

Sermon: Silent Booming X, Y, and Z

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Scriptures: Psalm 100; 1 Cor. 9:19-25; John 17:10-22

Like many young people, when I was old enough, I looked forward to getting my driver's license. There was something freeing about having the ability to get behind the wheel of a car and take off into the world on my own. One thing that made me feel like I'd "arrived" as a driver was the year I turned 17 and my courageous grandmother put her life into my hands by letting me drive her car as we ran errands, went to the movies, and took trips to the bookstore. When we did this, she would go the extra step to humor me by letting me put my music on in the car.

One summer, I remember being really excited to tell her all about this new CD single about which I had developed a very teenaged obsession. I put it on the radio waiting for her to fall in love with it as I had. I remember watching for her reaction as the music boomed through the speakers, but her face never really changed. When the song was over, perplexed, she simply said, "I could barely understand a word he was saying." Cue heartbreak. My teen self was incredulous because I understood every word of it so easily. It wasn't rap music or rock, it was a pop ballad by a man with a pleasant voice. I was so sure she would enjoy the song, and was so sad when she didn't "get it" like I did. I liked so much of her music. I grew up listening to oldies and country music, but Grandma could not get on board with Duncan Sheik. I think that very same day, she took me into a store that sold music and movies and bought me my first Frank Sinatra album. Perhaps that was her not-so-subtle hint that I needed a course correction in my music taste. I still listen to Old Blue Eyes to this very day.

But her dislike of my music got me thinking. Grandma was and is, still, so young at heart. It just never occurred to me she wouldn't like my songs. Looking back, I think that was *the* moment I became keenly aware of the years that separated us. We were from very different generations. My music wasn't her music. The generational divide was on clear display for me that day, just as it is in many of our churches today.

Some months ago, I had this idea to do a worship series wherein I would solicit questions, topics, and ideas about what you all would like to hear addressed in worship. While I try to meet you where you are, as I believe God meets us all where we are, I am not a mind reader. I wanted to offer up an opportunity for you to express areas of need that, I, in my finite human understanding, may miss. A member of our congregation sent me an e-mail asking if I could address, as part of this "People's Choice" series, the Generational divide we see in the church today and the challenges we face as a result. I think the hope is that I can help the younger generation understand those who came before them and vice versa.

No one can miss, looking around this room and thinking about our congregation, that there is a gulf covering the distance between the eldest and youngest members of Trinity. Our congregation spans the generations from the Silent Generation, to Baby Boomers, to Generations X, Y, Z, and ALPHA. Yes, Alpha. That's the generation of my youngest son and of all those 10 and under. Your 40-year-old pastor falls into an in-between category: X-ennial. I'm technically a millennial (That's GenY), but I identify more with generation X because I am so close to the edge of it. As we think about the generations, we might wonder about what it is, specifically, that separates us. Yet we know that even one generation of difference can produce a chasm of change that alters collective group characteristics. The reason I identify somewhat differently than my same age peers isn't just because I started school earlier, it is because the line that separates the generations, while physically invisible, is nonetheless evident in behavior, culture, interests, style, personality traits, and many other measures. There is a reason we broadly group people this way, but there are also problems that arise when we delineate groups of any kind. There's also a great level of misunderstanding about what ages belong to which generations. Millennials are still being maligned as teens, when they are all now between the aged of 26-41. The teens we complain about? They're generation Z. Not millennials.

All this to say, if there is such a distinct difference a single generation before or after ours, we must consider how great is the chasm between our... most distinguished, wisest members and our inquisitive youngest members. How do we relate to one

another with differences as large as the ones we face generationally? The person who brought up this topic happens to be doing a fabulous job of navigating that divide, but sees what I see and that is, the importance of finding other ways to strengthen the ties that bind us and build bridges across that age-related chasm. The bad news, of course, is that no one has perfect answers for how to bridge that divide. If you all find this difficult to navigate as a congregation, imagine being a leader, lay or clergy, and trying to find a way to serve all ages in our worship time together each week. The good news, however, if you choose to interpret it that way, is that this challenge is not unique in our church nor is it exceptional in this age of *doing* church.

We are not alone in this struggle, which is comforting to a point. The church across the western world is faced with big questions about its future as we discussed in worship just two weeks ago. One of our biggest issues is that the “need” to belong to a church, that was characteristic of the Silent and Baby Boomer generations, is one that fewer people of generations X, Y, and Z feel beholden to. Even megachurches are wrestling with challenges in addressing and keeping membership of these folks as they age out of accompanying their parents to church. We look at dwindling numbers in worship and are left asking questions like, “How do we increase attendance?” “Why is giving down?” “How do we appeal to young families without compromising our core beliefs and way of being?”

It’s natural to be concerned over these things, but acting because of fear is not a church growth strategy. I would argue that our worries over these particular issues are missing the point of church and that the worry/fear/anxiety we give into is doing the very thing we’re told most *not* to do in scripture. I haven’t counted them myself, but I read an estimate once that claimed there were 365 references in scripture that gave some form of Jesus’s own command “do not be afraid,” one for every day of the year. Fretting about attendance, giving, and our appeal are not methods of growing the church, let alone approaches to “being the church.”

The questions we face are far more complex than asking what’s appealing or why numbers are dropping. I read this week that only 7% of people between the ages of 18-29 identify as white evangelicals. Seven percent. Lest we incorrectly think we need to

be more mega-church like because they've got it all figured out, these statistics shake us back to reality. The numbers are sobering. The problem isn't that we aren't doing things as "successfully" as the "popular" evangelical megachurches. The problem is bigger than that. The questions we need to address have more to do with our collective sense of belonging and the work of meaning-making and community building than they do with being more "hip" or evangelical-like. As an X-ennial, I can tell you that, were I looking for a church right now, I'd be looking for one that was actively engaged in serving the community and that offered room to explore and grow spiritually.

As we think about the challenges faced by a church whose membership spans 5+ generations, we might be tempted to look back at the early church. We might even go as far back as Abraham and the covenant made between him and God, which specifically foretells of God's love for Abraham and all the generations that will follow him. In Genesis 22:17, the Lord God blesses Abraham saying God will make his "offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore." Mentions like this in scripture remind us not just that we are connected across time and space to the ancient Abrahamic line, but they also remind us that we worship a God who, millennia ago, *cared* about each generation, including the generations that fill our pews on Sunday morning.

If we think that we under this roof face generational challenges, think about how many generations separate us from Abraham and the writers of the Torah or the prophets. Think about how many generations separate us from the incarnate God and his teachings while he was among us in the flesh. Think about how many generations separate us from Paul and the activity of the early church. Think about how many generations separate us from the early church fathers at the First Council of Nicaea in fourth century or those who led a revolution in Christian thought during the Reformation of the sixteenth century. All this time and change that separates us from these people and their texts, yet here we sit trying to make sense and meaning out of it. I think that's significant. That the church has survived in this form for as long as it has means something. That we try week after week, day after day to make sense of teachings given by, to, and about generations we cannot fully understand is something to be

celebrated. Yet I think we can all agree that there is much we do not understand about these people and their lives and about the still-speaking Creator of all that is and was and ever shall be.

And ultimately, that's what this question is about: understanding. How do we begin to understand one another in a time when we witness daily how differences between individuals are driving us further from one another? How do we make and find meaning in a purple church with generations that span two centuries? How do we make sense of what the Triune God calls us to when we can't make sense of one another?

Understanding is our challenge and it's one we must rise to because it is an essential part of the call of Jesus to love God and love our neighbors.

Paul reminds us of the challenges of building the body of Christ and of serving God and the diversity of God's creation in his first letter to the church at Corinth. Paul speaks in chapter 9 of the ways in which he has worked to meet people where they are. In order to do that, we could say that Paul becomes something of a chameleon. Beginning at verse 20 of chapter 9, Paul writes, "To the Jews, I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak," he says, "I became weak to win the weak." He has become all things to all people in order to serve God in Christ for the sake of the gospel.

Perhaps we cannot be all things to all people, and, while I believe Paul worked as hard as anyone ever has for the sake of the gospel, it strains credulity that he, a human being, could become all things to all people. We cannot be all things to all people, but we can work together to meet people where they are. When we work with children, we meet them where they are, do we not? I do not expect children to glean the same lessons from the main sermon, but simplify those messages so as to speak to the kids where they are. In the same way, we should work together to meet one another where we are whenever and wherever possible. All of this work we do is to share the good news of God's all-encompassing, blessed love and his redeeming work in Jesus Christ.

That same Jesus offers a prayer in John 17, which addresses our need to unite despite all obstacles that may try to stand in the way. Jesus prays, “My prayer is not for them [the disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will come to believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one...” This is not a throw-away line added to a meaningless prayer; it is an earnest longing of the heart of God, made incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, sent to show us The Way God calls us to follow. He prays in verse 23 that we, as Christ’s body in the world, may be “brought to complete unity” through the presence of the Holy Spirit and in the teachings and ministry of Jesus. That unity is not going to be something easily gained, or it would already be done. It is something we must work toward—and that work will not always be easy.

Many a minister has tried to reach all ages in worship. Intergenerational worship, however, is not a simple, tidy thing and it’s not something a minister does alone. It takes the whole community. The work of the church in service, worship, and fellowship is not something for the old *or* the young. It is for both the old *and* the young *and* everyone in between. It would be nice if I could, in a sermon, help the “old” see through the eyes of the “young” and vice versa. That’s not something I can teach in a sermon. Perhaps television programs can give us glimpses into the lives of other generations and groups we are not a part of and I know there are many stories to be told. But I don’t think any story I told my grandmother, no matter how impassioned I was about Duncan Sheik’s song, was going to help her appreciate what I appreciated about that song. The important thing about that moment, for me, at least, was that my grandmother tried. She met me where I was in all my teen angst and music appreciation, and then, I, in kind, met her where she was as we perused the music of her era.

Because the truth is that we are different across the generations, but we are also different within our own generation. While it’s good to discuss, calmly, areas where we differ, we cannot get bogged down in our differences. We must instead reach across those divides. Some areas of disparity cannot be resolved, but that does not mean our relationships must be marred because of them. We are not the same. We will have many disagreements, but we have much more in common than we think. When we

focus on our differences to the exclusion of what we have in common, we risk allowing those differences to break us.

And the other part of that is that we need to stop seeing our differences as a weakness; they're actually an asset. Can you imagine if everyone in the church was only good at one thing or passionate about just one part of church? Like, maybe everyone in the church plays the organ. So when we call on people to use their gifts, everyone runs to the organ. That's great that we have such a pool of talented organists, but in the meantime, we've got no preacher, no readers, no acolytes, no Christian educators, no treasurer, no consistory or worship committee, no cooks or bakers, no one interested in working with other churches or serving the community or attending conference and association meetings. We've got no one to care for the physical building or take care of business in the office. We've got no one who can do pastoral care because *everyone* loves and can do just one thing. Yes, we'd get along because we have the same interest, but that sameness would come at the cost of being a functioning body of Christ. Unity does not necessarily mean being indistinguishable from one another. Christ's prayer isn't that they will all become identical or fall victim to sameness, but that we are one in him as he is one with the motherly Father and the Spirit. What I'm saying here today before all of you is that all of us, regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ability have the capacity to make a difference in the world and in the church. We all contribute to the building of the Kin-dom of God. Jesus prayed that all of them will be one. And "it takes all kinds," as they say, to make that prayer a reality. Amen.