

Last week I mentioned that the Proverbs say there is Wisdom in an “abundance of counselors.” People sometimes ask how I get my sermon themes, and like many preachers I do often follow the “lectionary,” a cycle of readings that follow the Christian Year. One of the benefits of this is studying in groups, and I do have a weekly group of preachers and lay leaders that focus on the common lectionary; there is surely much wisdom in community, in conversation with other people of faith!

Of course, sometimes we jump ship from the lectionary, and work on a theme that comes to us from some current event or life experience. In the summertime, I do often attend worship on Sunday morning, yes, a “busman’s holiday” I suppose, as worship is not just a job that I lead, but something I genuinely enjoy and feel. So I often attend a small Methodist church over in Gloucester, and this summer was pleased to hear from a semi-retired preacher there. I think we look especially to elders for wisdom; they are part of the “abundance of counselors” in life, and they have more life experience than we do!

So Rev. Printice Roberts-Toler of the Gloucester Methodist church was speaking on the topic of aging and dying, and I said to myself, yes, a topic that I may have subconsciously avoided, so I must speak on it soon. After all, it is right in the middle of the well-loved Psalm 23! ... “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death....” Aging and decline is also implied in one of my favorite scriptures from Paul in 2nd letter to the Corinthians Chapter 4: “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day....” Rev. Printice started his sermon by musing about word memory and his experience with crossword puzzles, how he might not be able to finish the Sunday one until Thursday, doing a wee bit every day. (Maybe I’m in trouble with word memory, since I

don't even like crossword puzzles; I get frustrated after just a few lines!). Printice, while confessing some memory loss, mused about the value of long-term memory, and how a church song from his youth just "came to him" recently: The words said, "I ain't gonna need this 'old house' any more." (old house meaning the body). I was moved by Rev. Printice's strong faith that the most important thing in life is not how long we can make our physical body last (this old house), but about how we can strengthen our inner nature, our inner spirit, our connection to the divine or Holy Spirit, our connection with God's love, and also strengthen our ability to pass on that love.

I move on to another in the "abundance of counselors" that I found in our summer devotional booklet. Rev Sarah Erickson is the director of Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary. She gives us the wonderful image of "Core Strength." Yes, Yes, Yes, We can do crunches and sit-ups and planks, and standing on one leg to "strengthen our core," but what are we doing to strengthen the core of our inner being which is our heart, mind, and soul? As Paul says, our outer nature will decline or waste away, but our inner nature can be renewed every day. He prayed for the church at Ephesus: "may you be strengthened in your inner being with power through Christ's Spirit." (Ephesians 3:16). How wonderful to think of "Core Strength" in a whole new way: are we strong enough, in mind and spirit, to stay calm and carry on in times of stress and conflict? Just like regular physical exercise, we absolutely need to open our minds and hearts regularly, to the things of God, the ways of Christ. Another great teacher I love to follow is Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan Scholar and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation. His 2011 book on aging and faith is called "Falling Page

Upward.” It is full of gems, encouraging thoughts and sayings. The title itself speaks volumes: Yes, we fall, but it is not always downward; if we learn lessons and take in divine wisdom, we can actually fall “upward!” Can we see down as “up?” He mentions Julian of Norwich who says “First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God!” And he recalls Carl Jung saying: “where you stumble and fall, there you find pure gold!” Richard Rohr quotes Jesus’ saying that “anyone who wants to save his life must lose it, and anyone who loses his life will find it.” This points to necessary losses in life, the reality of suffering; the question is whether we will let suffering and loss fill us with despair or whether we will find the ways it can transform us. If we are to live fully, we need to accept all of life, that somehow everything belongs, including that our outer nature does eventually waste away, and that the inner spirit can strengthen at the same time. One image that I find helpful for accepting the changes of life is what Richard Rohr calls being able to “sit in the passenger seat”; we can’t be in the driver’s seat all our life, though many of us try to do just that. Jesus also teaches this with a fairly graphic image: “When you are old, someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” I kid you not, check out the last chapter of the gospel of John! It means there are surely times in life to “let go,” to receive help, to receive grace, to receive the leading of another.

OK, my last example of another great teacher or counselor, through his music (you think I’m going to say Ken Medema) ... no, it’s a Christian singer named Michael Card. Michael Card has been inspiring Christians for decades; I remember him from my seminary days some 35 years ago. He is thoroughly Christian and Trinitarian, with theological training as well as being so talented and prayerful in his music. I saw an interview with him

recently, and he spoke of his father, a doctor, so invested with his rounds and patients, that he was rarely “home.” Even if you have parents who balance well work and home life, as I think I did, there is still always a little ache in the heart for the feeling of “home.” Some say it is the hole in the heart that is “God sized,” that only God can fill. Or the famous saying of Saint Augustine, “all hearts are restless until they rest in God.” So Michael Card wrote a song called “I will bring you home” many years ago that captured my attention. It was easy enough to learn, and it became a prayer for me over the years, especially during difficult times in my life. Naturally, I would like to sing it for you now, not because it adds any new ideas or thoughts, but because it is more like a chant or a prayer exercise; I hope you can open your heart, mind and soul, to experience a sense of “home,” the divine home, the eternal home, which is the love, grace, power, and assuring presence of God.... as Father, Son and Holy Spirit .... Creator, Redeemer and Indwelling Spirit.

*“I Will Bring You Home” by Michael Card*

*1. Though you are homeless, though you're alone, I will be your home.*

*Whatever's the matter, whatever's been done, I will be your home. I will be your home, I will be your home. In this fearful fallen place, I will be your home.*

*2. When time reaches fullness, when I move my hand, I will bring you home.*

*Home to your own place, in a beautiful land, I will bring you home. I will bring you home, I will bring you home. From this fearful fallen place, I will bring you home.*