to cook for a month. Community in my town looked like neighbors sitting together on lazy summer evenings while we kids played kickball or hide-and-seek until the streetlights turned on their glow. Community in my church was making calls on “shut-ins” at regular intervals and listening through tedious business meetings until Uncle Fred Barndorf and Elder Fusselman had had their say — many times! And we thanked them for their wisdom and concern. Church community put on Christmas and Easter pageants, welcomed the newly baptized, washed one another’s feet and sang the finest music this side of angels. Town community turned out in force for May Day parades and Memorial Day observances. Community pulled together to raise

money for a new library or a town swimming pool. Community cheered sports teams, supported Little Leagues and overflowed the church when the esteemed mayor died. Community can do far more than any one individual to feed the hungry; keep streets, food and medicine safe; ensure that everyone gets an education; care tenderly for the environment; and set aside parks and places of rest and recreation.

Just to complicate further the matter of community, sometimes I dearly want to be a “community of one.” Sitting on the edge of introvert and extrovert, I relish time alone to pray, wonder and let the mystery of God fill my whole frame. At times, when the envelope of silence surrounds me, I am nourished in every pore as I take in its sweet nothingness, without demand, without harshness, with ease for body and soul. Now, looking out on a beautiful blue and gold day, with a hint of wind and a blanket of sun, I am aware of the presence of God, and that is enough. My solitary delight is listening to music and allowing its golden notes to drop into my soul — an activity for which the only community I desire is myself and the creator(s) of the music and the Creator of the music.

Recently, I delivered the opinion that to stifle individual God-given gifts was an insult to God. Each person, I pontificated, had been privileged with the gifts to meet human needs, and God expected nothing less than the use of those gifts by each and every individual. One definition of sin was to prevent another person from the fulfilling of those gifts. Sitting next to me was a pastor who had been a missionary in Papua, New Guinea. He quietly turned to me and said, “If you made that statement to a person in Papua, New Guinea, he or she would not have the slightest idea what you were talking about.” To my wide-eyed surprise, he explained that the culture of these persons to whom he had ministered was one that was completely absorbed in community. The tribe was everything. No one was an individual. What the tribe needed, what the tribe decreed, was what the person would be. Even, often in the case of women, if persons were abused and beaten, they would never consider that they had a right to leave, or that their gifts were being ignored. They could not conceive of a life outside the tribe, they would probably die as a lone individual, and so the tribal community carried the potential for life itself but also a tyrannical power. That is but an extreme example of the another side of community.

I remember well the community of the telephone in my childhood and much later in the home of my parents-in-law. Everybody listened to every conversation. Everybody knew everyone’s telephone ring and thus,

everyone’s business. One short and two long tones meant, “I wonder who is calling Wilma? I’ll just check!” The community became “Big Brother,” knowing all by hearing all, and persons had little place to hide. No less than the tribe in New Guinea, the community set standards about what to wear, where to go, what to say, what to do. Standard questions which plagued my parents to their dying days were, “What will everyone else think? What is everyone else doing?” Woe to those who violated the community norms. And the community does set norms, even in this highly individualistic atmosphere. The society which now, both overtly and covertly, regards the elders as slow, too dimwitted to keep up with modern technology, a nuisance, a burden, an impediment to progress, no longer having any physical comeliness is setting standards and making judgments that are the dark side of the force in living together as humans in what we call community.

I cannot help but hark back to the film that began this whole exercise and the flashbacks to nursing homes. They, too, are “community,” if community is a collection of people sharing a common living space, common parameters of behavior and schedule. But they are community to which many people go only reluctantly. They are a forced community, symbolic of the altered state of being old, helpless, burdensome, incapacitated, and no longer able to be a “community of one” when one wishes in one’s own home. Unfortunately, the nursing home or “retirement center” (euphemistically named) community is, for many, simply the haunted, assembly-lined warehouse designed to dump people out to death. To be fair, many facilities for the elderly are trying to be “homelike.” They have pets and visiting children. They create “greenhouse” communities, which give socialization of a sort, as people live together in a “homelike” setting, but are truly not the same as a community of choice. They have caring people and guidelines for efficient kindness, and they do what families and friends cannot. And these touches do make the whole experience more humane. But nonetheless, I have not heard anyone say, “Oh wow, I just cannot wait to be old enough to be in a nursing home (retirement center) community!”

So community is complicated. I want it. I do not want it. I cannot abide what it does. I celebrate what it does. I want it sometimes. I do not want it other times. I want it to be what I need when I need it. I want it to let me out of it when that seems what I need. I seek the wonderful camaraderie and love of a community. I am deeply aware of the toll of energy that community pulls from me. I desire and fear the

intimacy of my own soul, all at the same time. I will die without community. I will die with it. I do not want to die alone. I would rather die alone than to die in an impersonal impersonation of community in which no one really cares.

Another story rich with community meaning is this: One day, a wife was overcome with sadness. She could not name the cause of this great sorrow that turned on the faucet of tears from her eyes and her heart. As she sat sobbing, her husband came into the room. He lifted her face to look at him, then he took his index finger, and very gently, he touched her tears. With his finger wet, he traced her tears onto his own face. "Your tears are my tears," he said. What he had just done was create true community, even if only for two.

One of my richest impressions from my time as a pastor was formed when I took one parishioner to see another. The one was in bed, unable to move, but still quite able to talk and think. She was 94 years old, a lady well ahead of her time in independent thought and action, and she had given so much of herself and her life to the church and its members — from cooking for camp to flying places with them. The other was still able to go places when she was offered transportation. At 97, she lived alone, loved to have visitors with whom she shared her memories of homesteading in New Mexico and being friends with the daughter of Jesse James, and she had done equally as much for the church. As Eva bent over Mary's bed, these two old friends, with their rich history of sharing and service, simply said to one another, "Hello, Mary." "Hello, Eva!" "How are you?" "Can't complain." They were community for one another. As they sat together, hands clasped, in occasional talking and occasional quiet companionship beyond the need for words, I had to leave the room. I did not want them to see my tears at the beauty of such true community.

So what I wish for, on this edge of personal and communal, is true community for my older years. I wish for a community that does not leave me or any person who cares for me alone when we do not want to be, and a community that allows me to be alone when I need and request it. I wish for a community that traces my tears onto its soul, so that it neither

demands too much, judges too much, sets norms that deny too much of who I am becoming, or cares too little about what it and I are feeling. Of course, that community can laugh with me, too! I wish for a community that believes my life and my witness are worth hearing.

God pours out visions upon the young, but God gives dreams and remembrances of worth and beauty to the old!. I do not want to go to some exotic place to live out my years, but to live them, like Eva and Mary, within the familiar, old-shirt company of those who have shared the journey. I yearn that people who see me will understand that within me lies all that I have ever been. As I come to the end of my life, I pray that true community will hear me wish for surcease from pain, for being held by the prayers of those I love and who love me, and for making amends with any and all so that I die with a light, large and free spirit. Inside my soul I want for myself and all who come after me, the true community that does not dismiss me with the word "old," but is as joyous about "old person" as it is about "newborn baby." Is it too much to ask that the same attitude of expectation about what it to come be applied by the community to elders as to toddlers, and that the same open arms of delight enfold them through their joys, sorrows and eternal hopes? Perhaps not, if we understand true community not as just a collection of people, but a people bound together by the ties of life and its journey, its hopes and dreams, and by faith of God and the spirit of the Divine into a kinship of holy compassion! Amen.

Discussion Questions

How would you define community? What are the marks of a true community?

How has community helped form and shape your life for good?

How has community made your life more difficult?

What do you need and want from community as you grow toward elderhood?



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Session III — What Is Honor?

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One Tuesday night a month, a state funded group, called Teens and Moms Together, meets in my church. Pregnant and parenting teens, mothers and mothers-to-be are fed. While their infants and little ones are cared for, the parents and mothers-to-be are given information to help them become better-equipped parents and people.

I once taught a session on violence for the group. I was taken aback when some of them said, without apology, that they liked fighting! A good down and out, hairpulling, namecalling, punching, kicking, and screaming fight was exciting! Well, my nonplussed brain went limp and then dead. I did manage to read to them portions of Sadako and the Thousand Cranes, and point out, at least on a global scale, the terrible fallout of violence. We spoke of the fallout of local violence, too, and we folded white cranes. But that is not all that needs to be taught.

When people who worked with these young ones and their children, saw a glaring need and met it, my brain was even more nonplussed! The need was for young mothers to be instructed and shown how to play with their children! I thought that just came with innate Mother Skills 101, but apparently not. As I watched, those balancing babies on their hips, chatting about rap music and the latest styles, seemed only able to say to their precious children, “Shut up and sit down,” or “Stop that, right now,” or “That’s a good boy (or girl)!” These children seemed to be ornaments for the parent’s life, sources of love the parent needed, or nuisances which complicated the lives of the mothers. But before the judgment factor kicks into high gear, let us reflect on the fact that these young parents may not have known anything different themselves. And how did we get here? And what does that have to do with living on the edge of aging in a culture that does not even want to think about age?

So often, what we do in one arena affects what we do in another. If we short circuit our grief, we equally short circuit our joy. If we blunt our ability to love our enemies, something of love’s depth will be lost to our friends and family. If we work with unrelenting doggedness, we lose the ability to play. If we deprive ourselves of sleep, our waking hours are bedeviled with the slowness of molasses and the irritability of

an almost sick mental state. If we dread death, we have hounded and bounded our living with fear. And so that leads to the theory I have about society. When we do not honor our elders, then neither do we honor our young. And the lack of honor for the young has its logical conclusion in the inability to honor elderhood.

We say we are a society of the young. If you watch television at all, you will have no trouble believing that. What do you see? Soap operas with young persons who are constantly in crises of love and betrayal. Young persons, or middle-aged persons staff the police beat and the emergency room, for the most part. Strong, tanned, fit people compete in the Olympics, run on beaches, work out in gymnasiums, show off swimsuits. The ads feature cute little girls and boys fingerpainting, walking on new carpet and testing it with tomato sauce, checking out cookies and milk and cereal and soup and learning to ride a bicycle and to fish. Those images will sell. So will images of young adults laughing and having a good time at a party, driving a new car with carefree abandon, flinging themselves on motel beds to enjoy the delicious mattress, making purchases for a fine home, and performing responsible jobs in finance and government and construction. We tell our youth that these are the best years of their lives, so live it up!

Meanwhile, the youth of today, many of them, feel hollow. What they are getting from the culture is a mixture of hype and envy, and they know that if these are the best years of their lives, someone is lying or dwelling in rich fantasy. And they cannot be blamed if they then do not look forward to the rest of their lives! They buy the latest and best, or they want to buy the latest and the best, and the latest and best does not satisfy or becomes a mocking symbol of what they are unable to afford. Their friendships are still too new and testing to be the mainstays of their days. At a deep level, they know that they have no real place in the economy except to buy. Unlike earlier generations in their teens and even younger, they do not contribute in a profoundly meaningful way to family and economy. They do not help run the family business, milk the cows, plow the fields, gather eggs, and work and learn alongside the adults. They may, of course, during their high school careers perform menial jobs, helping to

prop up the businesses that thrive on employing minimum wage workers. But much of that work is not about keeping the family afloat. The youth take those jobs so they can have a car, nice clothes, or otherwise buy their way to happiness that eludes them in the midst of employment and studies. And once they are out of school, at whatever level, the competition for jobs becomes a stomach-knotting, draining enterprise.

The child psychologist, Robert Coles, who has written about children and youth in many different situations in many parts of the earth, recounted in a speech his observations in Cambridge, Mass., and Soweto, South Africa. When he spoke to the South African young people in the midst of the struggle to end apartheid, he found the majority of them earnest, serious, having a reason to live and high calling to fulfill. When he and his son returned to their home in Cambridge, Mass., he observed teens slouching in doorways, hanging out on street corners, smoking, drinking, dealing drugs. Of course, some were serious students, but they seemed driven to success and not much happier for it. Nothing excellent, noble, or eternal called to them. Yet, lingering in each youth soul, I believe from what I have experienced in church youth activities, is a hunger for the excellent, noble, and eternal.

Children are certainly wanted in many families. The practices of doctors who treat infertility are thriving. Men and women spend their entire savings in an effort to create a pregnancy. The babies born are a treasure beyond compare. Then, something happens between that ecstatic moment of birth and a few years later when children rule the roost. Several pastors, and I myself, can testify that families will decide whether they come to church based on what their children “want to do.” And we have a sneaking hunch that giving children whatever they want whenever they want it is not honoring them, any more than yelling at them to shut up and sit down and stop whatever they are doing, or rewarding them for being “good” for the benefit of grown-ups. Childhood *laissez faire* is nothing more than a cop-out on the work that needs to be done to truly honor children with wise guidance. We have the eye-popping, although somewhat unscientific, newspaper poll by Dear Abby that over 70 percent of responding parents would not have children if they could go back and do it all over again. On my block, when my children were young, mothers had parties (which I wish now I had more vocally rejected instead of just not attending) to rejoice when their children went back to school in the fall, and therefore, the little ones were “out of my hair.” So we find young parents now unable to play and be attentive to the needs and

personhood of their children, because no one did that for them. Hence the lessons given in *Teens and Moms Together* to love and play with and enjoy and guide and maybe even honor children.

I have spent all this time on the condition of children and youth to say, emphatically, we do not honor our young, even as we do not honor our elders. Perhaps our very insistence on saying we are a culture of the young is a frantic way of holding pain and frailty and loss of human capacity and death away from us like the ultimate dirty, smelly diaper of life for we know too well that one day we will all wear it. In the final analysis, however, this is the truth: we honor no one when we say we honor only a portion of the cycle of life.

As a youngster, I spent many happy hours playing the piano for my grandmother, who lived in the bittersweetness of a little house that was the first house she had ever owned. My grandparents built this little two-bedroom nest for their later years. But far sooner than should have been, Grandpa had heart problems and died quite suddenly, and the dream home was too empty. That was the bittersweet part.

That dream home on Olivette Street had just enough parlor room in it for a big, black, tall upright piano. As I sat on its bench, my nine-year-old legs had no hope of reaching the floor, much less the pedals. That did not matter to Grandma, however. I would leaf through the hymnal, playing one old favorite after another, and some new ones too. She did not mind that the pedal did not smooth out the melody line, and I did not mind that she sang along in her old, cracking voice which, even its heyday, was reputed to have caused the dog to howl! “When Peace Like a River,” she would sing, and I would proudly play the right notes, mostly. And in our own way, we demonstrated what I think of as honor. She honored what I offered, she respected my ability, even as a child. She offered no judgment. I honored what she was — my dear Grandma, singing songs of faith that had obviously seen her through four children, many parsonages and the long nights when she and Grandpa prayed and worried about the congregation and how their family could make it. Ah, yes, “when peace like a river attendeth my soul, when sorrows like sea billows roll, Thou hast taught me to say, ‘It is well, it is well with my soul.’” And it was. We respected the gifts and experience each one had, we held that person in highest esteem. She would come in and sit on the bench beside me and give me a kiss that would carry me through the practicing that had to be done later. She would thank me, and I would hug her, despite her stiff

corset, loving her and not truly realizing what a blessing had been given and received!

Grandma and I had an idea about honor. The Apostle Paul, in (Romans 12:10b NRSV) asks the people of the church in Rome to “outdo one another in showing honor.” I honor a person if I take the time and trouble to know what makes them sad and happy, what they do and do not do well, how they have been formed and shaped. I honor a person if I love them without judgment, but still recognize what is needed for them to experience fullness of life and gently offer to them my best self and my best hope for their lives. I honor a person when I celebrate with them the gifts God has given and discover how those gifts can be given for the good of the whole community, no matter the age or the race or the economic position or anything else in all creation. I honor a person simply by rejoicing that he or she is, that God has made him or her with infinite and tender love.

As the promised wave of Baby Boomers (people born from 1946-1960) arrives at the “golden years” of 65+, they may well not take kindly to the representation of dishonor that paints the lives of the elders. I have a vision of them doing the thing they were and are skilled at — making their voices heard for a cause. That was something my generation did not even consider in the universe of choices, I suspect. And good for them — to the point of raising awareness of the terrible lack of honor, not only for them but really for the young and the in between as well. Raising their voice to demand honor and the respect that is inherent in honor, however, will not be the answer. Respect demanded is not honor. Respect freely given is indeed honor.

The circle of dishonor is vicious. The circle of honor lifts us heavenward. If I honor the young, which I do, they will, I trust, learn to honor me as I grow old. I am delighted by their energy, their creative impulses, even when, during one Senior High camp, the artwork became a bit risqué! I watch them with a mist of yearning that they will be able to do what I and my generation could not — teach humankind to care for the earth and all God’s creatures and creation. I tell them what I wish I had known at their age, and they at least seem to listen politely. Thank you for that, young people. I know your world is not my world. I do indeed want your world to be better than mine. So I must tell you what I

know, and let you take it from there, making your own discoveries. I must hear your music and your worship, since this is the expression of your soul. I am so glad you are here! But then, just for a little, just because I am comforted by it, will you make and sing my music and worship without just tolerating it and deriding it as old-fashioned? Will you listen to the wisdom and the dreams and hopes of my age, even as I listen for the wisdom and hopes and dreams of your age? For the circle of dishonor is one that we, young and old, cannot afford any longer. My friends and I cannot withhold from you the chances we had to try and fail. And you cannot afford to disregard the gift we would give you of prayer and praise through good and hard times, the gift of sharing our hearts so that they may live on in you that have many more years than we. You cannot snort and laugh in nervous disgust at our halting step and crackling voice, faulty vision and dim hearing. They merely are a coat we wear that covers a time-tested and timeless soul. As we guided you when you were little and the world had not touched you very much yet, guide us now through the age that is dawning. Guide us with gentle hands and hearts toward eternity.

The circle of dishonor, my dear friends, will lead us further into a violence that may leave us all with no love and no play and with escalating violence that will find us all dead. The circle of honor will take us to the rule of Christ, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12 NRSV) The circle of honor will allow us to live fully all our days, knowing that “it is well with our souls.” Amen.

Discussion Questions

Have you ever honored an elder or felt honored as an elder?

Have you ever felt dishonored as an elder or dishonored as a younger person?

What made you feel honored or dishonored?
If honor and respect cannot be demanded, then how can they be encouraged?

How has the world changed to be a place of honor and/or dishonor for people?



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Handouts for Four Weekly Discussion Groups

Session IV — Feetwashing

By Sonja Griffith, pastor of First Central Church of the Brethren, Kansas City, Kan.

When I shut my eyes, inevitably, after all the Church of the Brethren Love Feasts I have attended, I still see the ones when I had just barely “qualified” to participate.

I had just been baptized. The scene is shrouded in dusk that is held at bay by candlelight, as if we are in a holy room, and we are. We are back in the upper room for a seder meal — not just any seder meal, but a Passover meal to prepare for the sacrifice of a new Lamb. In the soft light, I see faces. One that stands out is Aunt Rebecca Stutzman. She was not my aunt by blood. I do not know if she was anybody’s aunt by family lineage. I really did not know her, to be truthful. She was a venerable woman of elder age, a matriarch of the church, and the “aunt” was a mark of esteem. Atop her silvery hair was not just the prayer covering, but the net bonnet that used to characterize all Church of the Brethren women. The lines in her face were a picture of life fully experienced — deep, suggesting both trouble seen and trouble transformed, but always drawn in a present serenity. As we prepared for feetwashing, modeled by that Lamb and commanded by Him to be continued, she left her seat for the side room in which the women washed feet. I recall that someone helped her with her shoes and stockings. She remained seated while, with some difficulty, leaning over to wash the feet of the person next to her. When her feet were washed, I saw her sitting in great peace with her face continuing its deep serenity.

I think about her often, as I read Chapter 13 of the Gospel of John. Peter says to Jesus, “You will never wash my feet.” (John 13:8 NRSV) Many people at Love Feast confess that it is easy to wash other feet, but not so easy to have one’s own feet washed. If one could ever let go of the barriers to the experience, the water sloshing over one’s feet and cradling them with warmth, the kind hands that lift them out and carefully dry between each toe, are feelings to be savored, for nowhere else does one find them. Even if one gets a pedicure or foot massage, they are usually the work of someone who is getting paid for it. So when a service of worship simply to demonstrate loving service offers this humbling and delightful experience, it does things to one’s heart, spirit and soul. That act was so apparently one of the vital sources of peace, staying power

and serenity in Aunt Rebecca’s life. Why then, is it so difficult to allow our feet to be washed, just as it was a tough go for Peter to let Jesus wash his feet?

“Don’t wash my feet.” When the Lord of the universe bent down, tied a towel around his waist and gently cleansed the dirt from the feet of the disciples, Peter would have none of it. Perhaps he felt that, to be served so by the One he called Master diminished him in some way. We, like Peter, demonstrate our greatness and strength and boldness by doing to and for others. We show the world and the people that our compassionate hearts beat for those “less fortunate.” We let the world around us know in no uncertain terms that when we are doing the doing, we are competent, we are capable and in charge. Also, being a doer means we owe no one anything — no return favors that we are obligated to perform.

More deeply than that, however, I think we, or at least I, have a hard time having our feet washed, beautiful experience that it is, because it means we are without anything to offer except our feet. We are loved and our feet are cared for without merit. Our feet in the water means we are helpless to walk or run, helpless to impress anyone with how lovely we are or how smart or how clever and creative. We are not the one performing the deed, and so we have no credits to claim, no competency to demonstrate. Certainly, on the lovely side of the ledger, I have had several parishioners protest the ordinance of humble service because they feared their feet were too ugly, cracked, dry, calloused, and subject to bunions and hammertoes. I am not sure what made them think the feet of the disciples were so perfect. They walked all the time! Nothing brilliantly intellectual or funny is appropriate or even comes to mind when one’s feet are being washed. We simply place them in the water for the person with the towel to make them feel comforted by the warmth, cradled by the water, cleansed with hands of love, and dried with kindly diligence.

For the person with the towel, the act of washing feet can and does give their lives meaning. How often we wash the feet of another through all the things we do for them. We bake cookies for them, we take them to the doctor, we visit and weep with them, we laugh with them. The Wichita Church of the Brethren has a

Caresingers group that makes music for them. Other churches have matched young and old as “adopted” grandparents and grandchildren, sharing love. We thrive on “doing for” others. We feel as if we are the masters and mistresses of our existence. When we are doing, instead of just being, we even feel we are following the mandates of Jesus. We are visiting the sick and the prisoners, clothing the naked, giving the cup of cold water to the thirsty, and welcoming the stranger, a la Matthew 25. We, of course, want to be the giver, not “the least of these” who are on the receiving end. The Kwakiutl Indians of the Northwest Pacific used to stage huge celebrations, called “potlatches,” in which one’s riches and position were shown by how much one could give away. And we may be little different. The ravages of poverty not only include too little to eat and drink, too risky a roof over one’s head, too small a number of clothes to wear, but also, too few resources to give. And yet, in my experience, those who have least are the most ready to offer loans and aid, perhaps because, for a moment, they feel rich when they can be giver!

The ones who are “done for” instead of “done to” may indeed feel that they are “done for!” They are incompetent, least, poor, and useless. And yet, if we are to “do to” the least, we need someone to “do for.” How can we bake cookies for someone with joy in there is no someone to receive the cookies with joy? How can we wash feet unless someone is willing to be the recipient of the washing? In short, the cycle of living is about both “doing” and “being,” or “doing to” and “doing for.”

Think for a moment about babies. They bring us a delight that is like no other! When they smile, we smile. When they cry, we search for a remedy — a clean diaper, food, or just cuddling. When they sleep, we watch their peace with a mixture of awe and envy. I always chuckle at the power of a baby. Just get a group of adults around a baby, and they turn to making faces, talking nonsense syllables, gooing and cooing as if all powers of language and reason had taken flight. We pass them around, kiss them, and smooth our hands over their soft skin. A baby is a perfect example that the joy of living can come from being, as well as doing. When we “wash the feet” of a baby, their clear happiness in receiving that act blesses us. Both caregiver and care receiver are sprinkled with the water of gladness! Certainly a baby is a promise of

life that will grow and expand in wisdom, stature, in the favor of God and the human family. But are not elders also a promise of life that will grow in spiritual stature and wisdom as they prepare to enter into the eternal heart of God?

So, like child who has been playing in the mud, like a baby who is just discovering life, we as elders, increasingly offer our feet to the basin and the kind hands of those who would do for us, with us and to us. We must trust that kindness.

Perhaps that is what the church can offer — the metaphor of footwashing. Just as there is a time in life for washing, there is a time in life for being washed. There is a time for doing for others and a time to graciously receive. There is a time to quit worrying how clever and wonderful we are, and to just be who God made us and who life has shaped us to be. There is a time to provide joy to life by what we give and a time to provide joy to those who have something to give. There is a time to be a baby, an adult, and to prepare for a birth into life that never ends. We have a part in Christ no less in the doing than in the receiving, for Christ’s words to Peter are profound — we have no part in him unless we live on both sides of the basin. And elderhood is, often, a time more to live with our feet in the tub than our hands. But in the cycle of life, both are utterly necessary. Can we, the church of Aunt Rebecca Stutzman, see footwashing as a way to help us all through the stages of life, even to elderhood? Amen.

Discussion Questions

Share your images and impressions of footwashing, especially as it relates to having one’s own feet washed.

How comfortable are you with receiving? Which is more difficult, being a gracious giver or a gracious receiver?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of characterizing elderhood as a time more about receiving than giving?

How do the ordinances of the church help/hinder our response to elders?



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