Aging, Dementia and Faith
Psalm 71: 17-24
Luke 2:25-32

I am a "leading-edge baby boomer," now 68 years old. Baby boomers are beginning to move from middle age into early old age, and we will be doing so in greater and greater numbers over the next twenty years. There are a lot of us - 78 million people. We will likely live longer lives than any generation that preceded us. And some of us are beginning the journey into Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia. It is estimated that at age 65, one person in ten has Alzheimer's disease, usually undiagnosed and without obvious symptoms. If we live to the age of 85, up to half of us will have some form of dementia to some degree. Let me ask those present who are younger than I am: are you prepared to deal with millions of baby boomers with dementia?

We are certainly not prepared medically: because of low Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements, fewer physicians are specializing in geriatric medicine even as the population ages. There is no medication to prevent or cure dementia, and an effective pharmacological intervention is many years, or even generations, away. We expect science and medicine to come up with a "magic bullet" for anything that ails us, but there is no magic bullet for dementia.

As testing becomes more common, relatively young people still functioning at a high level will learn that they are in the early stages of some form of dementia. Many of them are still working. How will their employers respond? How will they cope with that knowledge and the anxiety it brings? Do we have the social and spiritual resources this will require? How will our families, our friends, and our churches support us in this difficult journey? The good news about learning while still relatively healthy is that we can make plans and preparations and perhaps through lifestyle changes slow the course of dementia's progress, but slowing the process does not change the inevitable outcome. The bad news about knowing, of course, is that you know.

Stanley Hauerwas argues that our deepest fears grow from those conditions that most threaten our fundamental sense of identity as a "self." In the time of Jesus, prevailing cultural and religious assumptions held that our corporal

bodies constituted the self, and therefore the most dreaded disease was leprosy, which represented losing the "self" you had always known.

Since Jewish and Christian traditions have long associated selfhood with the *imago Dei*—the conviction that humans are uniquely created in the image of God—the loss of physical wholeness was believed to damage the divine image. Lepers were therefore barred from entering the sacred Temple, denying them personal access to God. Purity laws also prohibited lepers from physical contact with other persons, so they were removed from their normal role in the web of relationships that constitute community. Leprosy thus cost its victim relationship with self, relationship with the divine and relationship with the community – they lost everything. Jesus' first response to lepers was almost always to touch them, and through that touch offer the healing knowledge that the leper remained a person—a self valued by God and capable of continuing relationship with fellow human beings.

In the constructs of modernity, assumptions about the nature of the self have moved from corporality to cognition, from body to mind: I think therefore I am. The *imago Dei* is now associated with such terms as intelligence, autonomy and independence. Our deepest fears are now less associated with our physical well-being than with our cognitive well-being, namely Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

Like leprosy in a different era, dementia threatens our ability to maintain a relationship with the divine and to sustain our role within community. When I was young I was taught that faith meant "remembering God and being mindful of God in all that we do and say." What happens to our faith if we can no longer remember God? Persons on the dementia road are too often effectively hidden away as if they were contagious, living in a world populated solely by family members and professional caregivers rather than friends and community. Long-time companions on life's journey may distance themselves with words like "He has already left us" or "I want to remember her as she was." Being present to a person with advanced dementia makes us feel so awkward that bit by bit we abandon our friend. If Jesus touched lepers, and in so doing affirmed their selfhood, then as his followers we are called to continue to touch – physically, emotionally and spiritually – our friends and loved ones whose life journey includes dementia. We need to let them know that they remain a valued person and a cherished creature of God.

Why do we so over-privilege cognition as that which makes life fulfilling? Scottish theologian John Swinton points out the obvious: "God has no

brain," anymore than God has a liver or kidneys. As John likes to say, "Everything God does is a no-brainer!" And yet God is the ground of our being, and the loving relationship God maintains with us, in any and all circumstances, is the model for our relationships with one another.

Meister Eckhart described the Trinity in these words: "When the Father laughs to the Son and the Son laughs back to the Father, that laughter gives pleasure, that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and that love gives the Holy Spirit." I love the image that we cannot understand God without speaking of relationships, and that all relationships, divine or human, are grounded in sharing laughter, pleasure, joy and love. That is what we are here for – to share relationships of love and joy with God and one another. While dementia may take away executive function or memory, it cannot take away our capacity to share in such relationships. As a Memory Care chaplain, I spend hours each week with my dear friends living with advanced dementia, and I find joy and meaning in these friendships. They have taught me so much, including what it means to live in the present moment.

Because we have been shaped and formed more by consumer culture than by the Gospel, what we fear above all is not being in control, no longer having "value" to contribute; of becoming "a burden to others." But the New Testament calls us to bear one another's burdens, which we cannot do if we regard being dependent on others as somehow shameful or a failure. Our very humanity is defined by vulnerability and mutual dependence, a truth we do not like to be reminded of. I am only a "self" because other people grant me the gift of selfhood. And I am not a creature in God's image because I am especially clever, but because God chooses to be in faithful relationship with me exactly as I am. For up to half of us, dementia will be a part of our journey of aging, so we must find new ways to affirm the goodness of the gift of life and the joy of being in relationship with others within the experience of dementia rather than surrendering to fear, stigma and isolation.

Faith communities must play a critical role in this holy calling. The culture surrounding us treats friendship as a commodity we are free to abandon if we are no longer receiving sufficient value from it, and we have all bought into that to some degree, which is why we have such fear of "becoming a burden" to our friends and family members. Congregations are called to practice a radical inclusion based not upon the "value" that a person brings

to the community, but simply because each person is a beloved child of God and therefore a precious friend to each of us, sharing a relationship defined by laughter, pleasure, joy and love.

We are also called to a prophetic role, advocating for the full inclusion of persons with dementia in the life of the community. Dementia is a disability, and like other disabilities can be accommodated. Physical disabilities are accommodated with curb cuts and wheelchair ramps. Dementia is accommodated with patience, kindness and understanding. And wouldn't we all benefit from such accommodations?

Our psalm offers us a plea from a man late in his life that he not be forsaken or forgotten. John Swinton argues that we exist only in the memory of God; that should God ever forget us we would cease to be. It is not my memory that is most important; it is God's memory of me. Yet one of our deepest fears is that of spending our later years alone, forgotten by friends, having lost our sense of self, our relationship with God and our role in community with others. As followers of Christ, we may not abandon our older friends to such isolation should their journey include frailty or dementia.

And then there we have Simeon, the elderly man who took the infant Jesus into his arms and blessed him. That is what we older folks are called to do: offer our blessings to the young, even when we don't completely understand them. My friends with very advanced dementia regularly say "God bless you" to me, and I feel richly blessed when they do. Across the artificial lines of generations and cognitive ability, we must be there for one another. We must be friends.

Aging, whether with the good fortune of retaining all of our cognitive facilities or with the challenges of journeying into dementia, does not remove us from God's plan or purpose; we remain valued members of the body of Christ, the beloved community called "church." I asked earlier if faith was still possible if we can no longer remember God. Of course it is, for even if we cannot remember God, God remembers us. And if we cannot remember God, we need friends: friends who will remember God for us and be God's presence to us. Amen.