

## ***“Turning Forty”***

A Sermon for the Members and Friends of Millburn Congregational UCC

*Ephesians 4:25-5:2*

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Rev. Jed Watson

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When he was twenty-nine and pensive about it, F. Scott Fitzgerald recorded this lament in the *Great Gatsby*:

“Thirty – the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair.”

I remembered that this week, and it occurred to me: “that was *ten years ago*.”

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Yep. I turned forty last week. On August 8. I thought it would be soooo traumatic; people say it is.

I try to avoid being especially autobiographical in these messages, though probably a certain amount of that is necessary. For those who, like me, don't like autobiographies, you could think of this as someone reflecting on a personal milestone, and there are many milestones. But it's personal for me, frankly, and I am the appointed speaker, so you'll indulge me, please, and I promise never to preach another 'turning forty' sermon again. Also, Millburn Church has a lot of folks in this age cohort, people who are turning forty this year, or soon will, or recently have: the kids of the eighties, people who came of age listening to Madonna and Michael Jackson and Mister, Mister (remember *that?*) or who took refuge from that by listening to whatever our seventies predecessors listened to; people who can remember a world without computers but not clearly. Way back in the day when we worried about things like drugs and gangs and a war in Lebanon. So there are quite a few of us who, in age, are similarly afflicted, or similarly blessed, depending on whose side you're on, and I have taken sides, by the way. More about that later.

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It rankled all spring and summer, the attention paid Greg Maddux of the Cubs (or I should say, formerly of the Cubs, until the Cubs decided that trading a hall-of-fame pitcher would, like, *help*), who turned forty earlier this year. He came out blazing this spring, Cubs fans will remember, and there were innings when nobody got decent wood on that cutter, the pitch that he single-handedly made part of the Standard Repertoire. And people said, “How does he do it?” They called him, “The Miracle Man.” And even more annoyingly, “The Ageless Wonder.” And I'm thinking, ‘Why don't you just come to my house and serve me some warm milk and put me to bed?’ But what really bugged me about the Maddux episode is that until a few weeks ago I thought he looked pretty much like he always has, since back when he first came up. That is,

until the Chicago Tribune felt compelled to do a feature on Maddux, displaying two large photographs of him, side by side: on the right, the 'Ageless Wonder' as he appeared last month; and on the left, wearing the same uniform, the familiar Cubs' home jersey, in a photograph taken in 1988, there's this...*kid*, a beanpole, looking like he dressed up as a big-leaguer for a Halloween party. I don't remember him looking like that when we were 22. Not that the guy on the right is an *old* man; I don't think anyone would say that, not even a smart-allicky teenager (well, maybe a smart-allicky teenager). But he's not a young man, either, not exactly, not if you look closely, not if you're objective about it, to the extent that's possible.

He's somewhere in between.

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In February I got an invitation to lead what they call a 'young clergy' group – 'young' defined very liberally and generously as 'under forty,' which is hilarious in itself, and shows how well we're doing attracting younger ministers – 'young clergy' used to mean 'under *thirty*.' Anyway, I thought, "That's awesome, but I only have six months of eligibility left. Then what happens: do I get moved on to the next group, and what's that group called, I'm afraid to ask?" The 'Ageless Wonders,' maybe. I didn't respond to the invitation.

I wonder if I'll be getting any more letters from the military. I've gotten a lot of them, especially in the last two years; they come to the office, they come to my home. For those who aren't aware, the U.S. Armed Services are absolutely desperate for chaplains; that's true for all the branches, but especially the Army. They're hitting the seminaries quite hard with the recruiting, more so than they used to. It's not a bad deal, really: a month's paid vacation; travel, for sure, and almost certainly to warm-weather climes; the chaplaincy is part of the Officer Corps, of course, and that's good, and you don't have to start out as a second lieutenant, either – I'd go in as a captain, at least. Maybe I'd get some special treatment, since the Army Chief of Chaplains is UCC. Sometimes I think, "I could walk right into that." Or rather, I *could have walked* right into that, until last Tuesday - see, because the cut-off age is *forty*. I know they know my address; if they know my birth date I won't be getting any more letters, unless, of course, they raise the age ceiling, which is possible – they did that on June 1 for enlisted personnel, raising it from forty to 42. I saw a little blurb about that in Time Magazine just this week. In the two and a half months since the change, exactly five (5) 'Ageless Wonders' have signed up (in the whole country!). Even though they make it easy on us: the younger people have to be able to complete 47 sit-ups; we only have to do 29.

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Only it wasn't. Quite the contrary. What little time I spent reflecting on it was really quite illuminating, and also liberating.

It's a milestone, turning forty. You recognize that you've accumulated some wisdom over time, in spite of yourself: some good, old-fashioned secular wisdom. The psychiatrist, Carl Jung, used to write about a mythical old man who by virtue of age had ascended the very summit of life, and was now able to see beyond himself, beyond the limits of time, even: he

could see eons long past and eons yet to come, and his own place in the vastness of history. I'm only half way up the summit and can't see half of what he saw, but I see more than I used to see.

What I see looking down the slope from halfway up is a long series of opportunities and breaks, most of which involved little or none of my own doing. I see a lot of people behind those breaks, even some who I found oppressive and annoying at the time. Some of them said things I hated to hear but which were true. I'm grateful to them. Others said things I wanted to hear that were not true; I'm grateful to them, too, because they taught me to sift through that: they taught me how to see through...*nonsense*.

It's good to have someone to love, I've learned, and someone to love you. It's good to be part of a community that sustains you, and in which you find part of your identity. And it's a special blessing to have a sense of purpose and mission in your life.

People suffer and die. I understand that better than I used to, mainly because of my vocation but also in smaller measure because of my age. By this time we've lost some friends and loved ones, enough to know that it will happen again before long; we just don't know who it will be. At the same time you feel fortunate to have gotten this far yourself. A huge percentage of people in this world don't. Jesus didn't live this long; he missed it by quite a few years.

And people my age have learned things that should have been obvious but weren't: *Don't go on long vacations with extended family*. You should have known better all along, but you took the trip, and now you know.

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The author of Ephesians serves up some good old fashioned religious wisdom this morning, too. I've lived with it so long that some of it is beginning to sink in. Like, for example, the need to control your anger, to "avoid giving the Devil that kind of foothold in your life." No doubt. People think anger causes depression, but usually not. Instead it causes *anxiety*. When you're all tied up in knots you do well to ask not, 'What's bothering me?' but rather, "What's angering me?" I've learned that. The bits about lying, stealing and hard work are pretty straightforward. Less obvious is his counsel to 'be gentle with one another, sensitive.' But I have learned in my four decades that if you treat people with respect and a measure of dignity, you'll get along reasonably well in this life. It's not 100 percent, but I'd say it's somewhere in the upper 80's, and those are favorable odds. Taking things a step further, being willing to share the pain and heartache of others, gets you up well into the 90's. He also says, "Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth." I'm still working on that, though I'm much better than I used to be.

But something far more valuable appears in this text, something to ponder on the occasion of a milestone - any milestone. The author says God's "Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted." I've been preaching on Ephesians for several weeks, and I understand Pastor Wayne Nowack spoke eloquently on it last Sunday. Ephesians isn't perfect, it has its

shortcomings, but its idea of God is something to embrace. The God he's describing is not Zeus or Apollo or some other quasi-divine figure from ancient mythology. Instead it's the Creator and Sustainer and Redeemer of the Universe, including you; it's not perched on some lofty plane at a distant remove but is instead right here, right now, all the time, moving and breathing in you. It's never far away, and you're always part of it; you live and breathe and have your being in something infinitely greater and more significant than yourself. That's humbling, but it's also liberating. Maybe not so much when you're twenty, or even thirty, but when you're forty it's good to know that it's not all up to you, and it's not all *about* you. At forty my end is closer than it used to be, and maybe that's why the milestone is supposed to be sooo traumatic – people say it is. But *my* end is not *the* end.

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When he was twenty-nine and pensive about it, F. Scott Fitzgerald recorded this lament in the *Great Gatsby*:

“Thirty – the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair.”

I remembered that this week, and it occurred to me: “that was *ten years ago*.” I remember feeling that way. But when I was forty and grateful for it, I recorded this addendum in my *Turning Forty* sermon:

“Forty – the promise of a decade of love and fellowship, a lengthening list of people to thank and honor, a thickening briefcase of optimism and hope for the future. Thinning hair.”

Amen.