

“Meeting God in the Stages of Life: The Mid-Life Years”
Part 1

In this series of messages we are looking at what the various stages of life, and the differences that a relationship with God can make in each of these stages. Today we will look at what I call the “mid-life” years. How old, exactly, must you be to be in “mid-life”? (You could put any age you want on each of these life stages. You can say you don’t move out of mid-life until you’re 85! Well, that may make you feel good, but is it realistic?). Some define mid-life as being 40-60 years of age. I will consider it somewhere around 35-60.

A lot happens in our lives between the ages of 35 and 60. And a lot happens in families during that time, too. Fewer and fewer families today comprise what has been the traditional nuclear family. The norm is no longer a mother, father, and one or more biological children in a family. There are other family configurations: those in 2nd or 3rd marriages, often with children (“his & hers & ours”); single people, never married, or single-again (divorced, widowed) – often functioning as single parents; couples living together, unmarried; gay couples. *So, when we think “family” we have to consider many different shapes to family structures today.*

Some mid-life parents still have children at home. It’s taking longer for children to leave the nest. Many middle-aged people have divorced and remarried and are maybe raising a second set of children in a new marriage. Many people are older and raising teenaged children. Since I talked about the teenage years in the sermon adolescence I won’t say much today, other than to emphasize again that the parents’ task is to slowly back off, so their children can develop own autonomy and independence. *And it’s good to keep in mind that this is almost always an uneven process!* It’s sort of like a mother bird trying to teach her young ones to fly and leave the nest. This usually involves a lot of flapping of wings, commotion and squawking, until the little one finally flies on its own.

But eventually, almost all children leave the nest. I heard Howard Hendricks, a noted Christian educator and author, who is a dad to 4 or 5 children as I recall, say that when their last one moved out, he sang the doxology! I was certainly glad when our youngest, our daughter Karin, graduated from college, and there were no more tuition bills to pay (after paying college costs for 11 straight years – and for some of those years having two kids in college at the. But having our kids move out was a mixed bag for me. I will always remember taking our oldest son to Bloomsburg for his first year of college. This was the first to leave home. All the way back I felt really sad. I was grieving. The same was true when our other two headed off to college.

Some parents get stuck at this stage. The movie “Father of the Bride” provides a humorous, and poignant example of this, as the dad, played by Steve Martin, has a hard time letting go of his daughter as she plans to marry. Parents need to let go. If that is difficult, parent needs to ask: “What is it that is hindering me from letting go? What’s this about?” If a parent can’t do that, hopefully the grown child might say, “Mom...dad...I’ve grown up. I’d really like to have a relationship where we can enjoy one another as two adults.” This represents a shift: from the parent-child relationship being an up-down, adult-child, relationship, to one that is more level: adult to adult.

It is important to remember, as we think about the mid-life years, that there are those couples unable to bear children. For some, this can be a terribly painful ordeal. In one church I served I preached a sermon that highlighted the issue of infertility (the Bible uses the word “barren” to speak of those who are childless). In that sermon, I had several people in the congregation talk honestly of their struggle coping with their inability to bear children.

Once all of the children are out of the nest, this can spell a time of great change! For some married couples, raising children, and focusing on their children’s activities and needs, can be the glue that keeps marriages together. When children leave home and it’s just husband and wife left, they may discover that *the marriage itself* has suffered from neglect: there is little romance left, the husband and wife have little in common, perhaps conflicts and differences were swept under the rug and never addressed.

So it is important not to neglect the marriage in the child-rearing years. Sure, loving our children is *extremely important*, but couples can be too *child-focused*. It’s so important for couples to take the time to keep romance alive – if necessary, to invest in hiring a baby-sitter, to go out on “dates” with one’s spouse (even if it’s a cheapie date at McDonalds or Starbucks), to work at communicating to each other how valued and needed they are. Always remember: *the best thing a mom can do for her children is to love their dad. The best thing a father can do for his kids is to love their mom!*

When children are gone, it’s a good time to renegotiate the marriage. Sit down, have a “heart to heart” talk. Be honest. Listen to each other. Ask each other, “How’s our marriage doing? What strengths can we build on? What do we need from each other at this point in life?” If a couple can’t move forward in a positive way, perhaps some counseling sessions would be valuable as a way to form new “contract” for the marital relationship. I know of a couple, who once their children were out of the nest, realized that their marriage had become dull and they had grown apart. They recognized that if they were to stay together, they needed to do some things they both could do together. One of things they did was to take dancing lessons, something they both came to enjoy. This provided a new spark in their marriage.

A 60 year-old couple were married a long time. One day, walking along the beach they saw a bottle, and a genie popped out. The genie offered to give each of them a one-time wish. The guy says to his wife, “Dear, why don’t you go first.” So she says, “My wish is to spend the rest of our lives in a home by a beautiful lake, with millions of dollars, so we can enjoy life and enjoy each other.” Immediately, they were transported to a breathtaking lake, out on the deck of a gorgeous home with 2 Mercedes in the driveway. The genie says, “You now have all the money you will ever need in savings and investments.” Then the genie turns to the man to hear his one wish. The man hesitates a bit, then says, “Well, I am embarrassed to ask...but here goes: I’d like to be married to a woman 30 years younger.” Instantly he became 90 years old!

Well, maybe we think getting a different partner would be heaven on earth, but there are real long-term benefits from working to make our marriages better with the person to whom we are already married! The Bible urges couples to work to make their marriage better! Turn to

Ephesians 5. Now some people don't like some of the words in this chapter because it urges wives to submit to their husbands (remember, at this time it was a patriarchal society, where women had few rights). But look at Ephesians 5:21: "Be subject to *one another* out of reverence for Christ." Notice the mutual submission! Then this chapter goes on: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...in the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church...each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband." Take time to cherish and care for your partner in marriage.

When children leave home, there can also be this feeling that one is not needed anymore.

This may be more of a problem for mothers in mid-life, if they have invested heavily in caring for their children. Maybe you as a wife didn't get the attention you wanted from your husband, but you could tolerate this because your children needed you, and you got your emotional needs met through your children. This is never good – neither for the parent who depended on a child to fulfill her emotional needs, or for the child, who then is expected to fill the emotional needs of a parent. I will always remember a discussion I had with a lady in one of the first churches I served. Her kids were now grown and out of the nest, and she felt like she wasn't needed at all. She was sad and depressed. She worked in a hospital, and she told me that sometimes she would think to herself, "It would be so easy to just take a syringe and end it all".

Mid-life can provide a golden opportunity to reinvest ourselves in nurturing others. Some people do this through their pets! I used to make fun of my dad, the way he babied their dachshund after we kids were out of the house. Guess what? We had a dachshund after our kids left, and she had the run of the house. Now we have a Shi-Poo, and she is spoiled and babied even worse! There is a nurturing instinct that cuts deep within us! This is one of the things that helps us feel needed.

Even more important than showering our nurturing instincts on our pets is the reality that there are always people to be loved and nurtured. We can do volunteer work in the community. Churches are always looking for people willing to nurture others: teaching or helping in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School, caring for children in the church nursery, visiting elderly members or shut-ins. I wholeheartedly believe that if you pray, "Lord, I have a heart full of love to give. Show me people I can love and nurture" – that God will do just that!

The mid-life years can also be a time when there is turmoil in our job or career. For women, if they had no career outside the home, they may face the prospect of going back to work, without up-to-date skills that make them employable. This can certainly produce a lot of anxiety. This can also be a tough time for men and women who are employed. Maybe the economy goes bad, or the company wants to get rid of those making the higher wages, so many in mid-life are cut loose from their jobs. They have to find a new job; that can be traumatic. *Is God interested in us enough to provide a job for us when we are out of work? Is God concerned enough to help us re-train or gain new job skills so we can find work? Of course God is!* God knows we have to earn a living. God knows what we need! Philippians 4:19 says, "And my God shall supply

every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” Did you hear that? Read that Scripture to yourself again!

What I’ve been saying in this message is that the mid-life years can be a time of *transition and change!* But hasn’t that been true of every life stage we have looked at so far?

Indeed, for some people, mid-life is a time of starting over. This is certainly true for those going through a separation or divorce. I imagine going through divorce is one of the most gut-wrenching experiences of life. I’m not divorced. I really don’t know first hand what this is like. I can only try to empathize with the feelings of hurt, rejection, guilt, or the lowering of one’s self-worth that so often accompanies a divorce. I believe every marriage breakup is a failure of the ideal that God intended for that marriage. But divorce is not the unpardonable sin. The important things are that when one divorces, he or she can ask some questions: Have I learned from it? Can I take responsibility for whatever I did that made my marriage fail? Can I accept God’s forgiveness for the past and commit the rest of my life to Christ and His will?

For those feeling kind of worthless, or hopeless (maybe you are separated, divorced, or your spouse has died), I have some words for you. Turn to Psalm 34. This psalm begins with words praising God: “I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth” (Psalm 34:1). The psalm writer has been through some kind of difficult experience: “This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble” (Psalm 34:6). And then some words of Scripture I love: “When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit” (verses 17-18). Are you broken hearted? The Lord is near. Our Lord saves those who are crushed in spirit!

Many in their mid-life years remarry (either because of a divorce, or their spouse has died). There are a lot of “stepfamilies” today. Second marriages. Step-parents, step-children. These are often called “blended families”. I don’t like that term, because many re-constituted families don’t blend very well! Remember the Brady Bunch, and the peppy tune at the beginning of the show? All those smiling Brady Bunchers! Well, often in stepfamilies, the family members aren’t smiling like that! Stepfamilies are very complicated, and having a well-functioning stepfamily is a difficult thing to pull off! Steve Treat, an author and educator, and one of the instructors I had when I was doing my training in marriage and family therapy, says that if a stepfamily can survive the first three years, there is a good chance they will make it.

It can get really hairy, say, if a person who has remarried has children who are older (maybe 18 or 20 – ready to be launched), and at the same time has a 2 year old or 2 month old (this adult is in 2 places of the life cycle at the same time). So, in a few years the younger child will go to grade school. Say the parent visits the school for parents’ night. You will have very young parents in their 20’s, and other parents of a 6 year old who are in their 40’s or even 50’s or 60’s! The teacher may look at you and think you are the grandparent! Ouch. I once taught a course in seminary on stepfamilies. Stepfamilies are different; they have their own dynamics. I do want you to know I care about stepfamilies, and realize how difficult a road that is to navigate!

Let's not forget that there are many middle-aged people who are single. Perhaps they never married. Or they are widowed or divorced, and remained single.

Let's not forget, also, that there are many who make it through the mid-life years and do pretty well! Perhaps they are single and enjoy being unmarried. Or they are married, and have stayed married to the same person. They managed to get their children launched with a minimal amount of disruption. They may have a good job, a successful career. Maybe a good income, and are living comfortably. If this is the case, praise God for this blessing!

Here's the thing: we can look on mid-life and its changes with anxiety and foreboding, or we can look on it as an opportunity to grow and change! Middle age can be a productive and fulfilling time: more time to do things we didn't have time for if we had children at home; a time to build more intimacy with our spouse; perhaps more financial freedom; time to enjoy our grandchildren if we have grandchildren; an opportunity to start a new hobby, launch a new career, discover new things about our self and the Lord, grow in our faith!

But there are some other important issues coming into play in mid-life. We will look at some of these next week.

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
February 3, 2019*

