

Retirement – What Does It Mean?

Background

“So, when are you going to retire?” Someone asked me that during a multi-person conversation, to which I had been invited but not included.

That conversation’s dynamics, and question or suggestion about retirement, irked me. What are the questioner’s values about people, work, aging and God? Then, it dawned on me. Maybe I look old, or people think I do. And society does condition us to think: when we’re old, we stop working and retire. But, retire from what, whom and why?

Two responses to exclusion, aging, and retirement are helpful. One is to seek humor, which the cartoon gives. The other is to focus on how God is present in society’s contrasting values.



"I always hoped retirement would look like this."

Contrasting Values

Society understands retirement as being old and stopping work. Once we do that, we become *different* in people’s perceptions. Among those perceptions are: **dream**, **nightmare**, and **concern**. In contrast with these are the promises of Jesus. He offers us **experience**, which only he can give. A consideration of each perception follows.

Dream

Ads in print media and TV reflect society’s current values. They illustrate retirement with lovely photos and vignettes of happy, elderly couples, enjoying life to the full! They lounge on the beach, stroll through parks, go on extended vacations, and enjoy festive meals with large, loving families. They are wealthy, healthy and happy. The message behind the ads is clear: *retirement is the good life*. All you need is this prescription drug and that financial product.

Nightmare

When we retire, we will be treated as old and useless. Our years of learning, experience and accomplishments will no longer be welcomed or appreciated. People will marginalize us. Our wealth, health, and happiness will have a slow, downward spiral. (How depressing!)

The Concern

We want to retire, but can’t. Our savings and expected future income won’t sustain us. Downturns in financial markets have so damaged our savings and investments, we’ll have to keep working to pay the bills. 20% of age 65+ people are burdened with debts from mortgages and credit cards, and they need their paychecks.

Christ's Promises

Society's understanding of **work**, **old** and **retirement** is flawed. The underlying assumption is that all three are bad. But, as we look for Jesus in all this, we discover something refreshingly different.

1) Work - who says work is bad? Some jobs can be. But, work is intrinsically good. God works; God still creates and redeems, 6 days a week. God is with us as we work.

Ever meet someone who loves what s/he does? S/he works long hours every week, and doesn't want to stop working. This is because of vocation - what God calls us to be and do. God has a vocation for each of us. We can learn what ours is through prayer, Scripture's stories, and joining a church for guidance. Each will help us discern what our vocations are.

2) Old - is 'chronological enrichment' when seen through Scripture's lens. Scripture has many stories about chronologically enriched people, most of whom are historical heavy hitters:

- Abraham and Sarah -revered in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, were in their 90's when called by God to found a nation
- Moses was in his late 80's when God called him to lead slaves to freedom
- Zechariah and Elizabeth were senior citizens when God called them to be parents of John the Baptist, and continue their work as prophets
- Joseph was an older person when God called him to be Jesus' dad
- Anna was 84 years in her vocation of prophetess, when she met Jesus.

Today, many people work past age 65 because they want to! They and God have a partnership of BEing and Doing, called *vocation*. God offers this experience to everyone.

3) Retirement - Scripture's only reference is Numbers 8:23-26, and it is an oblique one at best. It speaks of older priests who stop the work they have been doing, and then assist younger priests. Their work changed, not stopped.

Experience

Everyone's story is unique. But, in every story about God's work, there is potential to inspire others. For God's greater glory, here is my experience with age 65+.

As age 65 came ever closer, I felt ill at ease. Will I be removed from what I do, as rector of a church? What would happen to my vocation as a priest?

When age 65 came, I never dreamed life would be this way! There is a wonderful sense of freedom. I know that I can walk out the door, any time, and thank God I can. But, I don't want to. It would tear the heart and soul out of me. My Bishop and

congregation know this and encourage me to stay. They affirm God's vocation, still present and active within me.

I have always appreciated my vocation as priest. But, now, I have a growing sense of awe as I reflect on what God and I do. The work is not easy and it is often exhausting. Sometimes, as I stand with suffering or dying people, I am heartbroken. I love them.

At age 65, God gave me a wonderful birthday present – a stronger sense of vocation, gratitude, awe, and insight to appreciate:

- who God is
- the purpose of life (be with God)
- the purpose of ministry (do with God)

God's birthday gift included a new appreciation of the world around me. It's easier to see and appreciate what is good. I don't care any more about the kinds of nonsense that go on in every workplace. I am aware of what happens around me, and some things still rattle me – such as the dynamic I opened this article with. But, they don't affect me the way they used to. I feel free. I am free!

Conclusion

Q. “So, when are you going to retire?”

A. “God and I aren't finished working yet.”

Our Good News is:

- society has got it wrong about aging, work and retiring
- retirement is a secular concept, not Biblical
- God offers us vocation: to be and do with God, always, and without limits

Thanks be to God!

D. Browning

June, 2012