Some years ago I was invited to be the speaker at the United Church of Christ in Preble, New York. This group was comprised of about 60 church members, most of whom were over the age of 65. The theme for the day was "The Gifts of Aging." When I was first called and asked if I might offer a program on this topic, I found myself at first thinking not about the gifts of aging but about all the ways we are bombarded daily by articles on the internet and our phones, commercials on TV, ads in newspapers and magazines, and the opinions of people all around us, suggesting that aging is something to try to avoid and deny at all costs.

What have you picked up about our culture’s attitude toward aging? Some of the messages we get are: it's not good to grow old - so hide any signs of aging any way you can. Use cosmetics, plastic surgery, and hair dyes, and lie about your age. Other messages are: aging people are a burden to our society, the older we are the less valuable we are, youth is far superior to age, and to grow old is to grow ill, unattractive, and mentally incompetent. How do you like that picture?

We might think this pessimistic attitude toward the aging is a recent phenomenon, but as early as the 1800's there was a change in attitude toward the elderly. Before then, during Revolutionary times, there was still a great deal of respect for the oldest members of the community. After all, most people didn't live past the age of 35, so if you made it into your 60's, 70's or 80's you were considered something of a national treasure! You know those white wigs that you always see in the portraits of George Washington? They were worn by young men to make themselves appear older and wiser! But then by the early decades of the 1800's the wigs went out of fashion, and older men and women actually began to dye their hair to look younger. Words like “codger,” “old timer” and “geezer” crept into our vocabulary.

While this pessimistic attitude toward aging is all around us, we who follow Christ don't have to take our cues from our culture. What about taking our cues from God? What is God's view of the aging process? To find the answer to this, let's take a look at Abraham and Sarah, whose story we find in the Book of Genesis. Now this is a very interesting
Father’s Day story! Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah nearing 90, when God came to them and made a startling prediction. God said, "I'm going to bless you both and make you the parents of an entire nation. For now it's time for Sarah to become pregnant!" Now imagine what the conversation would be like in your home if the oldest woman in your family announced that God had just told her she would become pregnant with a child. Yet God did the implausible, incomprehensible thing, and Sarah, at age 90, gave birth to a beautiful baby boy named Isaac, meaning laughter, because this incredible happening in Sarah's old age made her laugh with astonishment!

Now whether we take this story to be literally true, or as a metaphor for God’s ability to do the impossible, we all can learn something. We learn how God works in the lives of people who think life is just about over. We can learn that God has a very noble opinion of people no matter what their age is. God is a God of miracles and creativity and wonderful surprises. This God is always inviting us to become pregnant - male and female alike - not pregnant with a physical child necessarily, but pregnant with a new dream, a new idea, a new attitude, a new hope.

No one at any age is outside the scope of God's promises; we all can and should expect new adventures! When Abraham thought his life was all washed up, God called Abraham to a new life, giving him a new name and leading him out of the old country and into the new, with a promise of countless blessings. And God called Sarah to new life by announcing that she, who considered herself barren, would indeed become pregnant in her old age. Scripture reveals a God who considers white hair a crown, old age a reward, and experience the deposit of wisdom. Old age is a lookout from which we can see most clearly what truly matters in life – loving, serving, and blessing others.

I had an interesting dream one night. In this particular dream, a man lay very sick and dying in a bed. I recognized him as someone I knew, a very devout Christian, but he was exhausted. His heart had worn out; he was all used up. The interesting thing was that his bed was situated not in his bedroom or in a hospital, but instead in an artist's studio. He was surrounded by people who loved him and also by artist's paints and easels with canvases in various stages of completion in every corner of the room. The room was full of windows with a gentle light pouring through. As I looked at the man, I noticed that he was healing, not by doctors or medicine, but just by being in this room full of loving friends and art supplies and the light streaming through the windows.

As I pondered this dream, I sensed that the Holy Spirit was revealing something very important about growing older. Unfortunately, many of us buy into the negative messages our society communicates. We think that as our bodies grow older, our spirits do too. But we couldn't be further from the truth. "Though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day..." Paul told us in 2 Corinthians 4. The key to healing our negative views of growing old may be to go to the easel and get our paints out. Of course the easel is figurative – it is a symbol of our creativity. Being creative doesn't always mean being a professional artist, such as a writer or painter or
sculptor or dancer or musician. It means learning to express ourselves more fully and freely, as we come in touch with creative answers and solutions to the problems that surround us.

One Sunday several years ago, a young woman in the Bible Study class burst into tears, saying she’d been praying for something for five years, and God was not only not answering her prayer, God wasn’t even TRYING! As the leader of the group, I was wondering how to respond, when suddenly another member of the group asked if the very oldest members of the group would comment. Anna Mae Van Epps, a beautiful and radiant woman in her 80’s, told the group how important it was for her to learn patience in order to get the bigger picture. Gladys Chapman spoke of how it had gotten easier over the years for her to allow God to answer prayers in God’s own time and in God’s own way. It was so soothing to hear these women speak. Their wisdom was timely for this young woman in her twenties in so much pain and confusion. As I sat there I couldn’t help but feel how lucky she was to be able to hear these gentle elders speak, and I silently prayed that she was taking in all they had to say to her in their very unassuming manner. In a way that perhaps these women didn’t realize, they were using their creative spirit to help guide and support their younger sister in Christ on her journey with God into the unknown.

As we grow older we are given the chance to get better and better at doing those very simple and ordinary things that bring us joy and give joy to others. For some it is making writing notes and letters to people we care about; for others it is walking in a Pride Parade or making a phone call to your representative in Washington, or taking a stand against racism. Other ordinary actions that bring about healing and transformation are baking bread or knitting prayer shawls or wood-working. It can be doing volunteer work, visiting those who live alone, gardening or landscaping or building. "We are God’s workmanship created for good works in Christ," says Paul. God our Creator created us to be creators too in our own right - co-creators with God - in order to make our corner of the world a better, more beautiful and safer place. Our creativity need never end, as Sarah's pregnancy at age 90 attests.

The very God who created us is the same God who says, through the Psalmist, "Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am the one who will sustain you. I have made you, and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you." If we follow a God who loves us this tenderly, we can dare, like Abraham and Sarah, to become pregnant with new life at any age. We can believe the truth of Robert Browning's words:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made.
Our times are in his hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God,
See all, nor be afraid.