

The Age Tax

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, March 1, 2009 Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Yes, friends, as of this past Friday, I am officially 50 years old. And yes, I have sent away for my AARP card. Why not? Maybe I'll get some discounts. Age has its privileges.

Turns out age also has extra expenses, as well. A few years back, Mae Koscheski was going over her medical bills closely, following an emergency hospitalization. Mae says she goes over all her medical bills line by line, looking for double charges or charges for services that weren't actually performed. She also looks for pesky surcharges that are tucked into the invoice and easily overlooked.

It's a good thing she does, because one of her bills recently included a surcharge of \$70 for — “extreme age.” And here is the worst part – Mae was only 73 years old at the time! Extreme age? Let me guess – the admitting clerk must have been in her twenties!

Age is a funny thing. What we think of as old, or young, changes as we get older. Age as a number is also often misleading. We have all known both youthful senior citizens, still open-minded, active and adventurous, and “old” thirty or forty-somethings, closed off, sedentary and already set in their ways. How old is “old”? How young is “young”? It can be hard to say.

Take Jeremiah in our text this morning from the Old Testament book of the same name. Jeremiah hears the call of God to serve as a prophet, but protests, “I am only a boy.” I'm young, too young, to be able to do what you want me to do, Lord.

God's response? God tells Jeremiah, “Don't you worry about your youth. I will make you able. I will go with you. When you get in trouble, I will deliver you.” Whatever else age may be, it is an unacceptable excuse in the eyes of God.

No one is too old to serve God if they are called to serve, and no one is too young to serve God if they are called to serve.

We get the same message about youth in the New Testament, when Paul writes to Timothy, a young pastor, “Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example ...” Sure, Timothy is young, but Paul assures him he is up to the task he has been assigned.

Actually, age is just one of many excuses that don't go over very well with God. We can't say that we aren't smart enough to serve God because the Bible says, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise." We can't say that we're not powerful and connected, because God says "not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth ... but God chose what is foolish"

We can't say that we're not strong enough, because God chose "what is weak in the world to shame the strong." We can't say that we're not respectable enough because "God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are." We can't use the excuse that we don't speak well. Moses tried that. It didn't work. Again and again in scripture, it is abundantly clear: God will empower and guide those whom God calls, and God calls whomever God pleases.

This afternoon, many of us will be back together here to help Ruth Aukerman celebrate her ordination into Christian ministry in the Church of the Brethren. Ruth is an excellent example of someone who could have made excuses when God called, but didn't. She could legitimately claim that she has "done her bit," raised her family, had a career, etc., etc. She could argue that it time for the younger folks to step forward, so she can take it easy, spend more time with her grandchildren, maybe travel some more. And who could argue with her?

But Ruth has heard God's call, and she has tested that call through the church, and had that call affirmed. So she is not about to make any excuses. She is ready to go forward, serving God in new ways, as God empowers and guides her.

I do want to be clear that when I speak of God's call to serve, I do not mean only – or even primarily – the set-apart ministry that leads to ordination. We all have our own ways of serving God, based on the gifts, interests and abilities God has given us. God's call ordinarily involves us doing things we are already able or interested in doing, but doing them for God instead of merely for ourselves. Your call could be to teaching, singing in the choir, cooking in the church kitchen, visiting the homebound, doing disaster relief work, encouraging youth, or promoting peace and reconciliation. And that's just a beginning. Anything we can do for the glory of God and the good of the last, the lost and the least can be a calling.

The lesson from Jeremiah is to receive and respect that calling, and not to make excuses. Don't say, "I'm too old," or "I'm too young." Don't

say, “Not now, maybe later.” Don’t say, “Surely someone else can do it.” God’s call is not always easy to discern or discover, but if you hear the call clearly, please don’t put it off. Responding in the affirmative to God’s call is the most important thing you can do with your life. Jeremiah found that out – which is not to say Jeremiah’s life or career was easy. Actually, it was anything but. Like nearly all the prophets in scripture, he was unsuccessful in terms of persuading his contemporaries to do what God willed. He made many sacrifices and endured many hardships. He was never beloved in his lifetime. Indeed, plots were hatched to harm him, to silence him.

But Jeremiah’s prophecy enabled a later generation of Jews to make sense of what had happened to their ancestors. After the people of Jerusalem had been carried away into exile, as the Jews sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept, the collected works of Jeremiah helped the survivors see that God’s hand of judgment was in the midst of the disaster and that God’s hand of mercy was now extended to them. And Jeremiah’s warnings and wisdom have since inspired Jews and Christians for more than 2,500 years. Not bad for someone who tried to beg off, saying, “But I am just a boy.”

Young people today are still capable of doing great things. If you don’t believe me, get on your computer sometime and check out a website called, “amazing-kids.org.” Each month, the website shares the story of a young person doing something incredible. Often, the amazing accomplishment by a young person involves helping others.

Take, for example, Talia Leman. As a preteen, Talia heard about the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, and though it was far away from where she lived, she felt compassion. So she formed her own nonprofit organization, RandomKid. Through the Internet and other media, she managed to raise \$10 million for hurricane relief from kids nationwide. Her organization received reports from an estimated 5,000 school districts. Locally, she created a campaign called: “TLC” (Trick-or-Treat for the Levee Catastrophe), in which she enlisted trick-or-treaters to ask for donations of coins rather than candy. Talia’s contribution to the total was \$226,000.

Gradually, Talia expanded her project into helping the homeless, AIDS and cancer patients, those who did not have access to education, as well as people who live in the absence of clean water. Talia has also arranged a fundraiser that raised \$25,000 for a four-year-old leukemia patient who lives with his unemployed single mother by sewing and hanging 50 over-sized Christmas stockings in local businesses. She has started a campaign for schools across the nation to develop, label, and

market their own bottled water products in order to raise money for technologies to bring sanitary water to deprived areas around the world. Now just think how easy it would have been for Talia to watch the news and see all those horrifying pictures of destruction, and feel the call of God to do something about it, but to stop herself by saying, “I am just a girl – just a twelve-year old girl from a little town in Iowa. I’m not even old enough to get a job, or drive a car.” But Talia didn’t stop herself with excuses. She took action.

And if the success of her efforts has made her newsworthy, that’s great. But the lesson for the rest of us isn’t that we will always be widely successful. The lesson is simply that when the call comes, we should never stop ourselves with excuses. We may end up being more like Jeremiah, who was never really successful in a worldly way, at least during his own lifetime. Yet because he overcame his hesitancy, Jeremiah gave his people and the world a great gift that is still a blessing thousands of years later.

As God’s people, committed to continuing the work of Jesus in the world God so loved, we are – each of us – called to some form of service. Listen carefully for your call, and when you hear it, don’t hesitate. Make no excuses. Embrace your call. Share your gift.

Amen.