

July 9th, 2023

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

First reading: *Song of Songs 2:8-13 and Psalm 145:8-14*

Second reading: *Romans 7:15-25a* (Read from The Message)

Gospel: *Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

“Cultural Generation: A 3-Step Plan”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight for you are our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

If any of you have been in a situation with me in the last few months where small, localized conversations were possible you have likely heard me say some variation of the following: I heard on NPR that most people find small talk boring and that if we want to form more meaningful bonds and relationships, even with a complete stranger, essentially, we need to dive in deep right off the bat. I started asking my closest friends, people in run club, my family members, the man on the plane whose name was Matthew, and even the youth group the suggested intro question which was along the lines of “How do you feel about dying?”. This would lead to other questions and in turn, other heavy subjects. I figured this same principle should apply from the pulpit. God is not interested in the small talk either and wants us to go deeper with her and with each other.

On that note, this is a warning that my sermon will include sensitive topics and could trigger you. Carrel King is available to people during and after the service if you need immediate help.

While I was in Colorado a couple of Sundays ago, I attended service at the United Church of Christ right down the road from where we were staying. They had a guest preacher named Arlene Waldorf. She shared stories of different people in the LGBTQIA+ community and

had members of the congregation narrate the testimonies of these individuals while a picture of each person was displayed on a screen in the chapel. The first story she shared was of a young person named Levi who was intersex, a person born with physical traits such as hormones, chromosomes, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia that do not fit neatly into the male or female box, and had Swyer Syndrome, a rare genetic condition in which people who have an X and a Y chromosome (the usual pattern for males) look female. Levi was given the name Emma at birth and externally appeared female; however, his family did not know until years later through genetic testing he was male. Levi was so terrified of turning 18 and becoming a legal adult because of the way he saw the intersex and wider community being treated that he decided to commit suicide instead of celebrating that significant birthday. His parents, Dave and Kimi Martin, have chosen to share his story. Arlene made a point during the sermon that it's easier to ignore these groups of people rather than talk about them and try to relate to their human experience.

Back in March of this year, I was having a hard conversation with my maternal grandmother about gender identity, and she dismissed the argument that intersex individuals should be considered as they are a rare occurrence. For some perspective, roughly the same percentage of the population is redheaded as it is intersex. Redheads are rare but they are not nonexistent. An intersex individual may be a small percentage of the population; however, to dismiss that 1.7 % as simply “only 1.7%” is to deny their human existence. And **that** is not something Jesus Christ would be down with based on his extreme principles, the first and most unique of them being that of radical love.

We notice a repetitive theme in the Scripture readings today, those we heard and those we did not: perpetuating belief in God through the generations. I read the word generation so many

times that it prompted me to consider the many generational types we have in our church. As I pondered what God might be saying with these readings, the youth group and their generation dominated my thoughts. Thinking about them and the defining characteristics of their generation turned into difficult discussion material quickly: pain, loneliness, negative self-image, depression, suicide. The reading from Matthew starts out with a description of children in the streets, desiring interaction. When I read this passage, it felt like he was describing the youth of today. I'm paraphrasing here but verse 17 seems to say "we do something wonderful; no one notices. We do something awful; no one cares." This verse resonated strongly with me, especially when applying it to the youth and the LGBTQIA+ community.

I was talking to Sarah Dugan recently. We were discussing her work and, if you don't know, she deals with some horrific things on a daily basis. She checks in with clients frequently and she had this to say about her interactions with them: "Everybody is so sad. *Everybody is so sad.*" And she's right. This statement goes beyond that of her clientele but to the wider world. I know we are all sick of talking about this issue but the effects of COVID still linger. There is a loneliness epidemic on our hands on a global scale. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy told *All Things Considered* his perspective on loneliness was chalked up to these things: "We move more, we change jobs more often, we are living with technology that has profoundly changed how we interact with each other and how we talk to each other. **And you can feel lonely even if you have a lot of people around you, because loneliness is about the quality of your connections.**" Two years doesn't seem like much to a 60 year old but when you are 10 years old, that is one-fifth of your life. Adults were able to move on more easily from quarantine and social isolation than our children were.

Another thought was prompted by today's reading where Jesus says in Matthew 11:15-16 "he who has ears, let him hear. To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to others". During my first year as the youth group leader, one of the young people in the group was in so much internal pain that the only way they knew how to manage it was to leave the room and cut themselves in the middle of a meeting. That kid was sitting inside this building and calling out with their actions. I heard Matthew again: we do something awful, no one cares...until it's too late.

Our young people are facing so many challenges; I would argue it is harder to be a teenager now than perhaps it ever has been before. Pressure from social media, pressure on children and teenagers to exceed and outperform and achieve nearly impossible standards in school and extracurricular activities, pressure from society in general, pressure applied by adults, pressure from outsiders. Judgement lies in wait from those around us. Humanity's default position is to judge, and we are often not afraid to let our judgements be known. Social media has turned us against each other and ourselves. Our self-perception and self-worth are wildly skewed when we see videos of people with seemingly perfect lives, bodies, homes, relationships, etcetera. I recently learned people are using artificial intelligence to create fake pornographic images and videos of real, often minor children to abuse and control them. Ultimately, we cannot minimize their struggles simply because they are young. Challenges feel just as, if not more powerful, to a young person than to us, especially if they have not been equipped to deal with it.

Now, don't get me wrong; I am not trying to disparage anyone's experience as a teenager. My nickname in high school was Chewbacca and it was not because I happened to be a huge Star Wars fan. On one hand, as a millennial, I know the value technology has to offer and to an

extent, I support it, but I also see the destruction it has wreaked upon our society and especially our youth.

Psalm 45: 17 says “I will perpetuate your memory through all generations therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever.” Look around. This isn’t happening. Churches are shutting down at an alarming rate and the generations to come, well frankly, just aren’t showing up as much anymore. Why are we losing our young people, the future, our generation of Israel? When a teenager who is struggling with their identity would rather choose death than being alive and gay or trans or insert adjective here because of how the world and, in many cases, the church responds to them, it warrants a deeper look. Why would young people turn to religion to cope when they see it as hypocritical and even hateful? How is the church going to react to this? Well, we’re going to put ourselves on a three step program.

Step 1: Let’s start with how God views each and every one of us and then believing it as truth. In Song of Songs the themes are overwhelmingly about sex and love. The NIV Quest Bible for teens describes the book as follows: “Some suggest that the story is symbolic and that it should be read as a metaphor for the loving relationship between either God and Israel (that’s us) or Jesus and the church (also us). However, most take it at face value, seeing it as a celebration of romantic love in all its spontaneity, beauty, power, and exclusiveness.” I propose that both views can be true at the same time but for the sake of today’s lesson, let’s go with the first train of thought about it being about God and his loving relationship towards us. In a day and age where our value might be placed in the hands of others, intentionally or not, we can use Song of Songs to remind ourselves of how God sees us and others. God, our lover, calls to us and says “Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me” (SoS 2:13b). Earlier in Psalm 145, God goes on to describe you as having a lovely face, like a lily among thorns, a rose of Sharon,

calls us royalty (“daughters of kings (Psalm 45:9)”) and tells us he is “loving toward all he has made (Psalm 145:13b)”. During moments of struggle with our self-worth, we can turn to Song of Songs to remind ourselves that God finds us worthy and beautiful, simply because we are his no matter what color, creed, sexual orientation, sexual identity, size, shape, or other defining factor. God cares for and loves *all of us!* Period.

Step 2: After that little pep talk from God and/or Jesus, we have to shift gears and stop differentiating ourselves based on generational information and form a new collective identity within our church culture. If that sounds like work, well, guess what? It is.

We start by showing up here on Sunday morning. But that’s just the start; we have to go beyond church as a weekend activity that we check off our to-do list. The next part involves creating more community. God gave us, the church, the ability to make and sustain culture. That can look like a lot of things but sometimes it means reaching out and taking a chance. I called Ethan Davis and asked him to come and help with the fundraiser fair. In turn, Aaron Davis and Deborah Kirkland showed up both nights and were some of the last people here to help close it down. Stan Bobo and Matt Perry were here with me at nearly 11 PM on the last night. Cindy Bertin baked blueberry muffins for my family on Saturday so I would not have to worry about breakfast the next morning. So many of you showed up as volunteers when we decided to put on a fundraiser fair, made financial contributions, and encouraged us to move forward with this crazy idea. Yuki even invited a friend to come; his name is Michael, and he’s here today. He came to support the event and ended up helping when some of our strand lights went out in the prayer garden.

We create culture by working alongside each other and showing up to events like Pride and Juneteenth parades. And we have to keep at it; we have to continue to put ourselves where

the people who need us most are if we want those generations to see the value of church. We all know the work of the church is mostly outside the church itself; the same could be said of our culture too. The biggest thing is WE have to show up to make sure the younger generations show up and create a welcoming environment in a world that has turned its back on them. In all these readings today, God basically tells us, hey, this is part of your job.

If we are going to survive as a church, we must challenge ourselves as the church. I have already started reading my books for school and as a result, I am learning stuff. Who'd have thought? In the book "A Peculiar People: the church as culture in a post-Christian society" author Rodney Clapp writes about culture as a way of life that "forms and shapes a people into a distinctive community"¹ and that "cultures also begin to die when their spirits falter and their inhabitants suspect existence is futile". It seems like we are in the throes of that statement- the inhabitants, the generations suspect existence is futile. The book has a strong focus on opposing the idea of worship or faith as an individual, private experience when it's really about going through things together, it's about making social change, it's about being the body, the church going through the motions of being the church as one. Clapp references pastor Will Willimon quoting "a child psychologist in his congregation who complained that the problem with children's sermons was that they never dealt with any of the real concerns of children." Willimon questioned the congregant further about what issues should be addressed. She responded, "Concerns like death, abandonment, fear of adults, adult injustice, violence"". Clapp writes that church is not simply an aspect of culture, but it IS culture, a "cultivating process that produces people in a particular way; not merely to contribute to politics from the sidelines but to *do*

¹ Page 94 of Clapp's book

politics of a peculiar kind- a kind that once turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6)". It's time to turn the world upside down again even if it means risking our own lives by speaking out.

Step 3: This is where Jesus comes in. We've got to let him help us. Matthew intentionally uses language related to beasts of burden when referring to our relationship with Jesus and the yoke. A yoke ties two animals together, usually oxen, to pull the plow. Plowing is hard work, especially for the animals pulling. Jesus knows that being a human is hard, just because he was partially divine does not mean the human side of him disappeared and was negated and suffered no consequences of his humanity. We know he went through the process of being born, adolescence and puberty, he suffered ridicule, he bled and felt pain. Spoiler alert: he died too. I can see why Jesus "gets" us but the real truth about Jesus is he calls us to him. The call is a challenge, and the challenge is to be more like him. The ultimate message from Jesus is to love as he loved. Which is frightening in a world like ours, riddled with violence and hatred. When reading from the Message, Romans 7:25b says, "He **acted** to set things right in this life of contradictions". He did not act hatefully or allow others to act in his stead as a substitute, he did not say "love these people but not those". No, instead he acted, *he loved* in such a radical way that he ended up paying the ultimate price. He chose love over hate, and he expects us to do the same, even when it is difficult, and our human nature turns us from doing it as we see in the text from Romans. So if you haven't already, consider yoking yourself to Jesus because he lightens our load and love is a much easier burden to bear than hate.

These children, these youth; they get it. They know God matters; they have their own experiences with God. Hailey understands; anyone who went to Children's Sabbath this year knows she gets it. Sage and Rosemary are not afraid to pray out loud for our food. William and Ethan know the power of written prayer. Clark has enormous faith for one so young. Joey has

questions... lots of them. When Valentina says “amen” with the rest of the congregation, we can have hope God’s name will carry on through the generations.

In order to do that though, we have to make sure we are generating a culture of faith together and, teenagers, you have to hold us adults accountable and make sure we show up too. We all bear the burden of mimicking the example of Christ to ensure the kingdom of God prevails on this earth. We need to have these hard conversations with each other, with our children, and with the greater community if we want to see real change. We cannot be silent any longer. Jesus came and loved the most marginalized groups of his time. That’s what we must do as well if we really want to follow in his footsteps and it’s easiest to do that when we do it together.

So, when in doubt, remember the 3 step plan:

- (1) God loves you and finds you worthy,
- (2) The church is here for cultural generation of radical love (among other things but that’s another sermon) and,
- (3) Jesus is by our side to help us bear the burden. We just have to be willing to accept his help.

When we meet for youth group, we turn in our phones to be fully present. When we eat together, move the meal to the table instead of in front of the television. Go deeper with each other to forge those meaningful relationships. Get involved in things you feel passionately about. Show up for the community, each and every chance you get. Forge a real relationship with someone in a marginalized group and consider inviting them here.

We have real world issues as a church, and we have to use our abilities of church as culture to tackle these issues and accomplish the goals outlined in today’s readings. We must have the hard conversations and we will have to repeat them. Kyle has been saying this for decades: Hold on tight because we are going to need each other this week. We yoke ourselves to one another

physically at the end of each service when we hold hands; we yoke ourselves to each other with prayer; we yoke ourselves to one another through community building, Sunday School, mission trips, church potlucks, workdays, tithing, and by showing up when we are needed. And if we are yoked to Jesus, which inherently yokes us to one another, we'll be able to make it through. So listen up, because God is calling to you, beautiful ones, and saying "Arise, come, come with me, and hold on tight. We really are going to need each other this week".

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One True God, Mother of us all.
Amen.

Referenced scripture: Psalm 45:10-17