Facing Alzheimer’s and Dementia
A sermon by
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Text: II Corinthians 4:17-5:1

We joke about dementia because it is no laughing matter. Probably we are more anxious about losing our minds than losing any feature of our physical health. How many times have you heard – or said – that any kind of physical impairment is more tolerable than the loss of your mental abilities? And of all the bad news that your doctor could give you, what are the words most feared of all? Alzheimer’s.

Although Alzheimer’s disease was first documented in the scientific literature nearly 100 years ago, it really only entered our common vocabulary within the last fifteen years. And it was only after President Reagan’s poignant letter to the nation back in 1994 that Alzheimer’s entered the center stage in the media and public policy discussions.

We have always known people, of course, who became more forgetful and easily confused in their advanced years. But Alzheimer’s is different. It can afflict an otherwise healthy person of ANY age. It brings tragic, progressive, and mental and physical impairment. And it threatens the health and wealth of the whole family, too.

But what is Alzheimer’s disease? We use it in everyday conversation as a shorthand for any sort of dementia, but Alzheimer’s is but one form of impairment of a person’s ability to use his mind. Dementia – the progressive loss of mental capacities – is a common symptom of the aging process. Alzheimer’s, on the other hand, is a form of dementia that is NOT merely a function of the normal aging process. But Alzheimer’s does occur more frequently among older persons, and as the older segment of our society grows in numbers, so do the number of persons afflicted with Alzheimer’s.

All forms of dementia bring the loss of mental capabilities. As Alzheimer’s progresses it also brings physical impairments, too. Many in the medical community now identify Alzheimer’s as a terminal illness. Alzheimer’s may already be the 4th or 5th leading cause of death.

It is estimated that 50% of the dementia cases among the elderly is a function of Alzheimer’s. About 20% of dementia cases are the result of strokes, with another 20% of dementia cases being the result of a combination of Alzheimer’s AND having suffered multiple strokes. At one time Alzheimer’s was thought to be rare. Now we know that 5-7% of the population over 65 – or over two million people – have Alzheimer’s. The figure rises to 20% for those over the age of 80. Alzheimer’s reduces life expectancy by one third. Up to 58% of the residents of nursing homes suffer from Alzheimer’s.

The social and economic effects of all forms of dementia, and especially Alzheimer’s, can be devastating. Most Alzheimer’s patients will need institutional care, but few families are financially prepared for such a burden. As actor David Hyde Pierce – whose father has Alzheimer’s – testified before Congress recently, Alzheimer’s threatens to bankrupt the country.

That’s a little recap of what Alzheimer’s is. But as anyone who has lived with Alzheimer’s knows, there is so much more to Alzheimer’s than clinical diagnoses and statistical data. Ronald Reagan said he was entering that “long sunset at the end of life”. Caregivers are more likely to speak of the “36 hour day”, as one guide to living with Alzheimer’s describes it: the demands and the disappointments and
burdens of Alzheimer’s can be simply overwhelming. When one you love is an Alzheimer’s patient, you grieve for his mental death, even as you continue to carry responsibilities for preserving his physical life. It’s like losing a parent or a husband or a wife twice – separated by a lonely journey through the valley of the shadow of deathlike dementia.

What does our faith and the Bible have to say about dementia and Alzheimer’s? Nothing directly. The writers of the Bible viewed old age as a blessed time of life, and the aged as the wise ones of society. Few people lived into what we consider old age, but those who did were revered and honored. The ancients simply did not know much about a lot of what we live with on a daily basis.

But our Biblical faith does have a lot to say to us who live with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia. And the Bible has a lot to say to those who love and care for those afflicted by such conditions.

Let us declare at the outset that from the perspective of faith, there is no stigma attached to Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia. These are illnesses, not divine afflictions. There is no reason to hide the burden you carry as a person with Alzheimer’s, or as the caregiver of someone afflicted. There is no shame to having these illnesses, just as there is no shame to having chickenpox or heart disease or cancer. Yes, they are terrifying illnesses, but the illnesses themselves are terror enough.

Which leads to a fundamental theological affirmation: no matter what illness befalls you – including those which rob you of your mental capacities, YOU ARE AND REMAIN A CHILD OF GOD. As our confession puts it, “In life and in death we belong to God.” One does not cease to be a child of God, simply because he can no longer offer a verbal affirmation of faith. One is not excluded from God’s care or God’s kingdom by mental or physical impairment of any sort. That may seem obvious. But we live in a world which treasures youth and intelligence and physical beauty, and we receive messages everyday that say in essence, if you are not youthful and bright and attractive, you are not really a human being. Nothing could be farther from God’s truth! You ARE a child of God!

Because we are ALL children of God, Our faith calls us to extend respectful care and dignity to those of our sisters and brothers with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia. As Jesus says in the great judgement scene of Matthew 25, the way we treat the least important members of society is the way we treat Christ. For it is only when we see the “least of these” as our brothers and sisters that we can recognize them as fellow children of God.

The respectful dignity we are called to extend to those with forms of dementia comes on at least two levels: personal and societal: we are called to personally extend God’s compassionate care to those with dementia. We cannot shut them out of our lives, abandoning them to God’s care alone. God’s care comes through our hands and hearts.

We begin with our own personal, face to face care. But our care is not enough: as citizens and as a society, we need to support changes in public policy to insure that all of our citizens receive quality health and custodial care. We must not rob any of our sisters and brothers of their God-given dignity!

Our personal compassionate care has as a primary focus the caregiver: the careGIVER needs to RECEIVE our care. Our friends who are caring for a husband or wife or mother or father with Alzheimer’s need us as much as their suffering loved ones need them. Maybe more so. The church’s role as the living body of Christ is to extend love and support and acceptance to the caregivers of Alzheimer’s and dementia patients. Our role is to care for the caregivers.
And it is a two way street: caregivers, we want to help you. And we need you to let us help you. You do not have to do it all alone! That is why we in the community of faith, in YOUR community of faith are here. We need each other. We can help each other. As the folk song puts it, “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord…we will walk with each other, we will walk side by side, and together we will guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride, and they will know we are Christians, by our love, by our love.”

Our support and care for the caregiver extends to those last and sometimes most painful decisions when it is time to let go. Often there comes a time when a person’s dignity is best preserved by letting one die in peace. I do not think our faith obligates us to preserve the body at all costs through heroic and artificial means. Our affirmation that in life and death we belong to God frees us to let go.

Which leads to one last, but most important affirmation about human lives afflicted with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia: we need to remember that it is resurrection, and not eternal youth or even eternal life that is the primary expression of Christian hope and faith. None of us will live forever. We will all die. And if we live long enough, we will experience some form of dementia and many of us will experience profound dementia. Many of us will be Alzheimer’s patients. We will all die. But by the mighty and powerful grace of God, we shall be risen and restored in Christ! As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, this body will die, but we shall be raised with Christ. It is natural to look for the visible and concrete, that which is seen, as we yearn for the joys of life at its best, but such life, even at its very best, will not last forever. And this present life, whether it be in joy or in sorrow, in strength or in weakness, in affliction or in glory, is not all there is. Within the benevolent and loving power of God there is hope for wisdom beyond all human understanding and for life beyond all human comprehension.

One of my favorite Christmas stories is by Ann Barr Weems. In her book Family Faith Stories, Anne remembers Miss Hester, her childhood baby sitter. Ann and her siblings called Miss Hester "Nee Nee". Nee Nee was in Ann's home frequently in her younger years. Even after Ann and her siblings no longer needed a baby-sitter, Nee Nee came to visit.

As the years progressed, Nee Nee aged, and became quite forgetful. Nee Nee spent one Christmas in the home of the Barrs', sleeping in the same room with Ann. In the middle of the night, she woke up, and said, "Where am I?" Ann got up right away and said, "Nee Nee, it's all right. It's Ann. You're at our house. It's Christmas morning."

Nee Nee had a bewildered look on her face, the look of a lost child. Ann felt as though through the years the two had exchanged places: Nee Nee had gone from caretaker to being the one in need of care, and Ann had gone from needing care to being the caretaker.

Nee Nee looked at Ann and said, "Well, I don't know where I am, but the good news is you're with me." (page 135)

Friends: The good news is that through us God can be with you and all those whom you love and for whom you pray. That is the good news FOR YOU. Now, by the grace of God, may YOU be good news for your brothers and sisters in the Lord. AMEN.

**Recommended Resources:** Alzheimer’s: a caregiver’s guide and sourcebook, by Howard Gruetzner

*The 36-hour day: A family guide to Alzheimer's Disease, Related Dementing Illnesses and Memory loss in Later Life,* by Nancy L. Mace & Peter V. Rabins.