

We meet up with people of all ages in our Gospel text today: a baby, a young mother, a slightly older father, and two elders—Simeon and Anna. It is the interaction between these humans of differing generations that creates such delight in our lesson, with the focus particularly on the oldest generation. All of us are getting older every day, and in our community and church we have a number of people who fall into some definition of “older”. How do we feel about that, how do we look upon the older members of our society? My Dad just turned 94 recently. He’s doing great, living in his own apartment, driving himself around town, and so on. Every year for about a decade, he’s created a rhyming motto for his birthday. This year it was: “94 and still standing on the floor. Hope to be alive to make 95!” This reminded Phil of a Pickle’s comic strip in which the old guy, Earl, tells his old guy friend, “I overheard someone talking on his cellphone yesterday. He said it’s the duty of old people to die and get out of the way.” “That’s pretty cold-hearted”, the friend replies. Earl responds, “My new motto is: “Old, in the way, and we’re here to stay!” Perhaps a motto many of us might wish to adopt! But the comic strip does point out some of the interesting ways our culture views aging and the aged--are they a problem, in the way, no longer of any value? I love how the title of a book I just learned about, written by Dr. William Thomas, captures the attitude of many in our culture; it’s called—“What are Old People *For?*” That is the question that lurks behind much of the agism in our culture, isn’t it? But encouragingly, this book carries the subtitle, “How Elders will Save the World.” Maybe old people are around for a reason; maybe they still have much to contribute. Certainly, the Elders in our lesson today, Simeon and Anna, continue to live on with a sense of purpose and play their part in saving the world.

Let’s back up a bit and understand what is going on in this text. What has brought Mary and Joseph to the Temple? Jewish law prescribed that firstborn sons be presented to the Lord and an offering of thanksgiving and sacrifice be made, at the temple in Jerusalem, according to religious custom. This traditionally happened when the first-born son was around 40 days old. The law also prescribed that a mother, after birth, should undergo a ritual of purification. Neither of these particular rituals resonates in the same way in the 21<sup>st</sup> C., and indeed, contemporary Jewish rituals have changed significantly, too. Nevertheless, the point is that Mary and

Joseph, in accordance with this custom of their time, made the journey to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill these rituals. Many diverse faiths around the world have some sort of recognition of gratitude and blessing for newborn children before the Divine; it's in our DNA to do so. Mary and Joseph are honoring the tradition of their faith, and that gives us some food for thought, I believe. They have made the effort to enter a particular sacred space in order to participate in a particular sacred ritual. They *valued* this tradition, it *mattered* to them. They lived in a religiously oriented society, but we continue to see that even to this day in our *relatively secular* society. Being present in sacred space and participating in sacred rituals still resonates within us. Holy Baptisms, First Communion, Confirmation, Memorial Services, healing services, weddings---while some of these may happen outside of church walls or apart from faith traditions, we continue to see a strong pull towards having such rituals happen in accordance with our faith tradition and within a sacred space like our church building or memorial garden. We *still* think this is a unique place, with a particular connection to God, faith, and community. Which is why, for example, when we are going to use new communion ware for the first time, as we are today, it's *significant*. We don't just say in passing, "hey, look, we got some new dishes." We instead will say a prayer of dedication for these vessels and cups, because they have been created by hand by a local artisan for use in a sacred space for a sacred purpose. We recognize that there is some gravitas to what happens within these walls. It matters. And, further proof of that is this---I notice that if we do a service that has a unique element, like lighting candles on All Saint's Day, for instance, a great many people, of all ages, want to come forward and light a candle for someone they loved and lost within the sacred context of this place and that ritual. Which tells us what? That the Church of Jesus at large, and this particular church, are not obsolete! We are relevant, wanted, and valued. What *we* do matters. That's true now, and it was true in our Gospel lesson for this day, when Mary and Joseph bring their baby Jesus to the Temple in an act of gratitude towards God. It mattered to them that they entered that sacred place and performed a sacred ritual. How their story continues, though, is a good reminder to all of us---you never know what might happen when you come to church!

Because Mary and Joseph have some surprising and unexpected encounters within the Temple. The young couple with their first-born infant encounter two elders who were evidently *not* Scandinavian

Lutherans, because they are immediately *extremely* interactive with this little family they've never met previously. Now, I will grant you that babies have a way of breaking down barriers, even *among* Scandinavian Lutherans. When the Hanson's are here with their baby back there, I simply resign myself to knowing that there's no way I can compete. The people sitting around them will spend their time during my sermon making goo-goo eyes at the baby; I could just as well sit down. It's a price I'm willing to pay, of course, given the joy that a baby brings to everyone in the community. We see that kind of joy in Simeon in our lesson. Simeon was apparently quite an elderly man, maybe nearing death, and renowned for his righteousness and his devout faith. The Spirit of God led him to the Temple when Mary and Joseph were there, but we gain the impression that Simeon spent a lot of time in the Temple. Simeon sees the baby, recognizes that in this child, God is fulfilling a promise to Israel and to Simeon, and he hastens up to them in a mighty hospitable way and actually takes the baby from them into his arms. That might not go over quite so well in our boundaries-conscious era. But, Simeon, apart from not being restrained by Midwestern rules of polite conduct, is also over his head with elation: God had promised Simeon that he would not die before seeing the Messiah, the anointed one, and now God has kept that promise. Not only does Simeon take this complete stranger's child in his arms, he bursts into a peon of praise, like someone in a musical theatre number. He thanks God that he has been allowed to die in peace, having seen the promised Messiah who will be a glory to the Jewish people but also a light of revelation to the Gentiles: this child matters to the whole world, in fact. Understandably, Mary and Joseph were amazed at these words; even after the various angelic visits and strange circumstances surrounding their son's birth, they are still struggling to get a hold on Who He is. Most parents are trying to get a handle on that with a new baby, especially their firstborn; but Mary and Joseph had a steeper learning curve in that sense than anyone else in history. Simeon blessed the young parents, an excellent idea, in my opinion, because who is in greater need of blessings than new parents? And then he crashes the party of joy and amazement with some rather terrifying words to Mary: "this child will change the world, and a sword shall pierce your own soul, too". Is that what a new mother wants to hear? I don't think so. Those who bring about change to the world generally lead short and volatile lives. Most parents hope for a successful and happy life for their child, not necessarily that their

child changes the world. And words about swords piercing one's soul are hardly cheering either. But how true it is that to be a parent means having your heart metaphorically pierced by any number of sharp implements throughout your lifetimes together. And again, while this is true for all parents, it would be particularly true for Mary, who apparently was a widow by the time of Christ's arrest and execution. Imagine the pain and sorrow she had to bear alone! Any mother whose child has died an unjust, untimely, and violent death can understand a bit of the grief Mary will experience. So, Mary and Joseph hear both good and bad news from this elderly man they just happen upon in the Temple. Not at all what they were expecting, I imagine, when they walked through the doors.

And the surprises keep coming! Next comes Anna, the prophet, who apparently hangs out at the Temple much of the time as a widow of 84, certainly a great age to attain in that time and place. Anna also approaches them, although perfect strangers, and begins to praise God and speak about the role of this new child in the redemption of Israel. What a day for Anna! What a day for Simeon! And-- wow, what a day in the life of Mary and Joseph! Enter the Temple to perform your religious duties and before you know it, strange elderly people are hugging your child and bursting into song and praising God and making some pretty huge statements about your child's future importance. You never know what will happen when you enter a sacred space, do you?

So, what's wonderful about this story? Here's what I think. We see a young family with a baby in their place of worship. We see some devout elders that welcome and interact with that young family and baby in that place of worship. Both men and women are featured, too; not only are Mary and Joseph both mentioned, but both Simeon and Anna play a part. So, this worship space in Jerusalem is a sacred place where men and women, young and old, come together and interact and exchange blessings with one another. The presence of the baby brings great joy to Anna and Simeon; and these older devout folks of faith offer blessings to the baby and parents. As these differing generations interact, it's a win/win situation. And I think it is lived out right here, in Knife River, Minnesota, in the year of our Lord 2025.

Our congregation remains a place for all people of all ages. Certainly, the time in our congregational history when children vastly outnumbered adult worship members is long gone, as it is in most congregations, but we continue to welcome and nurture and educate children and teens, even as we look to be sensitive to the needs of the elderly. Four children received their First Communion a month ago; in the last month, confirmation students and teens have served as communion servers or lectors; we look for generations to be a blessing to one another, and this place is absolutely one of the places where that can happen. Remember the book title, “What are old people for?” We could just as well ask, “what are toddlers for?” “What are teen-agers for?” “What are *any of us* for?” The fact is, we are all here for a purpose; God blesses and works through us all, from the oldest to the youngest to the most middlest of us....we are a source of grace for one another. We all have a part to play in saving the world, with Christ as our Lord. What’s *our motto*, regardless of age? We are the “heart of the community”. We are here to be God’s heartbeat for each other, our community, and our world. Amen.