"DON'T LET THE OLD MAN IN…"

A sermon on the Occasion of my 76th Birthday

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

Sunday, June 1, 2025

UCN

VIDEO BEFORE THE SERMON

INTRODUCTION:

This morning's music video, is produced by Toby Keith, popular American singer and songwriter. The images in the video are from Clint Eastwood's 2018 film ***"The Mule."*** Mr. Keith says that he wrote this song after a conversation he had with Clint Eastwood (who was 88 years old at the time…and is now 95!) produced, directed **AND STARRED IN!** the film (which is about a tough old man whose life suddenly gets very complicated!)

[and for those of you keeping track of Eastwood's long career, his latest movie project just released

this past October is ***"Juror #2"*** a taut courtroom drama ...so the man (who is now 95!) just doesn't know when to quit!].

Keith (who is in his mid-50's) asked Eastwood (in that conversation) how he still manages to have the <u>energy and focus</u> to create movies. Eastwood's response was, ***"Well, every morning I get up, <u>and decide to not let the old man in!</u>"*** Here is the video…

Music Video before the Sermon – ***"Don't let the Old Man In"***

https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=yc5AWImpIfE

THE SERMON

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF GRUMPY OLD MAN IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



CHOOSE ONE OF THESE IMAGES TODD



"Don't Let the Old Man In…"

"Don't let the Old Man In…"

Alright…

Most of you may not know that 8 days ago I celebrated my 76th birthday…so Let's get this sermon **off on the right foot**, shall we? We'll get to

all of you (and ***your*** inevitable aging process) later, but for just a moment let's pay full attention to **ME**, OK?

I would like to hear you to all say (in Unison…and say it like you really mean it, folks!) ***"Gee Scott, you don't look a day over 60!"***

Ready?

[SCOTT MOTIONS HIS HANDS…AND CONGREGATION SAYS IN UNISON]

"Gee Scott, you don't look a day over 60!"

Oh, come on, you can do better than that!…now say it again like you REALLY mean it!

[SCOTT MOTIONS HIS HANDS AND THE CONGREGATION ONCE AGAIN SAYS IN UNISON]

"Gee Scott, you don't look a day over 60!"

That was great, **I feel better already**! And the happy truth is that (as I mark my 76th birthday – it happened a week ago Saturday) most days I honestly **DON'T** feel a day over 60 (artificial knees, sore shoulders, chronic arthritis, and my other

ailments aside)…and (even more amazing) on my <u>really good physical days</u> (say when I'm zipping to-and-from church up the Oak Leaf Trail 20 miles every day from Milwaukee) I don't even feel a day over 40!...that's the honest-to-God truth! And I know many of you similarly routinely feel younger than your chronological age might imply)…Isn't that a lucky (and wonderful) way to feel as you get older?

[PICTURE OF GRUMPY OLD MAN COMES DOWN OFF THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

But the truth is – dear friends -- as healthy and energetic as I <u>do</u> in fact (most days!) feel – there is no avoiding the truth is **<u>I DO</u>** look way ***"more than a day"*** over 60…in fact (facial wrinkles, stiff joints and all) I am **PRECISELY what 76 looks like**…and feels like…**at least <u>physically</u>!**

I know some of us like to pretend otherwise, but as the years steadily pass (and life's inevitable wear-and-tear racks up on all of us) we **<u>DO</u>** all physically age – some of us (visibly) faster than

others (I grant you) but everyone last one of us (sorry to tell you, friends!) all of us look (more-or-less) our age, one way or another. Now don't get me wrong…I'm very glad for you if you **THINK** you are exceptionally young and vibrant looking. I once had a terribly frail and infirmed 89 year-old member in the Bethesda, Maryland congregation I served tell me (and I and others tried to persuade her that she could no longer live alone in her rickety two-story house) – she told me that despite her very aged appearance -- that she still saw herself as being in her late 30's! But the truth is that (in the end) ***"time waits for no one,"*** and none of us really ***"fool the clock"*** for very long…at least not physically.

[PICTURE OF BETTE DAVIS AND CAPTION ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



Bette Davis:

"Getting old is not for sissies"

When it comes to our physical bodies, the actress Betty Davis had it <u>just right</u> when she famously observed that, ***"Getting old is not for sissies."*** The physical aging process (unstoppable and Inexorable as it is) is hard on all of us, and sooner-or-later our bodies remind us we are (with the rest of humanity) trudging our inevitable less-than-glorious way along this ***"one-way toll-road called life."***

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF BETTE DAVIS COMES DOWN OF SCREEN]

But wait a minute!...Don't despair!...Take heart!...for I did not step into <u>this pulpit of ours</u> this morning to depress you! This 76-year-old-bald-birthday-boy is NOT here to ***"rain on his own parade"*** -- nor to discourage any of you about **the inevitable downward physical trajectory of your life!** I am **<u>NOT</u>** amongst those who spiritually begrudge and resent this life for its unavoidable fact of physical decline and mortality. I am here rather to bring you the ***"good news"*** that <u>the human aging process</u> is <u>not just about</u> what inevitably happens to our aging bodies…for there is **much more (spiritually and emotionally) that <u>can</u> go on** that will determine <u>the quality of life</u> we can experience as we get older…**SO MUCH MORE!**

[PAUSE…]

And thus I arrive (fairly early on in this sermon, actually) at my main point this morning. **WHILE OUR BODIES INEVITABLY AGE, WEAR DOWN, FRUSTRATE, LIMIT, AND BETRAY US…IT DOES NOT NECESSARILY NEED TO BE SO FOR THE MIND, THE**

HEART AND THE SPIRIT. For surely it is as Clint Eastwood told singer/songwriter Toby Keith. Every morning, each of us are free to get up out of bed and refuse to ***"let the old man" (or in the case of all you women out there this morning "let the old woman in")***. Despite the inevitable aches and pains (and diminished capacities) that come with getting physically older, we human beings are nonetheless **CAPABLE OF MAKING EVERYDAY *"DECISIONS OF THE HEART"* THAT EMPOWER US TO LIVE POSITIVELY, PURPOSEFULLY AND WELL** – no matter what birthday we are obliged to acknowledge.

[PAUSE…]

Now, let me pause right here and offer a crucial (and obviously important) caveat to this cheerful observation. Choosing (spiritually and emotionally) to be ***"positive," "purposeful," "optimistic"*** and ***"young at heart"*** (as you refuse to let your own ***"old man"*** or ***"old woman"*** in) as we age is very difficult (if not sometimes nearly impossible) if we find ourselves forced to live with significant,

life-threatening, or altering illness, diminishment or disability. Never mind the run-of-the-mill, universal aches and pains of aging – when our bodies <u>really fail us</u> (and we find ourselves systematically enveloped in pain, disease and limitation) it of course becomes much more complicated to enjoy life, and remain a truly positive, contributing presence in creation. So let nothing that I affirm this morning be construed as (in any way) denying or minimizing how spirit-crushing (and life-robbing) serious illness or disability can be. Sometimes our bodies fail us in ways that make it very difficult maintain the kind of quality of life we so desperately want - and I might add DESERVE AS CREATURES OF EARTH).

But that said…for most of us (most of the time as we slowly age) the decision **is indeed there** as to whether or not we will:

- spiritually and emotionally <u>submit</u> to the ever-increasing limitations of aging (thus " folding the tent" in our own hearts) or

- keep going (spiritually and emotionally) with everything we've got left (thus choosing to live with spirit and purpose).

I passionately believe that -- to a very large extent -- we are (regardless of the precise conditions of our bodies) free to choose our own **positive spiritual and emotional path** as we live with the inevitable physical complications of aging.

[PAUSE…]

You know, I've got to tell you, I am in awe of many of the older folks who have populated and animated the 7 congregations I have served over the last 50 years of my career…who – despite the many very real losses they have endured (and limitations they have been obliged to confront in their later years) – continued to live their lives (and pursue their interpersonal relationships) with vibrancy, purpose, engagement and joy. I have been blessed to know many amazing older spirits…truly amazing, purposeful and productive folks (indeed there are – in case you haven't noticed -- several of these

amazing persons sitting here right now with us in this room!). Well today I say ***"God bless them all"*** – these resilient folks who (as active people in their 80's and 90's) get up every morning and don't ***"let the old person in."***

I think it is spiritually and emotionally obvious that the **ONE THING** that is most important to possess (as you get older, and are forced to deal with the vicissitudes of aging) **is A POSITIVE AND GRATEFUL ATTITUDE** about life and its continuing opportunities…again not in denial about the difficulties of aging…but in positive/purposeful acceptance of all that is **still possible** in your life.

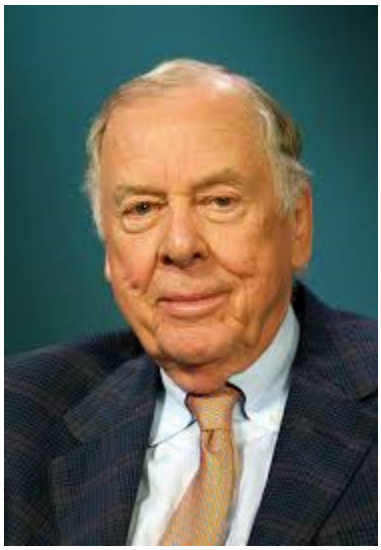
[PICTURE OF HAPPY OLDER COUPLE GOES UP ON CHANCEL SCREEN]



Indeed, there is a raft of recent studies (both psychological and spiritual) that indicate that having **a positive and joyful attitude about your own aging** helps older adults live better, fuller, and longer lives! As one report puts it, ***"Recently, researchers identified that having <u>POSITIVE SELF-PERCEPTIONS</u> about <u>the benefits of getting older</u> can create a <u>self-fulfilling prophecy</u> by helping someone stay***

mentally physically, and psychologically younger. A new study by researchers in Ireland reports that having a positive attitude about again may help prevent older adults from becoming frail, which in turn appears to keep their minds sharp."

[PICTURE OF HAPPY OLDER COUPLE COMES DOWN OFF THE CHANCEL SCREEN, AND PICTURE AND CAPTION OF T. BOONE PICKENS GOES UP]



T. BOONE PICKENS

A few years back oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens (who as then in his early 90's) offered reflections on what he calls his life's ***"fourth quarter."*** Having suffered several strokes himself late in his life (medical crises which necessitated extensive speech therapy for

him to continue his robust business life) and a bad fall (that required hospitalization) he acknowledged that he was keenly facing his own mortality. Yet, then in his tenth decade (he eventually died at the ripe old age of at 93) Pickens remained excited, challenged and invigorated by life. "***Be the eternal optimist who is excited to see what the next decade with bring,"*** he advises. ***"I remain excited every day, engaged and thrilled in the office and on the road. I thrive on that activity, and I'm going to stick to it, no matter what the setback."***

And while we are on this image of finding yourself in the ***"fourth quarter"*** of life, let me tell a quick personal story. Recently (when I was back in New Jersey helping the congregation there that I served for a decade in the 1980's depart from the historic building they could no longer afford – but that's another story!) I went out to dinner with an old friend, Rob Stone, (who, like me is in his mid 70's, and having sadly lost his partner of the last 30 years) was settling into a new relationship, selling his long-time New Jersey home and moving to

Asheville, North Carolina where together the couple is going through the years-long process of building ***"their dream home."*** "***Scott,"*** he said to me over our messy Italian dinner, ***"We're both in 'The Fourth Quarter'…what in God's name are we doing (at this late hour in our lives) building a brand new home in a brand-new community?"*** The answer I gave him is, ***"Rob, you're doing <u>precisely what you should be doing</u>…you're looking ahead in <u>hopeful anticipation</u> to the next decade (or two, or – God willing -- three) of your life… ready to enjoy the 'rest of the game'…as far as you know, you haven't yet gotten to the 'two minute warning'…so GO FOR IT!"***

[PHOTO AND CAPTION OF REV BRUCE MARSHALL IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



Rev. Bruce Marshall

My ministerial colleague Bruce Marshall who is also in his mid 70's) recently wrote a book (based on his experience of being a UU chaplain in a Maryland retirement community) entitled ***Finding Meaning and Spirit in Aging***, and in that book he quoted an older woman named Barbara, who wisely said, ***"If there is such a thing a successful aging – and I'm <u>not sure</u> there is – it is really dependent on <u>how a person handles loss</u>. But it's not just handling loss: it's also about <u>handling change</u>. Aging is about***

CHANGE: how the circumstances of our lives shift. We age well to the extent that we can adjust to change."

"We age well to the extent that we can adjust to change." This is EXACTLY what almost all the experts studying successful (and positive) aging report.

[THE FOLLOWING QUOTATION GOES UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

WHAT MAKES FOR SUCCESSFUL (AND POSITIVE) AGING?

Study after study reveals that it is ***"The Adapters"*** those ***"Adaptable"*** and ***"Resilient"*** seniors who have emotionally learned how to incorporate new information and realities (about what will be **possible** – and ***NOT* possible** -- for them as they age) who achieve the greatest satisfaction and fulfillment as they deal with the inevitable losses that come in their later years.

If you will indulge me, I would like to speak (for just a moment) to this issue of the importance of

"adapting to new realities as you age" from a personal perspective…because over the years – and somewhat against my will -- I have personally had to significantly **"adapt"** to **unwanted and unwelomed new information** about what is possible for me as my body ages.

For the entirely of my adult life – as many of you know -- I have taken great meaning and satisfaction from being **an endurance athlete.** As a boy, I was a long-distance swimmer. In my early 20's, I became a marathon runner, running at least ten miles a day, seven days a week. When my knees finally gave out in the early 50's (no surprise there, right?) when my knees gave out, I took up long-distance cycling, which I have done almost every day with great joy now for the last 25 years, including no less than 5 wonderfully-intense, month-long 3,000 mile cross-country charity rides. Regular distance cycling continues to bring me great joy and satisfaction, but as I have aged, it has become increasingly difficult for me to keep up with the younger, serious riders with whom I share these intense cross-country

adventures. Indeed, when I finished my last such cross-country trek (eight years ago now), I told anyone who asked that I believed that I had ***"aged out"*** of these demanding group rides.

But that was before I discovered the blessed new technology of **E-Assist Bicycles!**

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF SCOTT'S NEW E-BIKE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



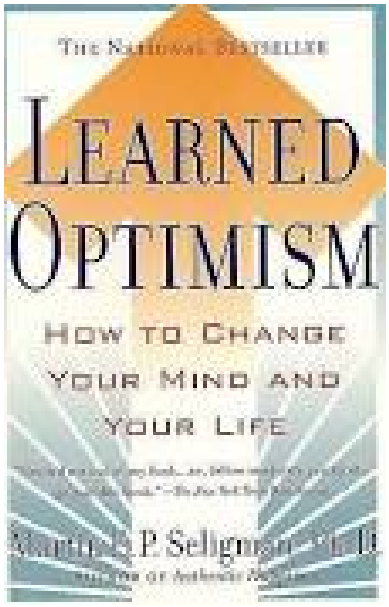
My new E-Assist Commuting Bike!

With one of these high-tech babies – older riders like myself (who still have to work hard and pedal the entire distance…and still get the cardio-vascular benefits of bike riding) can easily keep up with the faster riders, and enjoy the adventure of endurance riding. The point is that, by **ACCEPTING** and **ADAPTING TO** the new (and very real!) physical limitations of my body, I am (at 76 years old) **not** focused on what I can no longer physically do (because of my age) but am rather **looking ahead with eager anticipation** to what is **still possible** into my 80's and (God Willing) my 90's. I will still be fully participating in an activity (cycling) that brings me profound joy, satisfaction, and purpose…but only if I am willing to accept new realities about what I can and can't do. And if and when my bike riding days must come to an end, I will still be able to **shift** to walking, or swimming, or chair exercises, or other forms of less strenuous exercise to keep my body as fit (and moving) as possible! I will be free to **ADAPT!**

[PICTURE OF BIKE COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREEN]

Alright…so let's assume that I have persuaded you (NO MATTER HOW OLD YOU NOW ARE) of the importance of ***"adapting"*** and maintaining ***"a positive attitude"*** (about your life's remaining possibilities) as you inevitably age. But then the question quickly becomes, can one really ***"choose,"*** or ***"shape"*** or ***"engineer"*** one's own emotional or spiritual attitude about one's own aging process…or are we more "victims of circumstance" who simply have to "tolerate" what comes next?

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF MARTIN SELIGMAN'S BOOK JACKET GOES UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



Learned Optimism by Dr. Martin Seligman

Well, psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman, in his famous book ***Learned Optimism*** thinks so, ***"One of the most significant findings in psychology in the last twenty years,"*** he writes, ***"is that individuals <u>can</u> choose the way they think…I have been studying optimists and pessimists for the past 25 years, and I have discovered that pessimists can in fact <u>learn</u> to be optimists…by <u>learning</u> a new set of cognitive skills…pessimists can learn a new set of***

skills that free them from <u>the tyranny of pessimism</u>, and allow them to use optimism <u>when they choose</u>."

Seligman then goes on -- in the next 300 pages of his book – to explain precisely how pessimists can become optimists (by practicing <u>new ways of thinking</u> about their lives.

Now…as much as I personally resonate with Seligman's positive thinking, I'm not so sure, honestly, that it always works that easily for most of us in real life. Back in the 1980's, when I served that church in Plainfield, New Jersey, there was an aging member of that congregation named Eva who was a predictably and chronically negative person…you could count on her to always look on the dark (or pessimistic) side of everything…for Eva, the sky was <u>always</u> falling (even when it wasn't!)! Well, one Sunday I preached a sermon on Dr. Seligman's ***"Learned Optimism"*** book, rather cheerfully suggesting (along with the author) that one (by working to develop new and positive emotional

skills) was free to choose one's own attitude of the heart, and become more optimistic. When the sermon ended, I could see that Eva was waiting her turn in the reception line to say something to me, and as she approached, I wondered apprehensively what her reaction to my upbeat sermon would be. Staring right at me with her usual wrinkled scowl, she took my hands in hers, and said, ***"That's easy for you to say!"*** All I could do in that moment (truly appreciating how Eva was being purely Eva) was laugh, at which she (realizing that she had – rather predictably – once again just revealed her finely-cultivated pessimism) laughed too. Eva and I – so emotionally and spiritually different from one another -- me predisposed to optimism and she predisposed to pessimism – nonetheless understood each other, and both enjoyed the contrast!

But I wonder…are habitual pessimists like Eva ever able to really become ebullient optimists? Are people really ever really "in change" of their basic emotional outlook? I'm not sure.

When I think of the ***"positive agers"*** I have known over the years (including those outstanding and optimistic seniors from this congregation…you know who you are!) I suspect that they have been <u>positive and purposeful people their whole lives</u>. And when I think of my own life (which has clearly been dominated by an optimistic attitude which I now carry with me into my 8th decade of living) I realize that when it comes to both my ***"nature"*** (my core personality as a person) and my ***"nurture"*** (the way I was raised to see the world and life by my optimistic birth family) I realize that I am essentially destined to view (and approach) my life in positive terms – and for that (as I continue to face life's inevitable changes and losses) **I AM GRATEFUL**.

[PICTURE OF SELIGMAN BOOK JACKET COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

But enough about me. Where (this morning) does <u>all of this</u> leave <u>all of you</u> – as you age and get older? Well…honestly…I'm just not sure…you will have to tell me.

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF OPTIMISTIC PERSON IS P9ORJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



"Thumbs up to Life!"

If you – by both <u>natural inclination</u> and <u>familial outlook</u> – are inclined to be positive (a ***"Thumbs up to life"*** kind of person, and know how (in the heart) optimistically adapt to new information about what is possible in your life as you age, then my guess is that you will do pretty well, and find life-sustaining satisfaction with your life, come what may.

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF SAD-SACK GUY WITH HIS PERSONAL RAIN CLOUD IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



"Woe is me…I'm getting older and I'm not happy about it"

But if you are inclined (again by both natural instinct and familial outlook) to see the process of getting older as a one-way ***"veil of tears"*** that holds only misery and decline, then that too shall be a self-fulfilling process.

[SAD SACK GRAPHIC COMES DOWN OFF THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

For myself – as I now enter my 77th year of life -- I have decided (quietly, but deep in my heart) to get up each morning, and simply ***"not let the old man in."*** I full well know that as I inevitably move down my life's inevitably one-way road, there is plenty

more heart-break, pain, illness and limitation to come…and yes, finally death. But in the meantime, I'm gonna play hard in this ***"fourth quarter,"*** that I have been so miraculously given…and enjoy (truly enjoy) the time that's left for me to run and pass and score on **this playing field called life**!

So when I get up tomorrow morning (God willing) I'm going to decide (once again) to ***"not let the old man in,"*** it really is just that simple***…"don't let the old man (or the old woman) in…" Adapt…and enjoy!~***

Amen.