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Rust

Car Talk Sermon Series—Part 2

2 Corinthians 4: 7-12/Isaiah 40:28-31

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When my father taught me how to drive back in the 1980's, he taught me two things about taking care of a car. The first thing was to keep up with changing the oil, which we talked about last week. And the second thing was his strategy for washing the car. My dad would take us to the do-it-yourself car wash where he could control the power sprayer—I don't think he trusted the automatic car wash to do as good a job as he could. He always got the job done in one cycle—he never had to add quarters to buy more time, like I do if I'm in one of those things—and his method was to briefly hose down the top and sides, but then, he spent most of his time focused on spraying around the bottom of the car and up above the tires. He was determined that if there was any salt from the salted wintry roads, or any grime from whatever, he was going to get that stuff OFF of there. And then he'd let it air dry on the way home and then spend an hour or so putting a coat of turtle wax on the car, making the red paint of our 1968 VW Bug come to life again. The point was not only to make the car look nice, but to prevent this nasty thing called RUST.

Rust happens. Every car will have some rust on it somewhere, sometime. When a car gets too rusty, it starts to fall apart and eventually you can't drive it anymore. There are lots of things you can do to prevent rust from getting started, like keeping it clean and taking care of dents and scratches in the car quickly so that any exposed metal doesn't start to rust. When you do have a little rust, you can sand it and prime it and paint it, and that will hopefully stop it or slow it down a bit. We can do all kinds of things that will help our cars look nice and last a long time. But, if they're being driven at all, which is what they're supposed to do, every car comes to an end.

And just like the body of a car will eventually rust, so a human body must age, and eventually decline. And just like there are many things we can do to prolong the life of a car, there are many

things we can do to promote the health and well-being of our own bodies. We know what they are: we can quit smoking and exercise and wear sunblock and stay up to date on all our vaccines and sleep 8 hours at night and eat broccoli and blueberries and salmon and so on and so on.

My parents are now in their very early 70's. They are the kind of people who plan their vacations around hiking, and they eat quinoa and kale and do their baking with coconut oil and applesauce instead of butter and sugar. But they are aging anyway, right in front of me. Osteoporosis has found my mother, despite all the calcium supplements and leafy greens she has consumed over the years, and the weights that she is faithfully lifting these days. High cholesterol is oblivious to the thousands of miles my father has jogged over the decades. My parents both have good genes and great habits. But more and more, I'm reminded that they are finite, and they are not going to last forever no matter how fit they are. And of course, just like a car, accidents happen, as do disease and violence and famine.

I love the image Paul uses in 2 Corinthians of human beings as clay jars. He acknowledges that he himself may not be a very impressive person on the outside in terms of looks and speaking abilities and overall charisma, like some of the other leaders the church at Corinth has seen. But that's all the better, Paul says, because then it's even more clear that the power of the message he is bringing them is from God, not him. In other words, don't get distracted from the treasure by focusing too much on the container.

Paul also talks about the human body in his first letter to the Corinthians. He compares it to a seed. Human beings are seeds, and when we die, that's when the real growth happens. That's when the glory of who we are at our deepest core bursts into bloom, and that's what's going to last, not this kernel that is our human body. That's the promise of the resurrection.

So we don't want to get too attached to the container, because it is NOT going to last, but at the same time, it's what we've got right now. It's all we know. And in other parts of scripture, Paul also describes our body as a temple. We're supposed to honor it and take care of it.

We don't talk about bodies a whole lot in church. It's a touchy subject, no pun intended. And it is plainly a very personal thing. Wherever that line is between healthy self-care and unhealthy self-obsession, we each have to find it for ourselves—nobody can draw it for us. For example, plastic surgery might not be your thing, but it might be a wonderful blessing for someone else.

These things are not simple, or easy. So many of us struggle with things like body image, and addiction. It is hard to make changes even when the doctor looks us straight in the eye and explains the risks to us if we do not. And there are also economic issues here. Free-range grilled chicken costs a lot more than Kraft macaroni and cheese. Gym memberships and personal trainers cost money. Even living in a neighborhood where it's safe enough to go for a walk takes money. These are issues that deserve much more attention than I can give them this morning, but we can at least acknowledge them.

AND—there are three powerful and positive things each of us can do, related to our bodies.

First, we can learn to appreciate rust. Rust is not the end of the world. In the animated movie Cars, the shiny young race car, Lightning McQueen, is not happy that his sponsor is Rust-Eze Medicated Bumper Cream. When he has to make an appearance for them after a big race, he complains, “I hate rusty cars.” But then he loses his way on the road one evening and is befriended by a very rusty tow-truck, and Lightning slowly begins to appreciate that a vehicle can have a lot of rust and still have a lot to offer. When you're rusty, you don't worry so much about getting dented and scratched—those things just add more character.

Speaking of character . . . My husband has alerted me to the fact that there is this whole phenomenon out there in the world of cars called “Rat Rods.” A rat rod, for those of us unfamiliar

with it, is a classic car, often from the 40's, 50's or 60's, that has not been restored, meaning, you don't replace a dented fender; you simply hammer it out or just leave the dent. If it's rusted, that's even better. A rat rod is stripped of anything unnecessary, like a muffler, because it is built for the sole purpose of driving fast. If a part needs to be replaced, you don't buy a new one. You look for another old part from another old car, and make that work. Because of the creativity and resourcefulness that goes into these things, each rat rod is a one-of-a-kind original.

Above all, you NEVER put shiny paint on a rat rod, although you might use primer or a flat paint. Rust is BEAUTIFUL to a rat rodder, because they purposely seek out cars and car parts that show their age. Rust for them is a sign of age and authenticity, and they love it. After all, they say, you can only be an original once.

Proverbs 20:29 says, the glory of youths is their strength, but the beauty of the aged is their **gray hair**. I wonder if we could learn to appreciate the beauty and authenticity of our wrinkles and saginess and gray hair the way a rat rodder appreciates rust.

Second, we can let go of the illusion of independence. We all depend on someone for something, anyway, at every stage of life. If we cling too hard to unrealistic expectations of independence, we may well end up isolated. It is OK to need help with things, especially as we age. The beautiful thing is, our needs may well provide someone else with a much-needed opportunity to learn how to be a blessing, or to learn how to slow down and be in the moment, or to appreciate their own ability and mobility. Our usefulness isn't always about what we can do. Sometimes it's about how our lives can call forth the care and compassion of people who need to have it called out of them. Getting rusty doesn't make us dependent—it just makes all of us more aware of how we are truly interdependent.

Finally, we can continue our theme of gratitude from last week by giving thanks for the body we have, whatever state it's in. Let's give thanks for the things our bodies CAN do, and the things that

ARE great about it. It's OK if these things aren't the same things you would have given thanks for twenty years ago. Maybe you can't run a marathon anymore, but you can still walk around the lake. Or you can't cook a gourmet meal anymore, but you can still savor a scoop of strawberry ice cream.

Last week, I invited you to take a gratitude challenge by writing down three different things every day that you were thankful for. Today, I'd like to invite you to a new challenge. It's a twist on last week's. This week, keep giving thanks to God, but also give thanks every day for one thing about your body that you appreciate. Maybe you appreciate the way your hands can still make things. Or the fact that you still have a voice with which to praise God and encourage others—not everybody can do that, you know. Or you can see well enough to read and watch Netflix. Or the way your skin can feel the softness of the sheets on your bed at night. Whatever it is . . . let us give thanks that whatever state our body is in now, however old or young, however weak or strong, we are never more precious and beautiful in God's eyes than we are in this moment. Amen.