

RITUALS FOR THE LAST THIRD OF LIFE

By Mary Miller Currie

When I was baptized as a child, the church gathered to celebrate the beginning of my life in the church and prayed about the hopes and possibilities and calls God would set before me.

When I die, my baptism will be fulfilled and the church will gather to celebrate the hope of resurrection and life in the church triumphant - what will be said on that day?

When I was young my parents had to carry me, there were first steps, first words, first teeth and first days of school. There were pictures and celebrations of everything.

When I became old others had to help me get around, I wondered about walking and last steps, losing my words, losing my teeth, losing the things I had learned. I thought of last days and last times of doing things and going places - but no one wants to know these fears and ponderings, no one celebrates last steps and last teeth.

When I was 16 or 17 or 18 my parents finally trusted me to drive and allowed me to have the keys to the car - and there was a celebration. I felt empowered, I was an adult, I had freedom, I had possibilities.

When I was 66 or 77 or 88 my children no longer trusted me to drive and did not allow me to have the keys to the car - they took them away and hid them. I lost my freedom, there were tears and anger and frustration and I felt a certain worthlessness, I could do nothing on my own.

When I was 18 or 21 or so I moved into my own place and began to acquire the stuff of life - and others celebrated with me. My first apartment, my first home, my first art, my first big dinner party.

When I was 68 or 81 or so I had to downsize and move in with my children, move into an older adult community, move into assisted living or skilled care. I gave away the stuff of life, the memories, the things that meant something - I threw away the things no one wanted and no one cared about, and I mourned their passing - and still no one seemed to care. I invited friends and family to come see me, but visitors are few.

When I was young, I stood in front of the church and said my marriage vows - until death do us part we promised one another. Friends and family gathered around us and congratulated us and celebrated our love and the years we had ahead of us.

When my beloved died, I sat at the front of the church, the oldest of the family generations. Almost alone among family surrounding me, I said my good-byes. We were gathered to celebrate a life well lived - and so it was. So now I am widowed, I should take off this wedding ring - the vows it symbolizes no longer bind us together for death has us parted. Must I take off this ring alone with no one else to remember what our life together meant?

When I graduated at 18 or 22 or 26 we moved away from our parents for jobs and opportunities and the adventures of life. The church blessed me and commissioned me to go to find the church in a new place to continue to grow in faith - we celebrated the opportunities and adventures ahead.

When I turned 68 or 72 or 86 I moved to be closer to my children who had moved away for jobs and opportunities and adventures - the church said nothing except they were sad to see us go after so many years. Our last Sunday we just sort of walked away...

When I was 78 or 82 or 86, my family could care for me no longer. I ended up in a nursing home, and little by little people quit coming to see me. The church quit coming to see me. I think they all forgot me. I think they thought I would not remember if they had been here or not.

In Matthew Jesus separated the sheep and goats - and those goats were not the greatest of all time. Part of what he said was: "I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." (Matthew 25:36). Yet studies show we help the sick and shut in at home for several weeks to several months - then we tend to taper off and forget their need continues. We visit those who enter skilled nursing facilities and memory care facilities less and less often - and sometimes lose touch with them because of HIPPA requirements. If a Skilled Nursing Facility or Rehab Center moves a member, they cannot tell us where they were sent for privacy rights. Are we sheep or goats?

In my first church, Louise Ekstrand - who had a room in a local senior living facility - had me read the same passage to her over and over and over, every week when I visited on Thursday: John 10:22-30. I was young, and wondered why she wanted to hear about Jesus walking on Solomon's portico and arguing with the Jews. Now I know she did not care about that at all. What she wanted to hear over and over was that assurance Jesus still knew her name - she was still his and knew his voice calling her. He would never forget her, even if the rest of us did.

How can the fullness of Scripture, liturgy and prayer speak to the transitions of life? What are the opportunities in the events of life as we grow older? What are the rituals and passages of life where the church could stand with its older members - and be there with them in care and prayer? What does your church do - or not do - about these rites of passage in the final third of life?

Mary Miller Currie has been an ordained minister since 1979, serving most of her ministry in smaller congregations rebuilding after conflict situations. Her volunteer work developing CLP/CRE training for New Covenant and Missouri Union Presbyteries in the early 1990's eventually led to her doing research and writing the first national resource used by the PCUSA concerning training for Commissioned Lay Pastors. Since 2013 she has focused on the growing area of older adult ministry, serving as the Director of Older Adult Ministry at Clear Lake Presbyterian Church in the Houston area.