

“Prosper the Work of Our Hands”

Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17

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*May my words be a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.*

Ten days ago about 19 men and women—ranging in age from early 60s to 90—gathered at Emmaus Monastery to talk about the challenges of being an “elder.” We had questions to mull over:

- What are you hungry for at this point in your life?
- Are there activities/programs/services St. John’s could offer for elders?
- What would help you with the task of seeing meaning as you enter the last trimester of your life?

Our conversation ranged all over the map, and as one of the younger elders—I will be a mere 69 next month—I mostly watched and listened. I especially noticed the connections among the women who are 15 to 20 years older than I am, the ways they help one another: socializing over cups of tea, picking one another up for church and other events, offering support at difficult times. We talked about books that have been helpful to us as we’ve struggled with finding meaning as we age. We talked about services available in the community, particularly Commission on Aging. We talked about our homebound communion ministry and the ways we might expand and deepen it. It was, in all, a good 3 hours: we prayed, we ate well, and, of course, we laughed a lot.

We know all too well that life is short. Our Psalm today reflects on that brevity in the infinite scheme of God’s creation:

*For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past,  
and like a watch in the night.*

*You sweep us away like a dream;  
we fade suddenly like the grass.*

*In the morning it is green and flourishes;  
in the evening it is dried up and withered.  
May the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us;  
prosper the work of our hands;  
prosper our handiwork.*

“Prosper the work of our hands.” I look at my hands: they have held many hands: my husband’s; my children’s; my mother’s; the hands of countless men and women as they lived out their last days, and the hands of the family and friends who gathered around them. I look at my hands, and I see my mother’s hands: the age spots; the knuckles swollen and tender with arthritis; the wrinkles and veins that crisscross like roads on a map. When did this happen? Did they look this way when I was still employed at Hospice? Or do I notice them now because I have more time to stare into space? More time to reflect on the meaning of life?

More time to acknowledge that God will someday sweep me away like a dream?

More than 20 years ago I visited with a woman I will call Irene. She was in her eighties, and her husband was at the end stages of COPD. We talked about many things, especially after her husband died, but I remember best the day she went to a desk drawer and brought out a photo of an attractive woman in her 40s. The woman was Irene, who told me she is startled every time she looks at herself in the mirror, for she still expects to see the vibrant, attractive woman in the photo. For her, old age was a time of regret and sadness.

During that same period of time I also visited Marian, who couldn’t get out on her own, but who loved life, and who stayed in close touch with family and friends. She was happy to receive communion when I visited, but when I suggested someone would be pleased to pick her up for church she said she didn’t need to attend worship: she had “done” that. Engrossed as I was in the life of the church—especially preparation for ordination—I was shocked by her words. I was more attuned to the

image of the elderly woman in the Roman Catholic parish of my childhood who attended daily Mass, and who slumped down and died quietly in her pew one weekday morning.

But I am not shocked now: with many years on me since that conversation with Marian, I understand that our spiritual needs change with each phase of our lives.

After the meeting of elders I sat down with my copy of the parish directory to get a rough estimate of the numbers in each age group. I came up with this:

- Teens and younger: 9
- 20s and 30s: 5
- 40s and 50s: 38
- 60s and 70s: 35
- 80 and over: 22

I guessed on some ages, and I am sure I've missed a few persons, but the count does tell us that approximately 57 men and women—half of the parish—are in the third trimester of their lives. I am aware of that when I see many white and grey heads in the congregation on Sunday morning. But we are also a lively, thoughtful parish whose members mix with one another pretty well, no matter their ages. There is wisdom and knowledge in every generation, and so it is good that we listen to one another, that we enjoy one another, that we pray for one another, and that we work for the spiritual health of the men, women, and children who gather each week in this building to praise and thank God for many blessings.

As we approach the inevitable end of our earthly time we hope—in the words of today's Psalm—that God will “prosper the work of our hands.” At the retreat we asked what “our hands” can do to further the kingdom, and to enrich the spiritual lives of all those who are in their waning years. It would be easy to see life in bleak terms, as did Macbeth,

Hamlet's tragic king, who killed Duncan so that he himself could be king. Hear Macbeth's lament on the meaning of life, born of violence and despair:

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
 To the last syllable of recorded time;  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more; it is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing.*

As Christians, we do not usually share this bleak view of life, but hold fast to the more positive words of today's psalm. We believe that life is not emptiness, that we will be satisfied by God's loving-kindness in the morning, that we will "be glad all the days of our life." But there can be hard days. Some 30 years ago I was out walking with my son along High Street when I ran into a friend who had retired that week. He was clearly not happy about his situation, as he saw the years stretching ahead: what was his purpose, he wondered. I was worried about him—he seemed almost desperate—but within a couple of weeks he told me he had become involved with Habitat for Humanity, a volunteer work that filled his days with meaning. He realized that in every decade of our lives we have much to learn, and much to teach.

That is a lesson for us all. And so we walk with one another: reassuring and comforting one another, companions in the hard work of life, companions in the bewildering work that comes in the last decades, as we slow down or fall victim to the frailty of these human bodies.

And so let us bow our heads and pray to the God who has been our refuge from one generation to another. Let us pray that our Creator's

graciousness will be upon us, prospering the work of our hands,  
prospering our handiwork.