

The call goes on: Discipleship and aging

by [Paul J. Wadell](#) in the [April 19, 2011](#) issue



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On New Year's Day my father celebrated his 88th birthday. Later this year, Mom will make a birthday wish for the 87th time. Along with my sisters and brothers, I have witnessed their decline, worried about their frailty and fretted about their future. I have also been inspired by them, given thanks for them and been continually blessed by them, perhaps especially in these latter years of their lives.

Like all of the elderly, my parents are no strangers to the onslaught of diminishment that remind us that we are creatures, mortal beings who, no matter how feverishly we try to escape it, have an unbreakable date with death. They struggle with their loss of independence and increasing vulnerability. They're frustrated that they cannot do what they could do before and lament that once simple tasks can be maddeningly difficult. They've resigned themselves to the unwelcome companionship of aches and pains, and they scan the obituaries to see which friend's funeral they will next be attending. And they have certainly learned that patience, gratitude, prayer and humor are stalwart vanguards against the pitfalls of bitterness, resentment, negativity and an easily wounded pride.

My parents exemplify what it means to age well because they never saw growing old as something to begrudge. That's because even though they have had to relinquish many things as the years rolled on, they've never relinquished the sense of themselves as being called, as being summoned to find new opportunities to love God and neighbor. Baptism initiates Christians into a magnanimous adventure in

which we are called to imitate Christ by growing in goodness, generosity, service and love. Even though what this might mean changes as we move through different stages of our lives, we are never *not called* to bring Christ to life for others. We trivialize the elderly and aging if we assume that elderly persons are no longer moral subjects called to do good in the world, called to make a contribution by being a gift for others. Thus, despite what our society often suggests, retirement and old age are not principally a time of leisure, freedom and well-earned self-absorption, but a distinct stage in a life of discipleship in which we continue to be called to live for others.

The language of calling or vocation challenges us to think of aging differently and in a much more promising and hopeful way. In general, calling identifies the unique way each of us is invited to use the gifts and opportunities of our lives on behalf of others. A Christian account of vocation is based in the belief that God cares for the world through us. God blesses, affirms, encourages, loves, heals and forgives through us. But if we realize that we remain useful to God even as—and sometimes especially when—we grow weaker and more infirm, then aging can be embraced as a time of growth, enrichment and deepening holiness.

The language of vocation confirms that at no time in our lives are we exempt from responsibility for others. Our children may be raised and we may have retired from our jobs long ago, but we never stop being called to share in the creative and redemptive activity of God through lives of thoughtful and faithful discipleship. As we grow older, a common temptation is to narrow our circle of concern, to be more selective in the neighbors we choose to love and perhaps, in our insecurity and fear, to be more mindful of our needs than we ought. But to see aging through the lens of vocation reminds us that the elderly, even as their physical and mental abilities diminish and their energy lags, are still called to imitate Christ by the witness of their lives. Calling rescues us from being mere victims to the losses, sorrows and occasionally painful humiliations of aging by alerting us to all the ways we are still, in religion professor Douglas Schuurman's wonderful phrase, "providentially situated" to do good.

What might this mean for the elderly? How can a theology of vocation change our estimation of what those years are about? A pivotal witness that elderly persons can offer is to remind us that aging and death are not the worst things that can happen to us. The worst thing is not to grow old but to live a life bereft of meaning, goodness and love, a life characterized by coldness, self-centeredness and

bitterness. A good life is not one devoted to postponing the effects of aging as long as we possibly can, but one spent seeking, praising and loving God.

When quality of life is measured in the length of one's days, aging is no longer seen as part of a spiritual journey that culminates in intimate communion and beatitude with God; rather, it becomes a scientific and technical problem that must be overcome. Age is an enemy to conquer, not another opportunity to love well, to care for others and to live in friendship with God.

We sometimes marginalize the elderly because they remind us of what we resent—namely, that we are finite, bodily creatures who live in time and thus cannot escape diminishment, loss and eventual death. But as ethicist Daniel Callahan has argued, in a culture that has turned the desire for perpetual youthfulness into an idol and that not so secretly hopes that physical immortality might be ours, we need persons among us whose lives testify that life is "not a god, but a gift of God," that it is a good, but not the highest good. The highest good is found not in physical longevity but in persons who transcend themselves in love, kindness, care and compassion for others, and in doing so grow in likeness to God.

Moreover, elderly persons are "providentially situated" because they can teach us how to grow through losses instead of being defeated by them. Growing old can be read as a chronicle of increasingly deflating and potentially debilitating losses, but each of these losses can be made into a gift, an unforeseen possibility. For instance, retirement brings loss because we step away from the roles that gave us identity and purpose and enabled us to do good. This is especially true for people who see their professions not only as jobs but also as vocations, as ways of finding and living for God in the work they do. People in ministry can find it especially difficult to relinquish their positions because their call to a life devoted to serving God was virtually inseparable from how they understood themselves; who they were called to be was lived out in the work they did.

It is not surprising then that having to relinquish a calling is not only difficult but can also evoke a crisis in our understanding of ourselves and our sense of the future. What becomes of us when we can no longer embrace the call with which we have identified our lives? How can we respond to that loss of meaning and purpose?

We can realize that God is calling us to find and give life in other ways. Many years ago, at a difficult time in my life, I was befriended by an elderly priest who convinced

me that he had nothing more important to do than to be present to me. Because his days were no longer filled with administrative duties and ministry assignments, he could be available to me in ways that would not have been possible before. Because he had had to relinquish many things (titles, positions and responsibilities), he had time for me. He would even sit with me through the night if it took that long for me to be unburdened.

Although I didn't think of it at the time, God cared for me through that priest; God blessed me through his friendship and his abiding availability. I learned from him that having to let go of a calling gives us the opportunity to do good in other ways. During those months he blessed me with a love that never faltered and a wisdom that I knew was of God.

Christians are hardy realists about growing old. The infirmities that come upon us with illness, diminished capacities and increasing disability are easier to curse than to embrace. Christians don't believe that growing old and suffering loss is easy, but they do believe it can be blessed and rich in hope. That's because our lives are forever bounded by the love and goodness of God that brought us into being in the first place, sustains us through the years and is with us in the passage from death into Christ's resurrection.

At Christmas my father said, "God has been very charitable to me." In Christ, God has been very charitable to all of us. Perhaps the best way for us to love God and neighbor as we age is to witness this truth through lives of gratitude and thanksgiving—lives that glow amid diminishment and loss as sacraments of the love, mercy and providence of God.