Generation to Generation

Psalm 78:1-7 Kimby Young

2 Timothy 1:1-10 September 17, 2017

We have set aside today as Senior Adult Sunday. It’s a common practice in a lot of churches to designate a day for honoring our older adults. Here, at First Presbyterian Church of Gardner, the deacons started the ball rolling this year, as we were planning a better way of recognizing the gifts of our many members and celebrating those who have been with us for a long time. The challenge is how exactly to do that. Because frankly, let’s admit it, some people don’t want to be called senior or older adult. Where do you start that designation? If we go with AARP – senior adults include most of us in this room – including me. If you start counting a little higher than that 50-55 year old range, maybe starting with those who are retired – well then, that varies a great deal too. Frankly some of you have flunked retirement. Just where do you start counting a person as older or senior or worthy of honor and respect? Honor your father and mother. From a child’s perspective a 30 year old is ancient. So as we began talking about this – not wanting to offend anyone – to include someone who didn’t want to be included or to leave out someone who did want to be recognized – we decided to just let you decide. If you think of yourself as a senior – we honor you today. If you are a long term member of this congregation – we thank you for your service and your contributions. Today is not about labeling and dividing. Today is about honoring and recognizing those who have gone before us, those who have shaped our faith and helped us to become who we are. And for those of us who are older, today is about accepting the challenge of continuing to serve, of continuing to be a witness to God’s great goodness, and continuing to share the blessings of faith we have received from those who have gone before us.

Our faith is dependent on one generation teaching another generation. There’s an old saying in the church that “the church is just one generation away from extinction.” If we do not pass on the faith we value, it will not continue. As we see from our reading from the Psalm for today, it has always been so. The Psalm says “things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us - We will not hide them from our descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, God’s power, and the wonders God has done.” We will tell the story – the old old story of Jesus and God’s love. That’s what church is all about. That’s what we honor here today – those of you who have kept the faith, and kept the church going – who have lived well and loved generously. We thank you and we pledge to do the same.

When I was at my continuing education conference in June, I got into a heated discussion about the future of the church. I happened to be in a room with a bunch of retired pastors and several of them were lamenting the decline of the church and regretting what they had worked so long to build up was falling apart. They were despairing of the next generation – the generation that doesn’t go to church, that doesn’t do things the way they did things. It was a gloom and doom discussion. So I spoke up. Because I don’t see it that way. The young people I know are fabulous. The young people I know are deeply spiritual. They are seeking God. They are looking for answers. They are trying to do the right thing. They are working to make the world a better place. Yes, they are doing things differently than their elders. But the world is dramatically different for them than it used to be. They might not attend church weekly. But they are sharing God’s love. They are following Jesus Christ. They are serving and caring in the world. God will sustain the church – as God has carried the church forward for generations. It may look different in 50 years than it does now, just as it looks different now than it did five hundred or a thousand or two thousand years ago. But absolutely, God will continue the work of Jesus Christ. God will continue the story of grace and goodness. God will sustain the family of faith as God has done for generation upon generation upon generation.

Why I say this today, on senior Sunday – is to promise our seniors – your legacy of faithfulness will live on. God will make it so. Because of the stories you shared, the prayers you prayed, the mission, the service, the love you lived, because of your faithfulness and dedication – Jesus Christ lives today and will live on tomorrow. Thank you. Thank you for all that you have done to sustain Christ’s church and share God’s love.

But let me add – your part is not done. As long as we are living, we can’t sit back and leave it to others to be faithful. There is more work to be done in Christ’s kingdom. And each of us has a job to do. As the second reading for today from 2 Timothy reminds us, “fan into flame the gift of God that is in you… For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” Paul urges all of us to never quit – to share our faith, to tell the story of Jesus, and to work tirelessly to introduce others to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. No matter what your age, you still have job to do. Our seniors are being honored today. You are not being relieved of duty. Paul says, keep at it. Keep serving. Keep loving God and loving others.

As I was preparing this sermon, I am aware I have used that reading from Timothy several times in the almost two years that I have been here. It’s a favorite passage for me. It’s about heritage and responsibility. I like the way it starts – with the personal faith of Timothy and Lois and Eunice, with the family connection. This describes the kind of faith I received – passed down from my parents and their parents and theirs. I grew up in the church. Many of you did. I watch some of you sitting together in family groups and I smile to see grandparents and children singing together. Perhaps as you sit here today you remember and miss those whom you have sat with before in church. I remember praying with my parents as a child. Perhaps you do too. I remember hearing about the church my great great grandparents helped build in South Carolina. I love the stories my dad still tells from his childhood about sitting with his grandmother who lived with them and listening to Bible stories and singing faith songs. From generation to generation the faith continues. Maybe you did not learn your faith from your biological parents – but from church parents, church family members, church extended family – faith passed down from generation to generation. I love the story from scripture of Timothy and his grandmother Lois and in his mother Eunice, and I remember those who have taught me well and loved me fully. Remember those who have shared their faith with you, and give thanks.

But of course, the story doesn’t end there, nor the sermon. God is just barely getting started with us. We have been meeting on this corner in Gardner for over 150 years. We have a proud heritage of faithfulness and service to God and Gardner. We celebrate the good that has been done and the grace that has been shown. And today we celebrate your part in that story. But Paul says – don’t stop there. Don’t let us dare stop here. “Fan into flame this gift of God.” Keep sharing the stories. Keep living the love of God. Keep participating in mission and ministry. Keep imagining what God can do. What will be next for this congregation? What will be offered for the next 150 years? It is up to you – each and every one of you – to continue sharing God’s grace to the next generation, and for the next and the next and the next. What is it that you have to offer, that only you can give? Imagine. Listen to God’s call today, and respond.