

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Walkers in Wisdom

Part Three of a series "Lifelong Discipleship"

Luke 6:20-31

November 2, 2025

In the year 1425, the artist Masaccio began painting a larger-than-life fresco on a wall of Santa Maria Novella Basilica in Florence, Italy. Over the two years it took to complete the work, the painter created a revolution in art, a monument of linear perspective. Masaccio was the first to master the illusion of three dimensions. For the first time, when observers looked upon it, looked up at it, they saw depth. The subject of the painting was the Trinity, a representation of the Son on the cross, the Father behind him, the Spirit as a descending dove. It was a monumental achievement from the day it was revealed. Masaccio died the next year, he was only 27 years old.

In *The Trinity*, he left behind the painting that would define his legacy and would change art. And there was something else. Rediscovered in 1952, hidden for centuries behind a large marble altar table pushed against the wall below the Trinity fresco, was the rest of the painting and the rest of the message the painting evokes. Below the vibrant, inviting scene of the Holy Trinity was a painting of a tomb with a buried skeleton lying prostrate. It's not macabre or ghoulish, but it is striking. The God of life above, an image of death below. Above the cadaver is a phrase painted, or as it appears etched in the marble of the painted tomb, a phrase in Italian addressed to you the observer, a message from the dead to the living: "I once was what you are, what I am you will also be." Of the whole dramatic painting, the words are the only part at eye level: *I once was what you are, what I am you will also be*. The skeleton was once a living person; the viewer will someday join the dead. So the painting implores the observer: Remember the gift of life and the one who gives it, the one who redeems it by the cross. It's known in Latin as a *memento mori*, "Remember you will die."

Rather than cover up the message, trying to hide it from our eyes, let us look straight upon it, death below, our life in God above. Today, we do that. On All Saints' Day, we remember those who have died—martyrs and saints, teachers and friends, parents and family members. It can be so tender to do so. Moreover, in doing so we remember, if we have eyes to see, we, too, will die. *I once was what you are, what I am you will be also*.

Two weeks ago, we reflected on discipleship for when we are young—the struggle to get our lives together. Last week, we reflected on discipleship for the long middle years—the struggle to give our lives away. Today, let us reflect on discipleship for our wisdom years—the struggle to age with grace and give our deaths away as a gift to others.

A number of writers have offered wisdom on the later years of our lives—Richard Rohr well known among them. Over these weeks, I've been following Ron Rolheiser¹, who describes the inner work of later life as the path to become an Elder or a Sophia—a man or woman of wisdom. As we move into our later years and keep our deaths before us, something profound can happen. We are not just withering to our useless and helpless end. We become Elder/Sophia in our older years and give our deaths away as a gift to others.

How? None of us can speak with personal authority—we live and die once, but we have the collective wisdom of those in the Spirit who have come before us and shown us the way and better ways. We walk in the steps of Elders and Sophias by living with the awareness that we will die. At some point, we move from writing our agendas to writing our obituaries and our wills. This awareness can generatively and generously shape everything else throughout our lives. This sounds in some ways obvious, but it is not obvious to many people, at least consciously and certainly not redemptively. It seems to many to be depressing and gloomy. If culture 600 or so years ago pushed a marble table in front of *memento mori*, our culture pushes a big shopping buggy in front of *memento mori*. Entire industries are fueled by desperation to forestall signs of aging in our skin and hair, and our libidos, our golf games, our sartorial choices. In an ad campaign, a life coach helps young people not act like their parents. It's witty, though sometimes it starts to hit a little too close to home for me these days.

Face to face with aging and death as gift if we can see them as such, let us receive encouragement from the invitation to remember the gift of union with God awaiting those who die in Christ. And let us receive the invitation to give this life until that day to others, from beginning to end. That we may become Elders and Sophias and maybe, by the grace of God, saints.

Rolheiser offers three big questions that I also introduce to us this morning along this path. Three reflective questions we can ask of ourselves as a way of giving our lives and deaths away, as integral to ageing gracefully. I will say up front, it takes a mature person with some grit and some faith to wrestle with these kinds of questions. Then again, it takes a person with some grit and some faith to just grow older. Growing older is not for the weak. Like Jacob, this wrestling may be a long, long night, and you may walk away with a limp by the end. But you walk away with a blessing, and you may walk away as an Elder, as a Sophia—a person of uncommon wisdom.

Three questions to wrestle with. First, *what did God want me to do in my life? Did I do it?*

All of us have some sense that our lives had some kind of purpose and some kind of meaning. Your work was hopefully integrated somehow into your understanding of what God wanted you to do with your life. I'm sure there's so much more. We should come to

¹ His teaching on life stages was augmented with the release of his latest book, *Insane for the Light*, just last week. Many quotes and ideas are from this book.

grips with it. What did God want me to do and how well or how neglectful have I been doing?

How did you care for your family, your neighbors, the land? When did you feel most alive, and how did you share life with others? Buechner speaks of our vocation at the intersection of our greatest joy and the world's great need. Didn't you feel alive the closer you came to that intersection?

We each have different paths in life and perhaps you never fully felt like you knew how your work was integrated in your faith. But I feel confident it was somewhere. In Luke 6, Jesus speaks of blessing, in particular blessing the poor. Whatever our jobs are, whatever our vocation is, blessing the poor, if you believe the gospel, is a major part of what God wants each of us to do. Who are the poor? The poor are those who, "for whatever reason, or circumstance, have no illusion of self-sufficiency." In our later years of life, we come to grow in a new kind of poverty, as we become dependent on others. In the eyes of Jesus, little children know the secret of the kingdom. The hungry, the thirsty, those in prison are stripped of their self-sufficiency, but not, in Christ of their dignity. At the heart of the gospel for all people, no matter your job or your area of work, blessing the poor is at the heart of our calling. Woe to the rich who neglect this. It's very likely that you bless the poor without even realizing it at the time.

This is the first question of *memento mori*: What did God want me to do in my life? For family, for friends, for work, for being a blessing to others, the poor. What did God want me to do in my life and how well did I do at it?

A second question: *To whom do I need to say, "I'm sorry"? What are my regrets?*

Ira Byock, a physician who works in palliative care, wrote a series of books about what ideally should happen during the process of aging and dying. He summarizes it all in a short series of phrases... The four things that are most important to say on our deathbed (if we have not said them with sufficient heart before) are "Please forgive me," "I forgive you," "Thank you," and "I love you." (Rolheiser, *Insane for the Light*, 37.)

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. We hear the words of Jesus differently in different phases of our lives, and certainly as we come to the end of our lives. Inhabiting and adopting the full expression of the Gospel of Grace is the long heart-work of the Elder, the Sophia who grows through the pain in becoming a person of grace and freedom. A person doesn't have to live to be old, a person does not have to live long at all to have been hurt, to hurt someone, and to have regrets. The messiness of human life when we are fallen and sinful is all around us and within us. Coming to grips with this is perhaps the ultimate challenge for us because it requires both humility and courage. Humility to accept where you've been hurt and whom you have hurt, and courage to open the door of your memory and heart to walk around in the space that holds the scars. It can be hard to forgive others and to forgive

ourselves. “Sometime before we die, we need to forgive those who have wounded or failed us, and to forgive ourselves for our own failures,” and where possible, seek the forgiveness of others. Rolheiser even suggests sometimes we even need to forgive God because life is sometimes just unfair. “We need to do this, so we do not die angry, bitter people.”

The second question of *memento mori*: to whom do I need to say I’m sorry? What are my regrets?

A third question for aging gracefully and preparing to give our deaths away: *Who, by name, do I want to bless before I die?*

In one respect, this is practical and material. Prepare for death by preparing for the end of life. What material goods do you leave behind and to whom do they go? Write it down—to your children, to the church—every one of us should leave something to the church; to other organizations or people you want to bless and gift. Write it down. Tell someone. Take comfort in your plans to leave a blessing. And, likewise, talk with someone about your medical directives for end-of-life care before medical crisis. This is liberating and compassionate. And, for any burial plans. Cremation, burial, a green burial. Discuss ahead of time with people who love you. Some of you will remember Rudy Kittlitz. Years before he died, he gave me and his children a sheet of paper with what he hoped would be his obituary (the second date was left blank), and with specific requests for his funeral and burial. Rudy’s ashes were scattered and buried and blessed in a small, sweet ceremony here under an oak tree at DaySpring. The lump in your throat to talk about this is a mountain to climb, but those who embrace it bless those who are left behind in huge and important ways. They get to join you in your journey. What a gift.

There’s the material matters and even more. Henri Nouwen in one of his last books says that at a certain point in our lives the question is no longer, “What can I still do so that my life makes a contribution?” It becomes “How can I live now so that my death will be an optimal blessing to my family, the church, and the world?” The question is no longer, “How much time still remains?”, but rather “How can I prepare now so that my dying will be a new way for me to leave a warm, nurturing, and blessing spirit behind for those who have loved me and whom I have loved?” (*Insane for the Light*, 12-13)

For his part, Rolheiser lives the wisdom he teaches. He writes, “A number of years ago when, after surviving cancer once before, the cancer returned, and my oncologist told me I probably had only thirty more months to live. Initially, that news rocked me to my roots. I sat in prayer, in a deep sadness. Eventually, I realized I needed a creed to make those last moments precious and to ensure that I did not miss the hour of my own death.

Here’s that creed:

I am going to strive to be as healthy, as I can, as long as I can.

I am going to strive to be as productive as I can, as long as I can.

I am going to make every day and every activity
 as precious and enjoyable as possible.
 I am going to strive to be as gracious, warm, and charitable as possible.
 I am going to strive to accept others' love in a deeper way than I have up to now.
 I am going to strive to live a more fully "reconciled life."
 No room for past hurts anymore.
 I am going to strive to keep my sense of humor intact.
 I am going to strive to be as courageous as I can.
 I am going to strive never to look on what I am losing
 but rather to look always at how wonderful and full my life has been and is.
 And I am going to, daily, lay all this at God's feet through prayer.

(Insane for the Light, 130-131)

Then he writes: It has been nearly ten years since that dire diagnosis and, thanks to God and some very good doctors, I am still alive and wonderfully healthy—but still daily praying that creed so as not to miss the hour of my death.”

I'm aware of a person in their 50's who visited a person who is 90. The ninety-year-old was talking about how he swims a mile every day. The 50-year-old exclaimed, "I hope I can do that when I'm your age!" To which the 90-year-old asked, "Well, are you doing it now?"

This is the question, in a hundred different ways, posed to each of us, in each of our stages of life---and there are all of them here--represented by the *memento mori*. With your death before you, are you living now? As a young person, wrestling to get your life together? As a maturing adult, struggling to give your life away? As an older person, aging in grace, becoming an Elder, a Sophia, and preparing to give your death away?

The truth is, none of us know when the hour comes. We pray for a good, long life, but none of us are promised it. Every day is a gift. Every day is a calling, to give our lives, to prepare for our death, and to live now in the eternal life that is union with God.

These questions posed over a lifetime, or a year, or a week, or even a single day:

What did God want me to do? Did I do it?

Who do I need to forgive? And what are my regrets?

Who, by name, do I want to bless?

Our lives, and by grace, our deaths, are caught up in the life and depths of the Trinity. Our eyes and hearts turned upward from death to life—this life and the life to come, This life, in thanksgiving for those lives that have gone before us, and this life as a blessing to those lives around us, and this life for those yet to come behind us. This is our prayer and our hope always, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Amen.