**Another Country**

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If you think of your life as a calendar year, each “month” lasts seven or eight years, at least according to current life expectancies. Of course, some lives are shorter and some are longer. And some “months” within those lives may be shorter or longer, depending on how you want to think about this. Maybe you spent 10 years in Paris, for example, and you want to think about that as the July of your life.

But if you get me in this, the first three months -- January, February, March -- generally take you through childhood and adolescence, to age 21. The middle four months -- May, June, July, August, maybe 30 years -- are for most people, their adult lives, characterized by self-differentiation, productivity and relationships.

The months of October and November are when many people, at least in this society, expect to be retired. The weather is still pretty good, the days are shorter, but still long enough. These are what we call the “golden years.” Which makes me think of twilight on a late fall day.

April and September you might think of as transition months. April, according to the math, lands in your early 20s, and September comes as you turn the corner to 60. In our societal expectations, with an increasingly delayed adolescence, and an increasingly anticipated retirement, that fits.

That leaves December. The last month. And I think, for a lot of people, a difficult month.

I want to stress now that my characterizations of these seasons are generalized, bounded by my own cultural mores and expectations. You might experience these seasons very differently, just as legitimately, even more so, as you are grounded in the actual events of your lives, not a social norm.

Each of us experiences life in different degrees of connection and independence, togetherness and time alone. I think there are gendered differences in our expectations that shed different light on the picture, too. And of course, racial differences in life expectancy, goals, and expectations, create more nuance.

But December, at least in my experience of people around me, shares a commonality.

December is when many people’s bodies significantly wear out, when they cannot climb stairs, bend down in the garden, change the lightbulbs, or even rise comfortably from a chair. This is a problem for people who have been self-reliant their entire lives.

I think of my father, whose life was marked by a constant energy. A man who retired early so that he and mom could travel the world, spend time with their extended families, enjoy everything that life could offer. A man who split barn loads of firewood, by hand, to sell to gas stations and to give to neighbors, and to keep himself fit. A man who, upon his retirement, walked a hundred miles – five days – from his home in Wisconsin to our home in Minnesota, to visit his grandsons, and just to say he did it.

Dad did everything they say you should do to keep yourself healthy into old age – physical fitness, mental fitness, the best he could do at reconciliation with those things he perceived as undone. He even kept up playing the accordion.

But in his late 70s, a case of undiagnosed Lyme disease knocked him flat. A man without an off button suddenly could not start. Over many months, he was able to recover somewhat. But then, over the next several years, three forms of cancer, its treatment regimen, and creeping heart disease, all conspired to keep him from doing the things he wanted to do, from being the man he knew himself to be.

I think that dad reconciled with this, too, at the end. He made his peace. And he died surrounded by his family. But he did not go gentle into that good night.

I think, too, of Herb Lundin, a member of this congregation,, who died in January. My experience of Herb was somewhat different. I knew a man who knew his limits, at least until the last few weeks of his own December. But still those limits frustrated him.

Maybe this common experience of December is because of its shared upper limit. December, at least by our metaphor, is when life ends. The fact of that defines the month, no matter what expectations you have, what time or place you live in. But I also think there are characteristics of our culture that create hardship in December, that prevent a more graceful end.

Shifting the metaphor from time to space, author Mary Pipher writes that this experience of old age is like entering another country.

“Many old people are living in a world designed for young people. They can’t drive, walk through shopping malls or airports, or deal with rushed doctors in managed care systems. Many can’t handle stairs, small-print books, or menus in darkened restaurants. They have access to expensive and sophisticated medical care that prolongs their lives, but many must sacrifice their savings to afford it. Some must choose between medications and food. … Some people live to be more than a hundred, but they often outlive their support systems, neighborhoods, and bank accounts.”

Add to this list is the growing incidence of memory loss and dementia, particularly devastating not only for people experiencing these changes, but also for everyone around them.

Pipher writes that the “generations have very different mental landscapes.”

Younger people might sometimes say to older people, “but you have so much to give.” At the same time, older people can feel shut out by such a request, unable to connect in a meaningful way. We live in two different countries.

In 2014, Ezekiel Emanuel, an oncologist and bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania and brother to Rahm Emanuel, mayor of Chicago, made some waves with an essay in *The Atlantic* declaring that he hopes to die at 75. By my math, he would skip December altogether. And that’s about the whole of his reasoning.

“(H)ere is a simple truth that many of us seem to resist,” says Emanuel, “living too long is also a loss. It renders many of us, if not disabled, then faltering and declining, a state that may not be worse than death but is nonetheless deprived. It robs us of our creativity and ability to contribute to work, society, the world. It transforms how people experience us, relate to us, and, most important, remember us. We are no longer remembered as vibrant and engaged but as feeble, ineffectual, even pathetic.”

Emanuel argues that creative people achieve their greatest productivity between the ages of 25 and 60 – roughly my estimation of adult life.

“By the time I reach 75,” Emanuel says, “I will have lived a complete life. I will have loved and been loved. My children will be grown and in the midst of their own rich lives. I will have seen my grandchildren born and beginning their lives. I will have pursued my life’s projects and made whatever contributions, important or not, I am going to make. …. Dying at 75 will not be a tragedy.”

Emanuel says he is not asking to be euthanized, and he doesn’t plan on killing himself. If he lives longer than that, well, OK. And if he still feels creative, he might change his mind on the timing.

I think that Emanuel, whenever he dies, will have lived a long and productive life. So might we all. I would hope that at whatever age, people feel their lives have been worthwhile. My prayer is that no one’s death is a tragedy.

Emanuel’s acceptance of mortality is healthy. But his take on productivity points out what I think is wrong with our expectations of old age. The fact is that a lot of us will live beyond age 75. And not all of us enjoy the privilege, education and perspective of Emanuel. Not all of us will have accomplished as much, or have as much time to think about how we wish to be remembered.

Pipher writes: “Right now we are in crisis. We lack the housing arrangements, social structures, traditions and wisdom to make the last years of life manageable. No one wants to die surrounded by hired help. No one wants their parents to be anxious about money and in pain their last years. Yet these things happen all the time. There is an enormous gap between what we believe is right and what is practical.”

Measuring the worth of one’s life by one’s creative output devalues anyone beyond Emanuel’s curve. And that’s what I think is wrong with the argument. If we are to value the inherent worth and dignity of every person, that means people older than 75, too. That means we don’t measure people by their projects. That means our memories of them are not just part of their lives, but of their entire lives.

If we were to reconcile what is right and what is practical, we might feel more valued when we age. We might feel less anxious about our lives, or our children’s lives. We might come to all live in the same country.

There are systemic things that we can do to make this change. Changing our health care system is one of them. Securing retirement for everyone is another. Stepping out of the high-dollar funeral industry is something we can do right now. Hospice, home care, intergenerational learning, all of these things might change how we view age and life.

There are individual things we can do, too. Attitudinal changes that can allow us to find happiness in our lives, wherever we are.

I think of Louisa LeBlanc, right here in the front row. Louisa is proud to tell you she’s 90. Louisa, by my math, has turned the corner on the year, living out December and now back in January. If you speak with her, you will find this, there is a constant newness about her

She walks as much as she can. She exercises her body and her mind. She avoids medication. And at the same time she is happy to rely upon others, upon community, for help with transportation, or with entertainment or learning in the building she lives in, and here at church. If I can draw a conclusion, it is that Louisa does not measure her life in terms of output.

Pipher writes: “Those last years can be difficult, but also redemptive. As we care for our parents, we teach our children to care for us. As we see our parents age, we learn to age with courage and dignity. If the years are handled well, the old and young can help each other grow.”

I am not saying that if you simply change your attitude, you will die happy. From my limited experience, death is hard, no matter when or how it comes.

“Old age,” Pipher says, “especially in the last hard years, is really a search for a place in the universe.”

If I could change anything, it would be for you to know that you already have a place, that you are here, in your home country. You have been all along.