

Joy embodied: Helen Hutchison

Matthew 1:18-25

December 19, 2010

What does it feel like to be old?

Tom Stoppard said: "Age is a high price to pay for maturity."

John Glenn said: "There is still no cure for the common birthday."

Bette Davis said: "Old age ain't no place for sissies."

And my personal favorite, author unknown: "In dog years, I'm dead."

What does it feel like to be old?

You can't really know until you experience it for yourself. And so I am beginning to know, because I am beginning to experience it for myself! When I first came here to Waterloo, to First Congregational Church, I was still a relatively young man ... and look what you've done to me!

What does it feel like to be old?

It starts with looking in the mirror, with seeing the reflection of a face and a body that don't look quite like they used to look. But it's not just how your body looks, it's how it feels that really gets your attention: the constant dull ache in your finger joints, the knee that you can't quite trust any more, the pain in your shoulder or your back that won't let you sleep.

The older you become, the more you have to deal with a body that just won't do what it used to do so easily. Everything you ask it to do takes more effort, takes more time, takes more out of you. And as we live longer and longer lives, the physical challenges become even greater. There is more time, more opportunity, for ailments and accidents and just general atrophy to catch up with us and make our lives difficult and often miserable.

But as daunting as the physical challenges are, it is the emotional challenges that are hardest to bear. It's hard to give up playing soccer or climbing a ladder or flying an airplane or driving a car. It's hard having to give up one favorite activity after another, to find our lives slowly but surely shrinking in and closing down.

You can't do what you want to do. You can't go where you want to go. And, what is hardest of all, you may find one day that you can't even take care of yourself.

And, the older you get, the more you think about death, because you know your own death is growing ever nearer and because so many of your peers are dying. There are no generations left ahead of you and your own generation is fast disappearing. And so, as you age, you must bear pain and loss and loneliness and limitation and the slow ebb of what was your life.

It takes courage and fortitude and resilience to live old, but as Maurice Chevalier put it: "Old age is not so bad when you consider the alternative."

And that is the point. Alongside the reality of what you cannot do is the equally veritable reality of what you can do. Every life, at every stage, and at every age -- your life, now, at whatever age -- has value and meaning and purpose. Your life is uniquely useful, uniquely meaningful, uniquely worthwhile as it is.

Helen Hutchison was already old, very old, when I met her. She was ninety years old when I first came to Waterloo and she died some five years later, on December 27, 1999, eleven years ago.

I liked Helen, a lot, and I very much enjoyed my visits with her at Friendship Village. She had an unflagging zest for life. She was eager for the opportunities each new day offered her.

She love to read and to talk about what she was reading. Her apartment was filled with books, good books. Once she became blind, as she was when I first met her, she continued to "read" by listening to audio books on her cassette tape recorder. And, on top of that, she decided at age ninety to teach herself to read braille ... and she did!

Having conversation with some old people amounts to nothing more than listening to a long litany of complaints, but, with Helen, conversation was all about possibilities and delights, about interesting ideas and new discoveries, seasoned always with a generous dose of laughter.

My favorite memory of Helen concerns our "date." I happened to be sitting and talking with her one fall when an envelope was delivered to her room. She asked me to open the envelope and read the contents to her. It was an invitation from the Friendship Village staff to appear as one of the guests of honor at a special dinner for residents with October birthdays. When I finished reading the invitation, Helen promptly asked me to accompany her to the

special meal as her “date.” I accepted, of course, and some days later when the appointed time came, we attended the birthday dinner together and had a great time.

I don’t know what Helen’s life was like before, because I didn’t know her before. I knew her as a blind old woman, but when I thought of her then and when I think of her now, it is neither her age nor her blindness that comes to mind. It was something else that shone from her, something else that shone from her face, from her speech, from her demeanor, from her movement.

It was joy! Helen Hutchison embodied joy. Joy was woven into the entire fabric of her being.

Helen’s example reminds us that joy does not come from the outside, but from the inside. Joy is not relative to favorable circumstances or good fortune that we may or may not enjoy, but joy is relative to our capacity for seeing good or making good in the midst of whatever is our lot.

I imagine that Helen was joyful at ninety because she had been joyful at sixty and at thirty and at fifteen, or, at least, that somewhere, sometime, along the way, she had found the joy that lasts or that joy had found her. Because when I knew her, as long as I knew her, she did find joy in her life, as it was.

So now I have laid another burden on all of you who are old, another onerous demand on all of us who are old! Not only do we have to put up with all the pain and grief and aggravation of being old, we have to be happy about it!

No, not quite. We need not be happy about everything in our lives, but we surely can be joyful. We have taken an important step in realizing that joy does not come from the outside, dependent on fate and circumstance, but from somewhere within us, but we have one more step yet to take. And it is this step that relieves every one of us of the burden, or the guilt, of having or failing to manufacture joy, no matter what. And that step is this: the joy we have on the inside, doesn’t come from the inside!

Consider Joseph. Joseph appears in the gospels as Mary’s husband, and as Jesus’ father, or, at least, as the gospels say, as the human father who raised him. But other than these few brief appearances in the accounts of Jesus’ birth and childhood, Joseph is absent from the rest of the gospel story. Mary appears from time to time, finally among those looking on as Jesus is crucified, but Joseph is absent.

This absence has led some to conclude that that Joseph must have been old when he married Mary and died before Jesus reached maturity. That’s the

presumption of the “Cherry Tree Carol” that served as the backstory for our Christmas play this year, “The Butterfingers Angel,” but there is no evidence either way to suggest that Joseph was already old or still quite young when the birth of Jesus took place.

What we do know, from the gospel of Matthew that recounts the story of Jesus’ birth from Joseph’s point of view, are the challenges that he faced. Did Joseph have good reason, in his life as it was, to be happy?

He must have shared the excitement and anticipation of any man engaged to be married, but then he got the news, the news that his fiancée was pregnant and certainly not, as he well knew, by him! This must have been for Joseph a most unhappy time, but even so, he did his best to protect Mary from public humiliation, making plans to break off their engagement quietly and privately.

But his plans changed.

The gospel account says nothing about Joseph’s feelings, but it does tell us about his actions. His plans changed. He did marry Mary. He did raise her baby as his own. And he named the baby, Jesus. Joseph named the baby, and Joseph named him Jesus, which means “the Lord saves.”

Joseph did not give up on his life as it was, but he embraced it. He embraced the blessings of a wife and a son and the nearness of his God! The scripture records no song of Joseph like the song of Mary, but couldn’t he just as easily have sung ...

*My heart praises the Lord;
my soul is glad because of God my Savior,
for he has remembered me, his lowly servant!
From now on all people will call me happy,
because of the great things the Mighty God
has done for me?*

Joy came to Joseph from God. Joy came from the new way God gave him of seeing his life as it was. God showed Joseph the way he should go and Joseph went. Joy comes from walking in God’s way.

Joy comes from walking in God’s way. It’s that simple. It is joy to walk in God’s way, and it is grief to walk in another way, in any other way. Any life, all of our lives, will know pain and hardship, sorrow and loss, difficulty and danger. But joy comes when we know we are walking in God’s way, when we know we are walking with God, when we know God is walking with us! Joy comes from Emmanuel, God-with-us, God with us!

Do you feel the hand of God lying gently, but firmly, upon your back, holding you, directing you?

Do you feel the breath of God breathing through your body, refreshing you, re-energizing you, renewing your life, renewing your eagerness for life?

Do you feel the embrace of God loving you ... loving you ... loving you?

There are people -- Helen Hutchison among them, Joseph, Mary's husband, among them -- who are filled with a joy, with the joy that comes from being in communion with God, that nothing can diminish. No hardship can take it away. No loss can take it away. No disaster can take it away. No failure can take it away. No injustice can take it away.

At first, this may seem selfish: I am filled with a joy that is unaffected, unperturbed, undiminished by anything that happens around me. But it is not selfish, because it's not about me. It's about the God who is with me, the God who is with us. It's about Emmanuel. It's about something so much deeper, something so much more profound, than the day to day events that transpire in our lives, and yet something that includes and transforms the meaning and the import of every one of those events.

God is! There is joy!

And God is with us! There is joy almost more than we can bear! Do we dare to believe it? Do you dare to live it?

I do struggle sometimes with grief. There are times when grief over the brokenness in my own life and in the lives of those I love and in the state of the world as it is threatens to overwhelm me and leave me tasting only bitterness.

But in my better moments, in the moments I remember who God is, I know that it's not about me or about what I can or cannot do. I know that it's about the One who embraces me, the One who embraces those I love, the One who holds all this world in his embrace!

And that fills me with joy, not only joy for what one day will be, but joy in life as it is! Faith finds joy in what is. And what is?

*Unto us a child is born!
Unto us a son is given!
And he will be called ...*

Emmanuel. God-with-us. God is with us. God is with you ...