

I. Introduction

A. Fifteen years ago, I was quite taken by an observation made by a friend. He noted that he and his wife routinely categorized the Christmas letters they received. Their observation was that:

1. People in their 20s wrote about new and big. Their letters were full of stories about first jobs, first homes, first marriages and routinely assumed that next year would be bigger and better.
2. People in their thirties also wrote about new, but their letters were characterized by comments about how busy life had become.
3. Those writing in their forties stopped talking about new and started talking about “sames” – same job, same house, whatever. And that these letters not only advertised less excitement, but a few even contained a note of sadness. Struggles with kids or parents.
4. They went on to note that letters from those in their fifties and sixties often focused on grandkids or jokes about getting old. And those in their seventies and eighties and beyond were short, unless they contained medical updates.

B. I was quite taken by their observations. It got me thinking. It also got me looking at the Christmas cards I had written and the ones I'd received. I ended up turning my reflections into a sermon that generated as much feedback – both negative and positive – as any of the 600 I have ever preached.

C. Since then, I have been filing away observations about the way life unfolds – based on observations from my own life, from Bible study and from the various articles and books focused on this – especially from those who have famously divided life into stages, including: Piaget, Erickson and Fowler to name a few.

II. If you've been around you know that I've also talked a lot about friendships. I routinely ask people if they have 2 AM friends. After my stroke I wrote a book on the importance of friendships. Today I want to put these two topics together and think about friends over life. I am doing this because:

A. I do not think people are aware of how important relationships are – for today or tomorrow. I do not think people realize how much we need them.¹

B. I do not think people realize how important friends are to help us end well.²

1. If you study the Bible you will see that most people do not end well.³ I'm not talking about the fact that we grow old, slow down and eventually die. No matter how often people say things like, “70 is the new 40,” it's not. We age. Last week I had a post-stroke PR for a three-mile run. And I

called a longtime friend of mine – a fellow runner – and told him. And he was cheering me on and I said, “Can you imagine what we would have said 30 years ago if someone told us we’d be celebrating a 5K time in the high 20s?” I would have said, “shoot me now.” There is physical decline. But we are more than a body. We are people made in the image of God who can get better.

2. This is crazy talk in a culture where everyone wants to look or act like they are 25. Where everyone is trying to look and act younger than they are. But we should approach life from the promise that if we are doing the right things, we will be more like Christ tomorrow than today. More love, joy and peace. More Jesus and less Mike. In Phil 1:6 Paul states that He who began a good work in us – God – doesn’t stop. So, we can get better.

III. A few quick set up points:

A. The kind of survey of life stages that I am going to do forces generalizations. We are all unique. Some of you are single and some married and some divorced and some divorced and remarried and some have kids and some do not. I am making some observations based on norms. Please roll with it.⁴ And where that doesn’t help, think about – or pray for – your kids or grandkids, your friends and neighbors for whom it does apply.

B. An exercise like this forces us to read the Bible differently.

1. Some of the counsel we get from the Bible comes to us directly. Jesus (or Paul or Peter or Moses) says: do think this way, or do this and not that. Some comes to us in stories – David killing Goliath; Jesus walking on water. We are inspired or we make observations based on a specific person or event. This study is based on looking at lots of people’s lives over time.

2. There are teachings about friendship: Job’s friends figure prominently in his story; David and Jonathan have a friendship that is important to both of them; Solomon writes about friendship in Ecclesiasts 4: Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. Of course we can study Paul and Barnabas in Acts – their great friendship and the falling out.

3. And there are also examples about life stages that we could draw from specific people:

a) Moses’s life breaks out in three forty year segments: 40 years in Egypt learning to lead; forty years wandering around in the desert thinking he’s been set aside; and then forty years leading slaves in that desert.

- b) David's life is helpful because it starts so well and ends so badly because his bad choices catch up to him.
- c) Peter is a great example of someone who gets a slow start and then just keeps getting better and wiser.

4. Digging into people's lives is helpful and its one reason to read biographies. But I am looking for principles and trends and no one life does that for us. So, it requires a different kind of study. You look at common themes and big trends.

- a) And what you see when you do that is that most people in the Bible do not end well. Many get off to a fast start and then fade. In fact, of those where we have enough data to know how their life ends, two-thirds stumble. Sin derails them in a significant way. Which is tragic because the second half can be the time of greatest contribution.⁵

C. The last thing I'll say is that I am going to break things out along the decades. That's not perfect. We've lost most of the rites of passage that might help here.

1. I thought about letting you identify yourself based on the car you drive

- a) If you're driving a cheap car with bald tires – or a highly leveraged newer car – you are likely younger.
- b) If you're driving a minivan, face the facts. You're not as cool or as young as you'd like to think.
- c) If it's a high-end sports car – you're single or that's your midlife crisis car. You are in your fifties.
- d) If it's a large Buick Sedan or an RV, well, you get the picture.

2. When I talked about stages at Men's Fraternity I broke things out around football, saying:

- a) If you play most weekends you are in your 20s.
- b) If you play on Thanksgiving with your family – and don't get hurt, you are in your thirties.
- c) If you play once a year – on Thanksgiving with your 5 year old nephew Billy and 70 year old Aunt Sally – and you pull a muscle when you do – you are in your forties.
- d) If you watch football on TV – loudly complaining about your injuries as if they happened last week – you are in your fifties.

e) And if you nap through games, well, you get the point

3. In the end, I went with decades.

IV. Twenties

A. There is a lot being discussed on this space right now

1. A lot of talk about Millennials. Most of it is about how hard they are to manage.

2. In her popular TED talk, “Thirty is not the New Twenty,” practicing clinical psychologist and Berkeley professor, Peg Jay, calls the 20s the defining decade, noting that her practice is filled with people in their thirties who lament wasting their twenties.⁶

3. In his book, *Coming Apart*, Charles Murray laments that the middle class is dividing, with much of that showing up when people are in their twenties.

4. Last week’s weekend issue of *The Wall Street Journal* contained an article by Senator Ben Sasse from Nebraska, entitled, *Perpetual Adolescence*, in which he talks about the struggles of this group, noting that as of recently, more 18-34 year olds now live with their parents than anywhere else. He also notes that they have started to use the word adult as a verb.

a) As in, “Decided I couldn’t watch Netflix 8 hours straight and went to the grocery store instead. #adulting.”⁷

5. Clearly there are differences between being 25 today and 25, 25 years ago and even more from 2,500 years ago. But it’s not completely different. As Peg Jay points out in her TED talk, 30 is not the new 20. A woman’s biological clock hits it’s prime at 28.

B. It seems to me that twenty year olds can learn from three twentysomethings in the Bible.

1. Sampson is a great example of what not to do. His story – found in the Book of Judges – describes him as not only tall, dark and handsome, but was also very strong... and not very disciplined. Which made an easy mark for Delilah to pick off. She seduced him and it was game over.

2. Timothy and Esther, on the other hand, are twentysomethings wise beyond their years. Timothy needs to be told to step up a bit. Esther needs some encouragement as well. But they take it and live well. Unlike Sampson, they navigate the challenges of being young very well.

3. By the way, if you are in your twenties, I would be remiss if I didn't remind you that the Book of Proverbs was written for you. Solomon writes it for his sons when they are young men.

C. There is a lot more that might be said about or to the twenty-year-old, but we'll be moving quickly, so I will simply say, if I can get a 20 year old to listen I say: don't sleep around and avoid debt – a future version of yourself will thank the 20 year old version of you if you heed that counsel.

D. Also, "realize that you can make it to 30 on talent alone, but not much further. The things that play well in your twenties, or sound wise, don't work in your 30s. Finally, get a mentor! That is at least part of the reason Timothy and Esther shined. And it could be that the ones to approach are your parents' friends.

1. Your parents might be able to help, but that can be complicated for a host of reasons. And even if it might work, they probably will not start looking real smart for another ten years or so.

a) If they have followed the general plan they move from being your caretaker for the first 3 years of life, to being a cop for years 4 through 12. That means, you can cross the street on your own but only if you ask first. Then for ages 13 to 21 they function as a coach. You are playing the game. They are on the sidelines yelling advice and occasionally calling a time out to say, "here's the plan."

b) The final stage of parenting – which we have now moved into – is as a consultant. The hard thing here is keeping your mouth shut unless asked.

c) So, your parents might function as a mentor of sorts, but their friends can also step into that role.

d) We have been quietly piloting a mentoring program right now through one of our twentysomething groups. If you are really anxious to be a part of that, send me an email. We're taking baby steps right now.

e) When we were in our twenties we were essentially adopted by a couple in their 60s. They took us out to dinner, asked questions and over time started casually offering advice. He was a gruff retired Naval officer who stopped me from making several bad decisions. When I messed up he told me.

V. Moving on to the thirties – which are brought to you by the letter M. When we were in a small group during our thirties it was occasionally referred to as the 3Ms for marriages, mortgages and minivans.

A. Sheri and I got married in our early twenties and had three kids by the time we were very far into our thirties, so if I am asked to pick just one word of counsel for this decade, based on our experience it would be: survive.

B. Many of us spend some time sandwiched – i.e., taking care of kids and parents. Thirty is probably not it. But can be. For us it was all about kids – who were young – which meant they didn't cost that much but took a lot of time – and work – where you are trying to get established. And a lack of money.

C. If there is a moment that defined my thirties for me it happened one afternoon. I came home around 5, put Ben – who was 2 or 3 at the time – into a baby jogger and talked Austin into riding his bike and off we went so I could jog. I had two of the boys. I thought like I was banking some points. In my mind, I was giving her a break and securing for myself the ability to do some more work that evening – I had a project due.

1. When I got back home we opened the door and I heard Jason – who was all of a few weeks old – wailing away. Sheri was holding him and cooking dinner and it suddenly occurred to me. Now that we had three kids I wasn't necessarily doing her any favors by only taking two of them. We were outnumbered!

D. Based on my experience and what I've heard from others, one of the hard things that happen in our thirties we start to realize that we are not magically going to get smart. There is a moment when you realize, "Wow, I am now older than my Dad was when I was ten, and I thought he had it all dialed in. But I don't. And apparently I am not likely to anytime soon."

E. This is hard also because we tend to lose connection with old friends and may not have much time for new ones.

F. The biblical character I often point to for 30 year olds is David. Because I am thinking he was in his early thirties when he made some big mistakes:

1. He committed adultery; he multiplied wives; he had Uriah killed
2. He set in motion a chain of events that would lead him to pen Psalm 51 – his famous Psalm of Confession. But his life went down a trajectory that made his later years one heartbreak after the next.

VI. Forties

A. As I noted, the Christmas cards we write in our 40s have fewer firsts, more sames and maybe a touch of sadness.

1. It was at this point that my college roommate needed open heart surgery, which was unsettling for me. I wasn't just shaken for him. I was shaken that I now had friends old enough to have heart issues.

2. This is also often a decade when parents become ill.
3. And for many it's a time when the midlife crises might crash into our life when we realize, there are things I am never going to do. And some of my friends have passed me by. When did that happen.
 - a) I thought I made peace with ambition when I walked away from consulting. As a management consultant, I worked hard to get bigger clients and raise my rate. When I transitioned back into full-time pastoral work I said, "this is a calling not a career. I am not going to promote." And I felt like I had that under control. I looked to I Timothy 6 – "godliness with contentment is a great thing."
 - b) But then, I remember looking at a phone number for a friend who I had not called in a long time. And I realized that if I called he probably wouldn't call back, because he was now regularly rubbing shoulders with the president and speaking at the biggest events. And I realized – that's not going to be my path.
4. It's also often around this time that our kids are older and less controllable. And at some point you realize that you embarrass them.

B. If I get a chance to get a forty year old into the Bible, I will often point them to Ecclesiastes, where Solomon wrestles with the questions about life. What is the goal? What does a good life look like. A forty year old reads Ecclesiastes differently than a 20 year old.

C. Need for friends here to help us process what is going on and to cheer us on.

D. If I can offer advice without sounding like a wind bag, I tell forty year olds that their goal is to get ready to survive their fifties, by which I mean, to navigate the freedom heading their way in a manner that cultivates a greater love for God.

1. The Second Decade of Love

E. So let me jump there.

VII. In our fifties.

A. There are some good things here!

1. You get the house back!
2. We made our last college tuition payment.
3. Most fifty year olds start to grow more humble. Set backs have a way of beating it into most of us.

B. But there are hard things. And it's not just that:

1. Your sense of fashion and your hairline now resemble your parents. And you realize that any effort to look cool will not only not work, you will look creepy. No one wants to see a fifty-year-old in skinny jeans.
2. You embarrass your kids every time you walk into the room.
3. Your boss may be younger than you.
4. More friends in crisis. I have so many friends facing challenges right now I have started to think it's me.
5. If there are doubts about your mortality, they are put to rest.

C. Seriously, we have found that life gets easier because the kids are gone. The house stays clean. You are not racing to sporting events and concerts. Fewer money stresses

D. As a pastor, I have watched a lot of fifty year olds fade spiritually. It is one of the more depressing things I deal with. Some step it up spiritually. But some fade. I have often been surprised on both fronts. My Dad had a great fourth quarter.

1. Once the kids are off the radar, some pick friends who reinforce a life of leisure not service.
2. It is worth noting, it's not just that we are likely to become like our friends, we are likely to pick friends who reinforce the life we want. This can be good or bad.

VIII. I am not qualified to say much about sixties, seventies and beyond

A. For many today, this is an era of leisure or great service, or both.

B. At some point, it becomes a season of lasts.

1. This is the last time I will visit this place.
2. This might be the last car I buy.

C. Caleb is the patron saint here. He shows up initially in Numbers when he makes the minority report with Joshua. Forty years later he famously asks for a difficult assignment when he was quite old.

D. In our sixties we start to think about death.

1. How will I die?

2. Who will I die with?
3. And if I die who will be there to care of my spouse?

E. And we also start to wonder if we've made a mark. Have I made a difference on this planet? Is the world a better place because I was born?

F. I recently interacted with a man who has been doing life coaching for twenty years. And the question was: Who finishes well, who doesn't and what makes the difference? He has done a lot of work on this and written about it. He said several very interesting things.

G. He thought the two things that would be important to ending well – talent and money – do not factor in at all. Those with more are no more likely to finish well than those without.

1. Most had a moment of clarify and focus in their forties or fifties, where they refocused – he calls it a midlife renewal. Bob Buford wrote about Halftime. Peter Drucker
 - a) He noted that there's a big difference between spending your second half sort of "sloppy busy" with a mix of board roles and volunteering, and knowing and focusing on your calling.
2. They were adaptable – rather than become set in their ways and grumpy old people. Which he said was based on the idea that it wasn't about them so they could change.
 - a) The fruit of their life was now growing on someone else's tree.
3. They had encouragement and support:
 - a) They surrounded themselves with sources of encouragement.
 - b) He noted that life is inevitably filled with opposition, failure and discouragement. You need friends to help you finish well in spite of them.

IX. So what do you do with this? I'd like to suggest you think along three lines:

A. Take a friend inventory. Are you well set up for the next decade? Are you investing in friends? Are you a good friend?

B. I'd love for you to see if there are ways where you are stuck. Stage theory experts generally say, people get stuck along the way and stop growing. Have you stopped?

C. I'd like you to take advantage of the age you are in. There are upsides to every stage. Just because our culture celebrates youth doesn't mean we walk in lock step alongside them

X. Wrap Up

A. Mike challenged us to think about relationships – friendships in particular – noting how important they are and how we should invest in them. This is nowhere more true than when it comes to God.

B. In John 15 Jesus says:

1. ¹²“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.¹⁴ You are My friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.

C. That is an amazing promise. Clearly, we need friends – and we especially need a growing friendship with God.

D. If you would like to talk about that, or pray with anyone about anything...

¹ We become like the things we love and the people we hang out with. If you had better friends you'd be a better person.

² A third reason I talk about this is because as the family steps back and people become more isolated, there are only a few options for who or what steps in. The church, friends or the government.

³ Howard Hendricks noted that of the lives of men and women in the Bible that there is sufficient data to follow, two-thirds of the biblical figures finished badly.

⁴ We are all different. We not only have different abilities. We are on different trajectories for all kinds of reasons – such as health or marriage. A person who is 25 and married may have more in common with someone who is 45 and married than someone who is 25 and single.

⁵ In *Falling Forward*, Richard Rohr wrote: In my opinion, the first half of life is no more than finding the starting gate. It is merely the warm-up act.. We are summoned to the second half, not commanded to go, perhaps because each of us has to go on this path freely, with all the messy and raw material of our own unique lives. But we don't have to do it, nor do we have to do it alone.

⁶ She notes that because the value of youth has risen and the value of adulthood has dropped, most twenty-somethings are not anxious to grow up. She argues that they end up regretting that.

⁷ Ben Sasse, “Perpetual Adolescence: And What to Do About It,” *WSJ*, Sat / Sun, May 6-7, 2017.