

Senior Living
Ruth 1 (selected)
May 2, 2021
Dorothy Boulton

This past week, Erickson Living Communities – one of which is our local retirement community, Charlestown, – declared it was renaming its organization. In order to “reflect its identity serving a population that’s projected to double to 98 million people by 2060,” it is now known as Erickson SENIOR LIVING.”¹

I don’t know if they did this by design, but this announcement coincides with the beginning of Older Adult Week – Older Adult Month, in fact. It’s a time to become aware of issues facing aging adults, as well as a time to celebrate them in the life of our nation and, for us, in the life of our church. I had been aware that there is a Presbyterian organization called POAMN – Presbyterian Older Adult Ministries Network – but I hadn’t known, until recently, that the first Sunday in May is designated by our national church as Older Adult Sunday.

Given the tumultuous year of the pandemic that has affected older adults so harshly, this is indeed an appropriate day to acknowledge the pain and the loss and the grief for seniors, and their loved ones, – their neighbors, their families, – during these past many months of COVID-19.

There has been something that hasn’t changed since this morning’s text was written, thousands of years ago. That is, the vulnerability of older adults and the care & commitment offered and shared by their families and those who love them. We’ve heard how Naomi, a widow, was left without a social and economic safety net. As a foreigner in the land of Moab, and with the loss of both husband and sons in a patriarchal system, Naomi was a vulnerable and likely impoverished senior adult. In the midst of famine, she prepares to go back to her country – the land of Judah – to find food. We know that she has two daughters in law, also widows, who Naomi tries to send back to their mother’s homes...to a place where they can be cared for. One daughter-in-law eventually does leave Naomi, but Ruth declares her faithfulness and commitment to her mother-in-law. In some of the most poignant and poetic words in scripture, Ruth says:

Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will be I be buried.

Their words to each other convey such devotion and love. Even in the midst of grief – the acknowledgement of their mutual loss – and in their shared tears, we can hear how they long for the wellbeing of each other. “May God grant that you find security,” “May God deal kindly with you.”

The tears. The grief. The loss and heartache. The desire for something better – for health and wholeness, for joy, for security for one’s beloved family...this is a text for our time.

We have lived through trauma caused by the coronavirus pandemic for over a year. Senior adults and their loved ones have suffered deeply. COVID-19 is a deadly virus, and one that is strongly correlated with age. With most diseases, the likelihood of death after infection goes up about 3% for each year of life. For COVID-19, the likelihood of death went up 9 – 10% per year. In other words, the older one is, the more likely one is to die if one contracts the disease.ⁱⁱ

I’m sure you recall what we were seeing in the news a year ago – we were horrified as COVID-19 swept through nursing homes and other similar facilities, taking the lives of thousands of older adults with alarming speed. Several days ago, The New York Times reported on that toll and the statistics are gut-wrenching. The report informs us that to this point *at least 182,000 coronavirus deaths have been reported among residents and employees of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities for older adults in the United States. As of April 28, the virus has infected more than 1,363,000 people at some 32,000 facilities. Deaths related to COVID-19 in these facilities account for about 32% of our country’s pandemic fatalities.*

Here in Maryland, 40% of the state’s deaths are linked to nursing homes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Throughout this pandemic nightmare, it was agonizing for loved ones who had to say goodbye to parents, spouses, grandparents who were hospital rooms hooked up to ventilators. Since they were not allowed to visit, many said farewell while a kind nurse held up their phones to the ears of the dying. They could not embrace them, could not kiss them, could not hold their hands. So many dying alone.

There are other grievous effects of the pandemic. For many older adults, whether they were living in residential communities, or in their own houses and apartments, it has been a year away from families and neighbors and loved ones. Protecting themselves meant isolation – keeping far away from family, visiting with grandchildren only by phone calls or online, having groceries delivered from the store. Those in retirement homes, for example, had their meals brought to their rooms by the staff. There was no

visiting, no gathering in the dining room, no social activities. The loneliness of this past year is incalculable.

“It’s been so long since I’ve had a hug,” some lamented. “It’s not the same to talk on the phone.”

For those affected by dementia, the consequences have also been heart-wrenching. Not understanding why their loved ones can’t visit, they only know that they’ve been abandoned. People seemed only to “quit coming.” The lack of interaction and stimulation only worsened their memory loss and the ability to communicate. And again, for family members, not being able to visit and knowing the negative effects this was all having, was agonizing and painful.

And even on levels that are less intense, but nonetheless costly, were the doctor’s appointments that had to get put off. It was the hospital surgeries and recoveries that couldn’t allow for family members to visit or to check in or to ensure that their loved ones were receiving appropriate care.

This has been a year of suffering for so many.

A mercy...a great, great mercy...is that the death rate for senior adults since vaccination began has gone way down. And what a joy and miracle it has been for people to finally be reunited with their parents and grandparents after all this time apart.

The New York Times ran a beautiful series of photographs documenting people reuniting with their loved ones. They told how wonderful it’s been to share embraces, but also how difficult this past year has been and how they are still coping with their grief and loss.

“Aging is a process,” said Carolyn Tucker, seeing her mom Catherine O’Mahoney after more than year. “Aging is a process and every moment is precious. We missed all of that time. We were happy to see each other but it was bittersweet.”^{iv}

I’m grateful to Melissa Lambdin for allowing us to share the photo in today’s bulletin. It’s her embracing her mom, Bea Myers, after 14 months apart. What beauty. What joy. What love.

The story of Naomi and Ruth is a story we've been living this year. Grief. Heartache. Death. Loss. Suffering. Connection. Commitment. Devotion. Companionship. Faithfulness. Hope on the journey.

Though we will continue to walk with those whose grief is still fresh and who are mourning still, we proclaim the faithfulness of God who walks with us. And we offer our prayers for so many in this time of dying and living.

So, I invite you to join with me and with one another as we lift our prayers to a God who is our companion through heartache and hope.

Let us pray:

God of time, God beyond our time –
we pray for older adults...

We pray for those in nursing homes and facilities, and for the workers and staff who care for them.

We pray for families and neighbors who grieve the time apart from their aging loved ones.

We pray for those who grieve loved ones who have died during the pandemic, for the loss they feel, for the pain of not being able to be by their side.

We rejoice with those older adults who have adapted to new technologies and have new ways to connect and we pray for those struggling with those connections and are feeling left out.

We pray for those who are feeling depressed or isolated. We give thanks for those who worked tirelessly to enable us to gather together again, and for those who've kept senior adults connected, fed, cared for in many different ways during this pandemic.

For the reunions of children and parents, for the joyous hugs of grandchildren, we are indeed grateful.

As we gather at your table, we give thanks for the fellowship of all ages, one family – united as your children. Feed us and inspire us in body and spirit, Lord. May we be like Ruth and Naomi, committed to the well-being of one another, as we trust our whole lives to you.

You have been there to hear our bawling cries, and you are there as we grow old.

Be in our living. Be in our dying. Be our eternal home.

In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Baltimore Sun, April 28, 2021 Lorraine Mirabella, “Catonsville-based Erickson Living becomes Erickson Senior Living.”

ⁱⁱ Kate Eschner, New York Times April 25, 2021, “Measuring a Nation’s Loss by the Years COVID Stole from its Families.”

ⁱⁱⁱ “Nearly One-Third of United States Coronavirus Deaths are Linked to Nursing Homes,” New York Times, updated April 28, 2021

^{iv} NYT: Sarah Mervosh, April 28, 2021, “ Joy, Love Grief: How it Looks When Families Reunite”