

# Growing older grace-fully

Message for Sunday, January 8, 2017  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Luke 2:21-40

**Children's Message:** Matthew 2:12-18

Sometimes when I talk with you, I tell a story. Sometimes I have something to show you. I don't have anything like that today. All I have is a question. This is not a trick question, where I know the answer, and you have to figure it out. It's a question that many, many people have asked, and you may have some ideas about it.

In the Bible passage we just read, King Herod wanted to kill Jesus, because he was afraid of a new king taking over from him. Now he didn't know that Jesus and his family had already left for Egypt. So he ordered his army to kill all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years old and younger. That must have been terrible for those families!

So here's the question: "Why does God allow people to hurt other people? Why does God allow evil in the world?"

*(Let them come up with whatever answers they like. I certainly don't have the corner on truth on this one. Perhaps when they are finished, invite adults in the congregation for their responses; certainly most of them have wondered about this from time to time.)*

**Message** "Growing older grace-fully"

## 1) Growing older is a natural part of life

Aging is part of life. It is not something to be feared or fought. It's important for us to remember that, because the culture we live in is so youth-centred.

Here's an example. I picked up a copy of the latest issue of *Canadian Living* magazine. The editors aim for an audience with a wide range of ages. For instance, an article starting on page 45 has advice on how to keep your heart healthy, with specific advice for people in their 20s and 30s, another group in their 40s and 50s, and a third group for people over 60.

But then I looked at the advertisements in the magazine. The very first one—a two page spread just inside the front cover, is for L'Oreal skin

cream, designed to get rid of wrinkles and make you look younger. A few pages after that is an ad from Neutrogena: "You'll see younger-looking skin in just one week."

We're not just centred on youth. Our culture is *obsessed* with youth.

I'll repeat what I started with: aging is part of life. It is not something to be feared or fought. It is inevitable that we will grow older. What I want to focus on is: how to grow older grace-fully.

## 2) Grace comes in when Jesus comes in

What got me thinking about all this was reading in the Bible about what happened after Christmas, after Jesus was born. Luke 2 tells the story of Simeon and Anna. They are models, not of youth and beauty, but models of how to grow older grace-fully.

By the way, when I talk about living "grace-fully," I don't mean graceful like a figure skater or a bird in flight. I mean full of grace. I believe it's possible as we age to become more full of God's grace and less full of ourselves. I'm reminded of an older preacher who used this poem:

I can see with my bifocals;  
my dentures work just fine;  
I can live with my arthritis;  
but I sure do miss my mind.

Now there's someone who is not stuffy and concerned about his image! Grace allows us to laugh at ourselves, because we are confident of God's love.

Luke 2 tells us that Simeon was righteous and very devout. He was full of the Holy Spirit, and had been told that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Anna was a prophet who spoke God's message. She had been a widow for many years, and was now 84 years old. She devoted her whole life to serving God, and she lived in the Temple so that she could spend all her time in worship and prayer.

When Mary and Joseph brought the week-old Jesus into the Temple for his circumcision and blessing, both Anna and Simeon had the same reaction: they were ecstatic. This is the consistent message of the Bible: *true happiness and peace comes when Jesus Christ comes into a person's life.*

Listen to what Simeon burst out with:

**Luke 2:29-32; New Living Translation:**

“Lord, now I can die in peace! As you promised me, I have seen the Saviour you have given to all people.”

Simeon is now content with his life, since he has seen the Saviour. Do you see how God’s love in his life puts everything else in perspective? Yes, his car broke down and needs \$2,000 in repairs. And yes, he has arthritis in his back so bad that he can’t straighten up. Yes, those things are important... but nowhere near as important as knowing Jesus.

Anna began praising God as soon as she saw Jesus. Not just that, but she went around to everyone else who was in the Temple, telling them the wonderful news. Yes, her heart was broken when she lost her husband. Yes, it’s been lonely by herself. Yes... but those things fade into the background when Jesus comes into the picture.

The apostle Paul had this same experience of growing older grace-fully. Listen to how he describes the difference in his life when Jesus came in. He used to be so proud of the things in his life, but now...

**Philippians 3:7-9, New Living Translation:**

I once thought all these things were so very important, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

All three of these people—Simeon, Anna, and Paul—give us examples of how we can grow older gracefully.

### 3) What is your plan for the coming year?

We are entering a new year. We’re all growing older. I don’t care how old you are now, twelve months from now you will be another year older. This year, you will either become more humble and obedient, or you will become a more self-serving and proud. It’s impossible to stay at your current level of spirituality, whatever that might be. You’re either going to grow and mature, or you are going to decline.

Will you grow older grace-fully: will you know Jesus, and will you know the difference he makes? Or will you just know about him?

A Gallup poll showed that when people make New Year’s resolutions, they are mostly in these four categories:

- improve personal finances
- lose weight
- stop smoking
- exercise more.

Those are all good things, but I wouldn’t call any of them lofty or noble. None of them have to do with improving our relationships, either with other people, or with God. Why do money and the body rate higher than the soul?

What is your plan for the coming year? (You *do* have a plan, don’t you? Remember the proverb, “Aim at nothing, and you’re sure to hit it.”?)

Specifically:

- How will you grow in grace this year? What will you do to have a closer relationship with Jesus?
- How will you grow as a servant this year? Jesus calls people to follow his example of serving, not to nap on his nice warm lap. What can you do as a member of Christ’s body to help out (within the church), or to reach out (to the community)?
- How will you grow in love for others this year? What will you do to build relationships with other people?

### 4) An example of growing older and dying with a goal

This story doesn’t mention God or Jesus at all. I’m going to end with it, because it models beautifully how even an elderly and terminally ill person can still have a ministry.

Mitch Albom bid farewell to his favourite professor and graduated from university full of ambition and confidence. He was going to make a difference in the world, do something with his life.

But as the years rolled by, and he got promoted in his job, he changed without even realizing it. He

was now a famous sportswriter. Work had become his god.

One midnight while flipping TV channels, he chanced upon *ABC Nightline*. There was his old professor, Morrie Schwartz, in a wheelchair. He had ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), an incurable disease of the nervous system which gradually paralyses its victims until they die.

Seeing his beloved teacher immediately made Mitch think of his ambitions and ideals of twenty years ago. He felt ashamed of himself, what he had done with his life. There's nothing wrong with being a sportswriter... unless that's all there is to life. He listened with fascination as Morrie talked about how it felt, being diagnosed with ALS. Morrie had asked himself, "Do I wither up and disappear, or do I make the best of my remaining time?" He knew exactly the painful stages he must suffer as the disease progressed. He determined that "dying" would not be synonymous with "useless." He would make death his final project.

Mitch made some phone calls and found out where the old professor lived now. Amazingly, they were still in the same city. He called up Morrie, and asked if he could come by for a visit. Morrie was delighted, and invited him over.

And so they renewed their professor-pupil relationship. For the remaining months of Morrie's life, Mitch went to see him every Tuesday at his home. They discussed the meaning of life, including such topics as fear, forgiveness, aging, greed, marriage and family. Morrie believed "the most important thing in life is to learn to give out love, and let love come in."

Mitch wrote a book about their conversations, called simply *Tuesdays with Morrie*. It is filled with feeling, compassion, wisdom and humour. Mitch was living his dream now, thanks to Morrie's touch in his life.