

Generation to Generation

Rev. Heather Concannon

Preached at UUAC Sherborn

February 21, 2016

About a year or so ago, I was at a minister's dance party.
Yeah, it was kind of like a slightly less great version of what you saw me and Otto bust out.
This dance party (which happened to be at a minister's retreat)
Was pretty interesting.
So, there I was, dancing with my closest minister-friends, who happen to be around my age,
And then the next song comes on, and I feel like it's time to take a break from dancing
Get some water, rest my legs,
You know the deal.
And then a song later another song I want to dance to comes on
And I hustle back on to the dance floor so I don't miss rocking out to Miley Cyrus's "Party in the USA".
And this happens a few more times
Where a song comes on that I don't know
Or don't like
Or don't know how to dance to
And I leave the floor
And then a whole bunch of songs I've never heard play in a row
And I notice that a whole bunch of my colleagues who are 15 or 20 years older than me are dancing
Having a fantastic time!
And I'm sitting to the side with my closest minister friends, a little closer to my age,
Many of us went to seminary together
And I start to notice this pattern
Of mass exodus or onslaught off of or onto the dance floor, every time a song comes on from a different era.
And I realize: we are all having this dance party, people as young as 24, 25, and as old as their 70s... 80s, maybe...
We are having this dance party all together,
But none of the generations are dancing together.
And I find myself feeling a little bad about this, but I'll also confess:
I have NO IDEA how to dance to the songs I made some of you dance to.
Seriously, Smells Like Teen Spirit? Does that even have words? How on earth are you supposed to dance to that?
Nathan, I'm looking at you.
I feel awkward and stiff dancing to that music

More so than I usually do, I mean (there's a reason Otto and I prepared—ministerial privilege)

So I just did a little crowdsourcing (such a Millennial thing to do, right?) and picked the songs and prayed a little bit that *you all* would know how to dance to them.

And I'll also confess, at this ministers dance party, where the Gen Xers were in the heavy majority That my friends and I got a little irritated That they were playing so much music from before our time That we didn't know how to dance to And I even eventually went up to the DJ To request a song that I would know how to dance to. Which might *actually* have been when Miley or Taylor finally came on.

So there we were, all in one community, trying to dance to each other's songs Or at least generously tolerating taking turns having our songs played. And it strikes me that it's not unlike church sometimes Listening to each others songs while someone else dances Finally going up to the DJ to say "hey, could you play my song now?" Which—I will add—may or may not have been the best thing to do in that situation But I like to think that at least I did it politely.

In thinking about what to say about cross generational connections and communities

I went through a few dozen stories about multigenerational community that I'm not going to tell you today

Because they were all too saccharine and sweet and trite and not quite real enough.

I even called up my mom, who has a better chronicled memory of my childhood

Growing up in church than I do, at least for the details,

to ask her, "Mom, did I ever have any really sweet relationships with elders in the churches we grew up in, like Emma did?"

My mom is not a sugar-coater.

She simply said "uh, nope".

Because I think the truth is:

The centrifuge of our subconscious and the bias of segregation can spin us back into like groups

whether we are talking about race, or gender, or age.

Did you know that the average American is as segregated by age in our daily lives and our communities at the same rates as whites are from Latinos?

So why wouldn't we revert to these habits at church?

These cultural biases

The centrifugal force of segregation?

But we say that church is the place we come to practice being the people we want to be

So we try to consciously break these habits:
We sign up to be Mystery Friends
We get paired with people of different ages in Art in Bloom
We say “yes” enthusiastically when asked to be mentors in our youth Coming of Age program
We volunteer to teach Religious Education.
Because church is one of the last places in our society, beyond the extended family,
Where people of all generations—hopefully—come together for a greater purpose.

Age segregation is a relatively recent phenomenon,
Largely stemming from the industrialization era.
Fueled by rise of the nuclear family, especially in regards to housing
And our intensely age-based schooling system
It is now so intense that many Americans are able to go about their daily lives
Without interacting with anyone more than 10 years older or younger than them
And more likely, if we are under 22, only a year or two difference.

And I think there is value in being with people of similar ages and stages—to be able to explore and make meaning with people who are in similar developmental or life stages as you,
to be able to connect with peers.

Whether that is the Senior Youth Group or the Elder Men’s group or the Mom’s group.

To expect that a Kindergarten Spirit Play participant and a Senior Youth Group member and a member of the Circle of Elders has the same needs in terms of religious or human development would not fulfill the needs of either group.

But we also lose something important when we are only around our age peers.

One of the things I most missed when I went to college was interacting with people of different ages from me.
In high school, I did a lot of babysitting,
Mostly for my mom’s friends kids, all from our church
These women who were my mom’s age, or slightly younger
Who I had grown up around, who were like aunts to me,
Mentoring me, giving me rides, asking me annoying but affectionate questions about college, or my friendships,
And I, in turn, building a strong relationship with their kids
Younger people who also mentored me as much as their parents did.
Sometimes we would hang out in their kitchen over a cup of tea,
After they had gotten home, me having put their kids to bed while I was babysitting,
And talk about our lives.
I got advice and support and friendship, over those many years and cups of tea.

I valued being able to turn to someone who had a little bit more perspective than my peers might have had,

but not SO much perspective or opinions as my parents might have had.
I missed that, when I moved to college.
Their kids drew me pictures that I hung on my college dorm room walls.
My church gave me those relationships.

Research shows that for people at all life stages, in all generations,
meaningful relationships with people much older or much younger
than us creates significant benefits to our wellbeing.
It disrupts prejudice,
Creates a greater sense of shared community, and understanding of one another's
needs,
And gives opportunities to see the world through a different lens.
Because let us not forget that when we talk about the many generations in this
room—
And I say “multigenerational”, instead of “intergenerational”
Because “inter” implies between two, and “multi” means more than two
And as we saw when we got up and danced, we have at least five generations in the
room right now
And some theories would even say we have seven.
Even when children and youth are at Religious Education classes, they only
represent one or two generations
And the people we consider “adults” still make up four or five generations
themselves.

So much of what defines a generation is not only what life stage someone is in
But also the cultural forces that have shaped perspectives, experiences,
opportunities.
I was in 8th grade when September 11th happened,
A formative time for understanding international politics, the use of political
rhetoric, and religious fear,
I got my first cell phone when I went to college
And in my early 20s, I had conversations with preteens
About racism, whose primary association with the word “racism”
Was anti-Muslim and anti-Arab ideas
Which hadn't crossed my mind growing up, before September 11th.
And those same preteens, who asked me how I lived without a cell phone!
These preteens, possibly even technically in the same generation as me,
But their daily lives, routines around communication, ideas about race and racism,
Understandings of society
So shaped by the time they had been born into.
This is true for each of us
Whether we were born when families didn't have household telephones or TVs
Or whether we remember getting our first microwave
Or whether we remember climbing under desks in school during the Cold War
Or whether we remember Kennedy's assassination, or September 11th,
Or were drafted for war or signed up willingly or protested it.

How we prefer to communicate, how we think about technology, what we understand about the role of the government and wars and race—all mediated by the formative experiences we've had in the larger world.

The gift and the challenge, then, in religious community and in faith formation is finding opportunities and balancing both:

Time with our age and stage peers

And building relationships across our generations.

Because if church is one of the last places of cross-generational connections

Then of course we need to be extra intentional about building and choosing those connections,

Because they won't happen organically

Unless we water them and give them sunlight.

Our faith calls us to build the beloved community

And that includes toddlers and elders, and everyone in between.

It requires us to build that spiritual muscle of patience and generosity

When worship is not as quiet as we might like

Or if we are asked to slow down and walk during coffee hour because someone's balance isn't what it used to be.

Or if we are singing music we don't love

Because we know that sameness is easy but difference is where the growth happens

And our task is nothing less than growing souls

Young and old

Millennial and Baby Boomer

And whoever comes next.

May it be so, and Amen.