

A GOD FOR ALL AGES

1 Timothy 5

The number of Americans ages 65 and older will more than double over the next 40 years, reaching 80 million in 2040. The number of adults ages 85 and older, the group most often needing help with basic personal care, will nearly quadruple between 2000 and 2040.

The nation is aging. By 2040, about one in five Americans will be age 65 or older, up from about one in eight in 2000. Because younger people are much more likely than older people to work and pay taxes that finance Social Security, Medicare, and all other public-sector activities, population aging could strain government budgets. The number of workers sharing the cost of supporting Social Security beneficiaries will soon plummet unless future employment patterns change dramatically. The latest Social Security Administration projections indicate that there will be 2.1 workers per Social Security beneficiary in 2040, down from 3.7 in 1970.

This will put increasing pressure on our society to see the elderly not as human beings, but as a liability. There is certainly a different attitude towards the elderly than there used to be and what still is in many cultures. The elderly were looked up to as wise and to be respected, not just taken care of. Proverbs 16:31 speaks of the “hoary head being a crown of glory.” There were the ones who had life skills to pass on to the next generations like how to cook with recipes in their heads, how to care for the farm, and how to fix things that got broken. But now with our constantly changing technology, the young have the advantage over the old because they adapt more quickly to the new stuff. Also, there is a changing attitude of what “old” means. The Social Security age of 65 years was set in the 1930’s when 65 was very old. Today 65 is more like 85.

St. Paul addresses to Timothy in our lesson today about care for the elderly:

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

Within families that usually happened because you lived in or next door to your father's house. The Old Testament Israelites lived in an Eastern culture where there is even today much more respect for the elderly than we have today. Just ask one of our volunteer English teachers how much respect they get from internationals. On top of that were the instructions from the Old Testament about care for the elderly. Men were commanded to marry their brother's widows to care for them. Later their sons were supposed to do that. If there were no brothers or sons, then other close male relatives were to provide care. That attitude of respect is summed up in the words of our Old Testament lesson from Numbers:

Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God. You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

We saw in our Gospel lesson how angry Jesus was when He said:

But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.'

He was speaking against those who used loopholes to get out of caring for their parents.

Paul puts it in his usual direct way in Timothy when he said:

If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Yet, all of that was in a world in which the "elderly" were much younger and less disabled. People used to talk about pneumonia being "the best friend of the elderly." If you broke a hip, you died of pneumonia. Then with antibiotics, people survived that, but still have to deal with the pain of the broken hip. Replacement hips can help deal with that, but what about stroke victims who cannot swallow, those who are so confused they don't remember what happened ten seconds ago, and those racked with pain from a bad back? How are we to care for the vast numbers of our population that are getting older?

One thought that keeps coming up in our world involves what we call “utility.” That means to ask the question, “How useful is that person?” That not only affects the elderly, but the challenged and the unborn. It is what leads us to say about the elderly, “Is life a benefit to him or her?” We see that happen in making decisions about spouses and parents near death and ask, “What would he (she) have wanted?” I know as an aging parent my thoughts are centered on saying, “I just don’t want to be a burden to my kids.” We think of how we are encouraged not only to have advanced directives, but to assign someone who has durable power of attorney to make life choices for us. To help explain the advanced directives may say “do not resuscitate,” the decision is left with doctors. A durable power of attorney gives the power to those we know best and trust. Make sure your older relatives have filled out those documents!

Yet, in doing all of that we are forgetting that our value lies not in usefulness or “utility” which we measure as humans, but in being created and redeemed by God, which God has measured with the infinite value of His Son, who died for us on the cross.

Because of that we are led not by human “utility,” but by faith in the God who made and bought us back. So, with a dying relative we ask not, “Is life a benefit to him/her?” but “What can I do to benefit the life he/she still has?” In his book Taking Care of Strangers author Robert Burt talks about how those situations are made difficult because the people we are making decisions about have become “strangers” to us. We might say “I take care of him,” but that can be a lot harder with someone who is now a “stranger” to us. Our attempts to make decisions easier can go against the God who allows those situations to happen so we have to talk, struggle, and put our trust in Him. As Lutheran theologian Gilbert Milander said:

In these decisions before death more than in any other sphere of life we are presented with unwanted and unexpected interruptions to our plans and projects. I do not like such interruptions any more than the next person; indeed, a little less, I rather suspect. But it is still true that morality consists in large part in learning to deal with the unwanted and unexpected interruptions to our plans.

Those situations cause us to put faith in God, which can be difficult, but is the greatest blessing to all. They also remind us that if we love, we are a burden to each other—even as I can be to my loved ones when I die.

Following Jesus is not about making life easier and decisions simpler. If we want that, let's be totally utilitarian. You don't have to be a Nazi Germany or a Soviet Russia to be that way. But Christ calls us to love not because it is useful, but it is the way of the God who loves us not because we are useful, but because He loves.