

Don't Break the Elastic

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"Seniors Service"

Ecclesiastes 12 (12:1b)

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Dear Family of God,

Maya Angelou died May 28, 2014 at 86 years old. She was an American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees for her writing, acting and other things. Angelou is best known for her series of seven autobiographies, which focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), tells of her life up to the age of 17 and brought her international recognition and acclaim.

When she was interviewed on her 70th birthday, she was asked what she thought of growing older. And, there on television, she said it was "exciting." Joking she said that her body was constantly changing and certain parts of her body seemed to be in a race to see which will reach her waist first. The audience laughed so hard they cried.

Then with more seriousness, she went on:

I've learned that no matter what happens, or how bad it seems today, life does go on, and it will be better tomorrow.

I've learned that you can tell a lot about a person by the way he/she handles these three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights.

I've learned that regardless of your relationship with your parents, you'll miss them when they're gone from your life.

I've learned that making a 'living' is not the same thing as 'making a life'.

I've learned that life sometimes gives you a second chance.

I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw some things back.

I've learned that even when I have pains, I don't have to be one.

I've learned that every day you should reach out and touch someone. People love a warm hug, or just a friendly pat on the back.

I've learned that I still have a lot to learn.

The person who sent Angelou's words as an email ended by giving one of those silly "threats" about forwarding the message. But this one was different. It said, "Please send this to five phenomenal people today. If you do, you will boost another person's self-esteem. And"—this is where I got the title for this sermon—"if you don't... the elastic will break in your underpants and they will fall down around your ankles! Believe me, I didn't take any chances

on MY elastic breaking. I sent it to a lot of special people.” I thought that was funny. Don't Break The Elastic!!

In our Bible reading we heard words of wisdom written by another elderly person. King Solomon had great wealth and experience in life. He was loaded with all kinds of wealth. The book of Chronicles says this about him:

2 Chr 9:22 King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth.... 25 Solomon had four thousand stalls for horses and chariots, and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem. 26 He ruled over all the kings from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. 27 The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills. 28 Solomon's horses were imported from Egypt and from all other countries.

2 Chronicles 9:13 says that Solomon's revenue included approximately 25 tons of gold per year!

But all of his riches didn't make him happy. In fact, they led him into sin. Late in his life, King Solomon wrote for us a summary of his life and, like Angelou, drew some conclusions. There is a heart-touching tenderness in his words as well as deeply thoughtful confessions from this successful man. Looking back on his life, he remembers some poor choices he made and how those choices now haunt him. But because of his choices he is able to share the wisdom he has gained from God. And that makes him a tremendous teacher for us.

Useful for God Despite Failures of the Past

Tonight, the lesson from elderly Solomon is addressed to elderly members as well as young. It's this: You are useful for God, despite your past failures. I want to encourage our older members—but younger folks too who have regrets—to think about how God can use you, no matter how you've failed in the past.

Solomon as a young man prayed for wisdom from God to rule the nation left to his care by his father David. And he did rule wisely. God blessed Solomon tremendously on the material level, as we've already heard. He did rule wisely, keeping Israel united and strong as a nation. But spiritually and morally, Solomon slipped into sin.

I don't think I need to explain all of his sins. Suffice it to say that Solomon fell most notably into idolatry (1 Kings 3:3). 1 Kings 11:7 says,

1 Ki 11:7 On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites.

And much of his idolatry came as a result of his attraction to women. It was not the fault of the women. It was Solomon's pride. He brought wives and concubines into his home from all the nations around him. Marrying royalty from other nations was one way the ancients tried to keep peace. Be that as it may, in total Solomon had over 1000 women. And some scholars believe that the symptoms of sickness he alludes to in his writings could indicate that he had some sexually transmitted diseases. We can't say for sure.

Now, I just want us all, but especially the younger crowd, to think for a while about all of the years that Solomon wasted. I mean, he was so incredibly blessed by the Lord with wisdom to rule the country. He was the envy of every nation. He was wealthy, beyond every other king

or queen. But he spent the mid to late part of his life—much of his 40 years as king—dishonouring God with wild living (chasing women) and idolatry (worshiping the gods of his foreign wives and concubines).

But in the last part of his life Solomon returns to God with more single-hearted devotion. He forsakes his sinful way of life and God uses him to write important sections of the Bible. Solomon writes the book of Ecclesiastes for one. He shares how he has looked at life and experienced it from both sides—living outside of God’s design and living inside of it.

And his conclusion is that God’s way of life is best for us. That is truly living life to the fullest. That is the way life is intended to be lived. That’s why we can trust his experience when he concludes the book of Ecclesiastes with these important words:

*Ecccl 12:13 Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.*

Or as we heard from Jesus this morning, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” And if you love him wholeheartedly, you will obey his commandments.

I say all this to encourage some of you who are older—but also to the younger—who are living with regrets. You know you have done some things that are pretty bad. Maybe they are equal to Solomon’s sins. Your sins might not warrant time in jail but sometimes they can still hold on to you like a ball and chain. And if that is you, I want you to hear the Lord say three things tonight.

You are Forgiven

First of all, hear this from the Lord through his servant John in his first letter to the church. You’ve undoubtedly heard these words before but tonight you need to hear them and believe them so you can leave your guilt and shame behind.

1 Jn 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If you’ve never confessed that sin that is still plaguing you, confess it now. Just tell God you are so sorry for it and ask for his forgiveness. And from now on remind yourself that Jesus Christ has forgiven you of all your sins! Don’t let Satan try to steal your comfort and your confidence that you are forgiven. Claim that forgiveness each time you doubt and quote to yourself the truth of Romans 8:1

Rom 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, God no longer condemns you. Do not let Satan keep you living in shame or guilt or condemnation. Your sin is past. You are a new creature in Christ!

Live the New Life

Secondly, start living a new life. Maybe your sin is long past but your guilt has remained. Then step one was an important step for you. Step two can only happen once you accept the forgiveness of Jesus once and for all. Now you are free from condemnation and empowered to live a new life. Solomon turned from his sin and was still able to enjoy the new life that is ours as Christians. He could move ahead without shame and guilt. He could serve

the Lord with joy and peace. And his love for the Lord was greater than anything he'd ever known before. That's why he said the summary of life for the believer is to fear or love God and keep his commandments.

You're never too old to change because, by faith in Jesus, God's grace is ours no matter how old we are. Jesus said he came to give us life and life more abundantly—life that is as full as it can be because of God's grace!

Tell Others

Thirdly, start telling others about God's goodness to you. This is where I want to spend the rest of our time tonight. You can think of the words of Ecclesiastes as a testimonial from an old guy to the youth and anyone else who will listen. Please hear me when I say, "Remember your creator in the days of your youth before the days of trouble come...."

Maya Angelou in that book I mentioned earlier also gave this interesting quote: "youth is wasted on the young." That's because so often young people think they know everything. 14 or 15 years old and they know everything. Youth need the experience of age. And only the aged have that experience! So you have to share it.

You see, my elderly friends, your wisdom can change the attitudes of the young. I think of the words of Solomon's father, King David. In Psalm 37:25, David writes:

*Ps 37:25 I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.*

That's the testimony of David to the youth. He's saying, I don't know what will happen in your life. But I'll tell you this much: God will take care of you.

Psalm 71:17 says

*Ps 71:17 Since my youth, O God, you have taught me,
and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.*

The old need to share with the young. And the young must recognize that the elderly have a lot we can learn.

A lot of elderly people feel they are irrelevant. Our society feeds that feeling by glamorizing youth and health. Our TVs bombard us with advertisements for skin care creams, botox injections or surgery to reduce our wrinkles, hair colour to cover up our grey, hair implants to get rid of our baldness, and pills to counteract just about every side effect of aging you can think of.

But in the Bible old age is nothing to avoid. Throughout the ancient Near East the aged were and still are held in honour for their experience and wisdom. Among God's OT people, the old are not honoured simply because of outward signs like grey hair. Rather, their old age is seen as a blessing from God, a sign of God's favour for fearing the Lord and keeping his commands (Lv. 19:32; Dt. 30:19-20). In other words, they are honoured because they show dependence on God and God's way of life (Ex. 20:12). Without this kind of righteous life the snow-white head is no crown of glory (Pr. 16:31; cf. Ec. 4:13). But because older God-fearing people are considered really important in God's kingdom, even Jesus Christ in glory is depicted as having 'white hair,' according to Revelation 1:14.

When the elderly fear the Lord, then they are considered a wonderful source of wisdom for the younger generations. Listen to what Job says:

*Job 12:12 Is not wisdom found among the aged?
Does not long life bring understanding?*

With that in mind, elderly Christians ought to be eager to talk to young people in particular. I genuinely believe that you have power as older people. You do! Your grandchildren or other children in the church and those from the community around us will be amazed to hear you talk about your history. Share your stories. Don't be afraid to share your failures with the young. Share with them your struggles as a young person. Sure, you lived in a different time than young people today, but there are always similarities between young people of every generation. Why do you think so many young people love the book of Ecclesiastes? Because it speaks to them even though it's the words of an old man!

Don't let your grandkids live under the impression that you have always been the angel they now see you as. Many grandkids look at their grandparents or other elderly people as old people who have no idea what it's like to live in the 21st century. But that's not all true. As Solomon wisely pointed out in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes,

*Ecccl 1:9 What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.*

There are plenty of areas the old and young can connect on but the elderly need to step out and find that connection with the youth.

You could share with them all your current struggles... all the stuff Solomon lists in the chapter 12... stuff that takes the pleasure out of life, like arms and legs that grow feeble, eyes that don't see so good anymore and ears that are going deaf, teeth that fall out, and on and on. But I don't think that would connect with them.

I remember being on a visit recently where the man said he used to complain about his problems. Then his wife told him to stop. "It doesn't do any good," she said! And he agreed. I find them to be a wonderful couple today. Old. Frail. But still full of life. Youthful spirits. As I quoted from Angelou at the start, "I've learned that even when I have pains, I don't have to be one."

I find this elderly couple to be overflowing with the Holy Spirit. They take their troubles to the Lord in prayer but they also try to laugh or joke about their frailties with the grandkids. That makes for a good source of connection. I remember my kids laughing so hard when my mom or dad would pop out their false teeth! That was so funny. Connecting with the youth over funny things makes it easier for them to listen when grandpa or grandma share something serious about their faith, about life.

As seniors, let the youth know that you've struggled with temptation like they do and with trying to fit in with the crowd. You've dealt with broken hearts and nasty friends. There's nothing new under the sun so you can find a point of connection.

What the young generations needs to see from the old is the same thing we see from Solomon: God's grace for us at every age. Solomon had a story to share with us about his travels down the wrong road of life and his discovery that God would not only take him back but use him to be a blessing for many generations to follow. The book of Ecclesiastes is

Solomon's testimony. And every one of us—the elderly especially—have a testimony of how you've failed, fumbled and flipped but how God has been there to pick you up, dust you off and put you back in his service. He's been there to forgive you when you've sinned and to give you a new beginning. He's been there to bandage you up when you've been battered and bruised and heartbroken. He's been there in those times, like the "Footprints in the Sand" story, when you didn't know where he was but eventually you saw that he never left you for a moment. Tell those stories to the kids.

The great news about Solomon's testimony and yours and mine is that God can use us. Indeed, the Apostle Paul gave us a wonderful testimony of God's faithfulness to his children through thick and thin. In Romans 8 we learn that no matter what hardships we've faced, no matter what sin we've committed and confessed to God, because of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, we have God's awesome promise. Listen again.

Rom 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

That's God's promise to every one of his children and you, my elderly friends, need to share that good news, and live it, for the sake of the younger generation. You have that power at your disposal. The power of God's amazing grace. You have the privilege of telling us all how only our Lord Jesus can get us through everything that goes wrong in our life.

The younger generation needs to see from the older that God was not an afterthought in your life. They need to know that God is not just for old people but that you've sought him, walked with him and failed him from youth or whenever you started but he's never failed us.

We have a great God. He has saved us from our sin in Christ and because of Jesus never gives up on us. If you're old, don't be afraid to share your stories of God's goodness and mercy. Don't let the elastic break in your underpants. Share them! And if you're young, listen to the elderly. You'll be amazed at what they can teach you about walking with Jesus through life!!! Thanks be to God, the God of all ages!