"The Road Trip of Life"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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Who likes a good road trip? I know this is not a universal love. What sounds like adventure to some, can seem like torture to others. In my house, we're divided on this issue. My partner, Bill, will gladly fly to meet me at the destination, but he'll leave the long miles on the road to me. I was in the midst of planning my next road trip when I needed to provide the sermon description for today. And that is how our monthly theme, "Aging: The Journey of Life" became a sermon on "The Road Trip of Life." At least to someone who loves road trips, the metaphor felt like an apt description of an experience of moving through the world with curiosity, wonder, and a bit of uncertainty about what's coming next.

From the moment of our birth, we begin to age. We often joyfully embrace the process of aging in children. We celebrate a first smile, a first step, a first word. We mark the first day of school as well as other milestones in schoolwork, sports, or a favorite hobby. In the beginning, aging feels like an important activity in and of itself. "How old are you?" we ask a child. With pride, a child may announce they are 4 and ¾. Every month matters when you are young. *I am getting older* is both a claim of success and of hope. For a child, *aging* is often an unqualified good.

Indeed, the beginning of a road trip is typically one of the best parts. Starting off on the road, but not yet arrived anywhere, the simple experience of going feels like fun. There is a sense of anticipation for all the possibilities. Maybe we'll discover a great view or a delicious sandwich? Maybe we'll stop at a ridiculous tourist trap that doubles us over in laughter? Or, maybe we'll be struck quiet by a sunset igniting the distant mountains in color? We're not certain. The possibilities can feel like freedom. The hope for an adventure invites us to dream. At its best, aging during childhood offers such sweet experiences of imagining what the future could be.

Aging from childhood into years of youthful living, we may feel the pressure of a culture that valorizes youth as the ideal. We may embrace this ideal, reveling in a message that tells us these are the *best* years of our life. Or, we may struggle as we fall far short of what we are "supposed" to be or do with these most valuable years. Advertisements and movies remind us all of the ideal of youth with their portrayal of actors with youthful bodies and no wrinkles or grays. As we age, we may reach back for this youth: for the physical prowess of our teens or twenties; for the ability to work longer hours, sleep less, and achieve more; for the freedom from responsibilities of mortgages or children, bosses or payroll. Or, maybe we reach for the innocence of not knowing what we have learned of heartbreak and disappointment, of limits and losses, of chronic illness and death.

In my mid-twenties, I graduated from college and enjoyed several years of low-commitment jobs that enabled my love of road trips. I travelled cross-country. Once with a friend. Once on a bus. The third time alone in my red, Ford Escort. I felt fearless and open. When the sun began to set as I entered the mountains, I laughed out loud as I realized I had never driven a stick shift in the

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mountains. *I could figure it out! What could go wrong?!* At its best, this is youth. A rising confidence to take risks to find your own place in the world. To apply to college or to the job you want. To travel. To fall in love. To get in your own car and see what life has to offer.

Then, as older adults, our cars can start to feel fuller and less free. There may be more passengers: spouses, children, and/or pets. And, there is definitely more baggage. We likely carry with us the proverbial briefcase from work as well as the weight of disappointments and failures. Rather than a wide-ranging road trip, our driving may feel curtailed to a familiar route of home, work, school, soccer, violin, and playdates. On our best days, these familiar paths with their crowded car become an adventure. In conversation, you discover the vastness of your child's imagination or delight at the beautiful view of your spouse smiling back at you.

Of course, there are other days also. Days when the tire is flat. In the rain. Or when the windchill is 27 degrees below zero. There are days when nothing seems to be going right. When the kids are bickering or you just yelled at your spouse because you're still upset by what happened earlier at work. There are days when 'adult-ing' feels too full or too hopeless or simply too tiring. There are moments in the road trip of life you may wonder if there's another car, another road, another way to live than where you've found yourself.

If the beginning of a road trip is full with excited anticipation, then a road trip somewhere in the middle can start to feel complicated and uncertain. We've been living long enough to know that some miles are neither fun, nor desirable. Even with a lot of planning, the unexpected will likely happen at some point. A storm will blow in. A passenger will fall sick. Something breaks. So now what? You've driven too far to go back. And, really, you don't want to travel over those miles again anyhow. Here in the middle, you have to choose again to keep driving. To choose life even though you now know you'll never play for the Red Sox or be again the same youthful person you once were. To choose life even though now you know that sometimes children do fall very sick as do parents, that passionate love can unravel into painful discord, and that hard work may not earn you the reward. To choose life even though there is injustice everywhere and that while we can make a positive—perhaps even a major—difference, chances are high that we're not going to see world peace or the elimination of poverty in our lifetime.
Maybe we never use these exact words, "I choose life," but we do keep driving. We drive scanning the horizon for a storm or a traffic jam, paying attention to the gas stations and restaurants for resources we may need, and noticing the beauty as it emerges. A car with a young driver and passengers rockets past you and you smile . . . wishing them safe journeys.

Over the miles, our journeys may begin to change. In some ways our cars become lighter again as children move on to their own cars. Or, as some of that baggage of work and striving is set down or managed to a lighter load of chosen activities. We learn more of what feels the most comfortable to us—our favorite pace to take, our most beloved companions, and whether we prefer familiar roads or the discovery of new paths. And yet, we may also notice we're starting to make more trips to the doctor or the physical therapist. While we may not wish for the brashness of youth again, we wouldn't mind the joints of youth or the endurance of a younger body. Not quite "old" yet, we may

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nonetheless feel we are getting older. That the trip will not go on and on . . . and so what's left to be done, to be noticed and learned, appreciated and uncovered while time and health allows.

None of us know how long our road trip will last. Yet, for some of us, we have been driving for quite some time now . . . and it shows. Perhaps we don't move as swiftly and confidently as we once did. And yet, we also notice more of what we *do* have. In a recent article on her work with older New Yorkers, author John Leland writes,

> "Nearly three years ago, I started following the lives of six New Yorkers over the age of 85, one of the fastest-growing age groups in America. The series of articles began the way most stories about older people do, with the fears and hardships of aging: a fall in the kitchen, an aching leg that did not get better, days segueing into nights without human contact. They had lived through — and some were still challenged by — money problems, medical problems, the narrowing of life's movements.
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> But as the series went along, a different story emerged. When the elders described their lives, they focused not on their declining abilities but on things that they could still do and that they found rewarding. As Ms. Wong said, "I try not to think about bad things. It's not good for old people to complain."

After many miles, those who have journeyed far have wisdom to share. Leland notes, "Older people report higher levels of contentment or well-being than teenagers and young adults."

Yet, calling oneself "old" can feel derogatory. What word might we use for these final miles of our road trip? Elders? Senior citizens? Retirees? Sages? In an article exploring this question of language, psychology professor Laura Carstensen embraces the term "perennials." She explains,

> "'perennials' makes clear that we're still here, blossoming again and again. It also suggests a new model of life in which people engage and take breaks, making new starts repeatedly. Perennials aren't guaranteed to blossom year after year, but given proper conditions, good soil and nutrients, they can go on for decades. It's aspirational."

As the years keep coming, do we still blossom? How might aging leave space for the grief of losses without being overwhelmed by them? Could a 'perennial' framework help us to age with an eye to what remains possible?

Every metaphor has its limits. And, the road trip of life is no exception. Too easily it could fall into tropes of 'twists and turns' or 'bumps and detours' in ways that belie the depth of pain or gratitude we feel. And yet, sometimes we reach for metaphors because there are no words that will ever encompass the fullness of an experience directly. The best we can do is use a metaphor in an effort to point to a deeper truth—to mysteries and experiences that refuse to be pinned down for examination. And life in all of its particularities and possibilities certainly resists such efforts for neat summaries.

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As some of you know, these last few months have had an unusually high number of memorial services for members of our congregation as well as people from the wider community. These services have been for people who were young—in their 20's, who were in their middle years, who were older if not yet "old", and who were elders. Each service was different. Each service told a story of a life journey and of a person's character and impact. In some ways, this is the hardest part of my role as a minister . . . to sit so near to the pain of grief and death. And yet, such moments are also a kind of narrowing that reveals what matters most in a life when the road trip ends. They are a reminder to pay attention now to the gift of waking up to another day, to being alert to the possibilities of what the day may bring, and to notice the beauty and blossoms all around.

We are all aging from the moment of our birth until the time of our death. Aging is the movement of life. It is the signal of being alive. With its gifts and its losses, aging insists that we wrestle with what it is to be alive with its possibilities and its limits. Such wrestling might lead us to see aging as a threat that pulls us ever nearer to death. For me, I hope to hold fast to the idea of aging as a road trip on which I'll likely have some bad meals and long days, but on which I also hope to discover some magnificent places, to meet some fascinating people along the way, and perhaps leave the world a bit more loving and just than I found it.

So may it be.
Amen.

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