

SERMON 940

Second Sunday after Pentecost

1,001st Week as Priest

828th Week at St Dunstan's

93rd Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

THE MODERN CONUNDRUM

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Wendell Berry is a Kentucky farmer and poet who writes about everyday aspects of life—grandchildren, draft horses, the weather, love, life and death—and he is one of my favorites because he is easy to understand. That may be because he is a Southerner and he is of an age when clarity and a sense of humor are important.

I know I am getting old and I say so,
but I don't think of myself as an old man.
I think of myself as a young man
with unforeseen debilities.

I feel the same way, actually. I am turning sixty-three in a few months, and I know that I am getting old, and I say so. But like the poet, I think of myself as a young man. If you consider not the chronological age of

a person, but the *internal* age (the way you think and feel inside, in your heart of hearts, your better self), then I'm only twenty-four. However, I have certain debilities, too. Weaknesses, incapacities, frailties, enfeeblements, hindrances, and impediments. I feel the aches and pains of a long bicycle ride—that night and the next day. I count the number of vitamins, supplements, and other pills I take each morning and realize that I'm not really twenty-four after all.

Saint Paul must have known the ravages of time as well. “Even though our outer nature is wasting away,” he told the Corinthians, “our inner nature is being renewed day after day.” Paul had a harder life than most, but he didn't let that get in the way of the Gospel. In fact, he bragged about his debilities:

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

This difference that Paul sees between the outer nature and the inner nature is fascinating to me. The outer nature is the body, and over time it begins to

weaken and wear out. When you are twenty years old, you never give a thought to the whole process of aging. You believe that you are invincible and that you will live forever. “Youth is wasted on the young,” goes the old saying. They take it for granted, and they often aggravate the aging process by immoderate behavior and falling into difficult situations. Paul, it seems, was a magnet for these unfortunate circumstances.

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

But we know better how to live a good life, a healthy life, don't we? We know that moderation and a balanced lifestyle are the answer. Not burning the candle at both ends. Not binge drinking or smoking. And certainly not placing ourselves in danger through at-risk

behavior.

Paul had written the Corinthian church an earlier letter, addressing this very subject: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” These words alone ought to cause us not to lose heart.

But our inner and outer natures seem to be at war with one another. We know how to live a good and healthy life, but we can't discipline ourselves to do it. We are so incessantly busy all the time that we can't seem to slow down, or rest, or smell the roses. “I have to, but I can't.” “I can't, but I have to.” It's the human condition that drives us to excess, anxiety, and disintegration. We tell ourselves that we will learn to enjoy life once we have retired. Once the children are grown. Once the kids are out of college. Once upon a time.

So we fall into the modern conundrum: We divide our lives into different segments, pieces of a pie, so we can focus and get more done, use our time wisely, and make the most of every waking moment. And our lives become segmented—work, family, church, exercise, sleep, friends, spouse, rest—everything has its own time

slot, and has little or nothing to do with the other parts of our lives. And we begin to lose ourselves, our souls and bodies, in fragmentation and disintegration.

In the ancient Hebrew way of life, the aim was to become a fully integrated human being. You are the same person at work that you are at home. The same at church that you are with friends. It's really the only reasonable way to live. You learn to think of yourself as one integrated person, not a handful of personalities that you put on according to where you are and who you're with.

This way, when you approach the end of your life, you can look back on it without shame or regret. "Above all," said Paul, "live a life that is worthy of Christ." You and I both know that we are getting older. We all want to be able to look back on a life well-lived. We want to be able to say that we did the best we could under the circumstances, and that we loved God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and we loved our neighbors as ourselves. AMEN.