

For Everything There is a Season

Psalm 71:14-23

I have already declared it publically; at least in as far as the eSpire goes. For me, summer and strawberries go together. Red juicy fruit right off the vine, not the reasonable facsimiles which come in plastic boxes in the supermarket. So, obviously I am still waiting for the season to begin, and actually the calendar and the Farmer's Almanac are also insisting it is not yet quite here. It is still spring for another 10 days. But springtime has its delights too, not to be overlooked, as do all the seasons of the year. *For everything there is a season*, the preacher pronounced in the book of Ecclesiastes. And while the Bible doesn't quite say so directly in the creation story in Genesis, if God created the heavens and the earth and everything therein and pronounced them good, then that Creative Force we call God must have created the seasons and all that they offer, and pronounced them good.

As our litany, with its images and metaphors, reminded us, each season has its own energy, its own colors, its own moods, its own gifts. The hopefulness and unfolding of spring; the enthusiasm and growth of summer; the color and harvest of autumn even as it surrenders its vibrancy; the darkness and the barrenness of winter. There is a rhythm, a constant spiraling, in the movement of the seasons which can be counted upon, can be trusted, knowing that the hand that fashioned the rose also formed the snowflake. The seasons tell us stories of life and death, transformation and rebirth; stories of waiting, patience, resting, but also of action and fruitfulness and generativity. Stories of God's faithfulness through all time and all times.

The seasons have a lot to teach us about our own inner lives. In fact, it has been said that *each of the four seasons is a classroom for the heart*. While there are unexpected shifts, there is a natural, unfolding pattern in our lives. We go through periods of change and growth. Nothing stays the same. We have inner seasons which reflect the characteristics of the seasons' outer space. You have felt the happy spring-like stirrings when you are full of hope, haven't you? When you suddenly or slowly emerge from a dark space, or a tedious and boring time when you are boring too? A daffodil blooms in your soul, a robin sings in your being, the sun shines a little more brightly than yesterday. And then you move

even further into the heat of summer-like existence when nothing seems impossible and all life is ripe to overflowing. The kids are doing well, the ulcer is healed, your plate (literally and figuratively) is full, strawberries are ripening and the corn is as high as an elephant's eye, and the *living is easy* to quote a couple of songs.

Likewise, you can be plunged into autumn's relinquishment and winter's solitude by a fading away, a dropping off, a loss, a pervading sense of sadness – a loved one dies; many innocent folks are mowed down, youth and health fade; joy seems a distant memory; confusion, loneliness and discontent pervade your essence. It isn't all strawberry time. You have been there too, haven't you? Or perhaps that is where you are right now in spite of what the thermometer says the temperature is or what the calendar insists. These darker feelings and states are as real as seasons they resemble, but, God willing, they are not permanent, for with time and grace and the Spirit's help, out of the pulling-inward, resting and re-grouping, spring will come. It may look differently than before, for each season, each set of experiences, each learning, has to be integrated into the whole expanded self you are becoming. But growth and movement, change and transformation, are constants – like it or not.

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest, sun, moon and stars in their courses, join with all nature in witness to God's great faithfulness, mercy and love (from the hymn Great is Thy Faithfulness).

So too in our interior spaces –we have seasons of blossoming, fullness, letting go, withering, and even moving toward death. And God is present and accompanying us in all of them.

But there is another way to look at the seasons of our lives - one not so limited to fluctuating emotional states, but rather considering the various stages of life. We don't need experts to take note of how different ages have different shapes, tasks, joys and challenges. We know that babies need to first learn to turn over before they can walk. We know that a two year old has to practice saying "no" in order to achieve some sense of independence. We know that an adolescent will test the limits and eventually grow up (God willing) into a responsible adult. And so it goes in a progression. There are all sorts of theories and charts and models about human growth from people like Freud, and Maslow, and Kohlberg, and Erikson. Good stuff, but one way of looking at stages of life that I particularly like comes from a Franciscan priest named Richard Rohr who sort of simplifies things

and points out that there are essentially two halves of life. They are not necessarily age-bound, you don't jump from one stage to another just because of a particular birthday or decade. Rather they have to do with spiritual maturity and interior growth, and a different set of values and goals.

Fr. Rohr notes that the first half of life is organized around achieving, securing, acquiring, building. We are concerned with surviving successfully. This is the way it should be, the way it needs to be. We need to figure out who we are, what we can do well, what tribe/group we belong to, what rules/laws/norms/customs we will follow. During this period many will find mates, establish families, make homes, seek meaningful work which pays and has benefits. Most of us have been or still are in this half of life, or we are watching people who are. Graduations, weddings, birthings, car pooling, commuting, jobs, bills, making pronouncements, taking stances....building a life and a future. It is a good, exciting, necessary place to be. *For everything there is a season.*

But somewhere along the line it seems that this is not, should not be, all that there is. Thomas Merton, the American monk, pointed out that we may spend our whole life climbing the ladder of success, only to find when we get to the top that our ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. And the recognition, the search for something more, something different, commences. The desire for a kind of freedom sets in. We develop more tolerance and openness. We are learning to be more patient and compassionate, less certain we are right. As Rohr puts it:

I don't need to push the river as much now, or own the river, or get everybody in my precise river; nor do others have to name the river the same way in order for me to trust them or their good will.

This kind of thinking, this way of being, is a sign of moving into the second half of life which takes on a depth, a wisdom, a shape, which is not found in the first half. And remember that age itself is not the sole determining factor in which half of life we are in. Nor is one half more graced than the other. As the Scripture lesson says God shows Godself to us in our youth and in our old age and grey hairs, and in our closing hymn we will proclaim that God's mercies never fail in all our circling years. But the years do have a way of moving us on – if we are lucky, and if we are blessed, they often move us into a new kind of space.

It seems to me that aging gets a bad rap. Yes, there are losses that come in the later years of life. Losses of all sorts. As a French proverb puts it: *Everything passes, everything, wears out, everything breaks*. Or as a friend of mine says, she is reminded of rice crispies as she tries to get going in the mornings. Everything goes snap, crackle, pop as she wills her muscles into action for the day. I know the feeling, and those sounds. No matter what name we give to it – old, aging or aged, elder, senior, golden years – there are some real losses that can come with time. Losses, as well as some things that weren't there before – new shapes to our bodies, new routines, more doctors' visits, questions like where we will live and with whom and under what power.

But there are some shifts of another sort too, and I want us to think also about those. I am speaking now to all of us - those of us who are already of a goodly number of years and grey hairs, and those of us who, God willing, will be headed in that direction. I want us to think about the possibilities of living a full rich second half of life. To some degree it is up to us to choose to move into that space, we can deny, resist, complain, but there is possibility, incentive, reward to aging gracefully and grace-filled-ly. The divine plan allows for it, intends it. The Bible assures us that those in old age *still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap*. Now maybe you never greatly desired to be *full of sap*, but put the way the psalmist does in Psalm 92, it sounds pretty good to me.

God approaches us with an invitation to a way of living not marked by age but by grace. *Walking in the Spirit* we might call it. And the second half of life allows spaciousness and time, room and return, for this kind of walking which looks and feels different from the earlier stage: It can include:

Not being so focused on doing, so we can just be.

Nor needing to achieve in the same way as earlier, so we can more fully appreciate.

Not so much planning and plotting as trusting.

Being, appreciating, trusting.

This half may be marked by....

Not being bound by so much adherence to external authorities, so that we can listen to ourselves more closely.

Being able to live more easily with mystery...not everything needs to be right or wrong, black or white, my way or the highway.

Where with more lived experience behind us, we can take a longer broader view of existence, see the whole of things, how they fit together in God's plan.

In the second half of life....

We can listen with the heart as well as the mind. *Listen with the ears of our heart.*

We want to give back, rather than collect.

It's not so much having to have what you love as loving what you have right now.

And perhaps the richest part of all: We can hold together the sadness and the joys of life, the tragedies and the delights in what has been called *a bright sadness*.

Now I have set before you a long list of qualities, attributes, attitudes, approaches which indicate a move into the second half of life. Probably I have given you more than you can take in in a single sitting. Certainly more than one can move into in less than the rest of one's lifetime. But hopefully you have recognized a couple of them in people you have known, or better yet, in your emerging growing self, or in your desire to grow, to expand even as you see diminishment in other ways. Being *full of sap* is sounding better and better, isn't it? Sounds like there might be new life and new energy and new growth still running through our veins, doesn't it?

The thing is one has to go through the first half of life with all its learnings and experiences, before one can *fall upward* into the second half of life. *Falling upward!* That is how Rohr describes movement into this rich fertile fruitful sphere. Paradoxically, the way down with its sufferings and diminishments is the

way up. Loss and renewal, death and rebirth, is the pattern of nature with its seasons, the secret of human life, the way Jesus shows us in his life, death and resurrection, the way of the Christian life.

So I invite you, rather than bemoaning getting old or older, ponder instead the meaning of your experiences, integrate their lessons, take care of unfinished business, face your imperfections, accept who you are, pass on your truths to others as you see them in a gentle manner, and trust God's faithfulness in the strawberry, the rose and the crystal snow drop and in all the seasons of your life. And be grateful for the passing of time and ensuing understanding that *you may count your days so that you may gain a wise heart (Psalm 90:12 adapted)*. A wise heart – what a gift at any half of life! So welcome a fall, a fall upward, trusting God will be there to catch you and hold you in the *everlasting arms*. And you can begin falling now, whatever age you are. *For everything there is a season.*

May it be so. Amen.

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess

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Quotes and insights drawn from:

The Circle of Life by Joyce Rupp & Macrina Wiederkehr (Notre Dame, Sorin Books, 2005).

Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life by Richard Rohr (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2011).

“Eldering”, *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, Vol. xxxi, #3.