

“More than Institution, a Movement”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I'm a “tweener.” It took me a while to figure that out. But I realized, as I'm looking at this different age bracket, supposedly you are a “baby boomer” if you were born between 1945-1964. Now you are a “Generation X” if you were born between 1961-1981. So you have this like 2-3 year gap in here where you are both and neither, you're both a baby boomer and not a baby boomer, and a Generation Xer and not a Generation Xer. This is important stuff to me, because I was born in 1962 - right in that “tweener” period.

I'm young enough that I do not remember “Howdy-Doody,” which is what you watched when you are a baby boomer; but, thank goodness, I'm too old to think that the TV show “Friends” cast were cool. They drove me nuts. Grow up! Act like a grown up. I was too young to ever use the word “groovy,” [laughter] but I'm too old to ever have said, thank goodness, “I want to get my jiggy on.” And, thank goodness, I'm too ancient to ever have said or talk about myself, “in the way I roll.”

I'm a tweener. I don't quite fit anywhere. And, while these labels kind of tick me off because I don't fit with any of them, they are helpful - to help understand how we relate to each other. They help us to understand generationally who we are, what our stories and experiences are, and how we can relate to each other.

We have people in their late 90s in this congregation who are still vibrant, and we have children who we are going to be guiding and nurturing this week in Vacation Bible School, all living in this same house, trying to do one ministry to Jesus Christ, and we all have to figure out how to get along. We have to figure out how to relate to each other and to share that ministry.

So I'm going to try and help today, because it's not that much different than what Zechariah was trying to deal with, with his contemporaries in the Bible. They, too, were influenced by their history, their generation. They were the generation caught in the “tweener” time. They were caught between the first Temple period - where that Temple was destroyed - and they were living toward the next Temple that was going to be rebuilt. But they were living in this “tweener” time where they didn't know how to find God; because if there wasn't a “Holy of Holies” in the Temple, where do you go to find God? We are trying to find that today. Where do we find God and does God even exist?

Now, in my generation and in those older there never would have been a question. Where I grew up and in the age I grew up in when I was in high school, there might have been 2-3 Jewish kids in the whole school. Everybody else was - I won't even say “Christian.” I don't remember using the word “Christian.” We defined ourselves by whether you were Lutheran, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic. It was all about your denomination and we all talked about it all of the time. Not you guys [speaking to the senior high mission trip attendees]. If anyone where I grew up had said they didn't believe in God, we would have thought they were the “devil.” We wouldn't have known what to do with them, and we certainly would have gossiped about their parents, who were not doing a very good job of raising them apparently.

That is not your [senior high mission trip attendees] experience. It has changed so much. That is why it's so hard sometimes for the rest of us to know what you are going through and how to relate to it - because it all started actually with "Generation X" so let me explain that to you. Generation X was the first generation where Church was not the hub of social activity; they were the first ones that life did not focus around God and their Church. They didn't understand what it meant to have everything be Church. Now to you guys [senior highs] that is normal - not to most of the rest of us - and how we respond to that is so vitally important.

Now I put in your bulletin a poem by Christopher Fry, and I will read it and you can follow along if you would like. It helped explain a little bit about what we need to do to get to the place where we can have a new movement - to where the Church can be vital again.

Christopher Fry said:

The human heart can go to the lengths of God.
Dark and cold we may be, but this
is no winter now. The frozen misery
of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
the thaw; the flood, the upstart spring.
Thank God our time is now when wrong
comes up to face us everywhere,
never to leave us till we take
the longest stride of soul men ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration into God.

I love that word "enterprise." He had to have been a Trekkie. [Laughter.] We are being sent out, but we are also called to be sent in. A lot of churches are really good at Social Justice, but they forget the spiritual coming into God and into our hearts, and the relational aspects of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Then you have other churches that are exceptionally good at talking about "my personal relationship with God." It becomes so selfish because it becomes "me and my God," and "me, me, me and my God," that they forget about anyone else and they forget about social justice.

It is very hard to be a church that can do both, but that is what God has called us to do in the pain and suffering of this world; as it describes in the breaks and cracks, and begins to move. The soul is uplifted by the internal relationship with God that motivates us - moves us. Only then can we reach out into the world that so desperately needs to hear the ministry of Jesus Christ. That is what you [Senior Highs going on their mission trip] are going to be doing when you are in Miami. You may be laying on the beach a little bit too, but you are there to nurture your faith in God through Jesus Christ. But, not just so you can have a "groovy" (I did that for the "baby boomers") and good time with God. [Laughter.] But, also so you can touch lives and make a difference in Christ's name in the world and the place in the world where you are going. That is our call for all of us.

Now, I read a wonderful book by Carol Howard Merritt, entitled "Refraining Hope: The Vital Ministry of a New Congregation." I read it because I heard her at a conference a

couple of years ago. She was marvelous and she is younger - in her 40s - but she fits in that Generation X. I think she was born in the mid-to late-1970s so, oh, man, she is young [laughter] - at least for me - but so brilliant.

She talks about “Generation X,” so if you are in “Generation X,” here is who you are: I will describe it to you right now. Or, if you are older or younger, it helps frame [that age category] as I describe the changes and how you are different. For “Generation X,” everything is “mega.” You have “mega” shopping malls. When I was young, I remember when the first mall came to town and it upset the downtown. They [Generation Xers] don’t remember a downtown being vital. Remember they were born between 1961-1981. Wal-Mart was the place you go for “Generation X.” Everything is mega including church. The neighborhood church for “Generation Xers,” was in decline, and just like mega malls, and mega this and mega that, you had mega churches. Bigger was better. Christianity became consumer-driven. It wasn’t about what we can do with our mission. It’s about how can you serve me, God? How can you serve me, Church? “Church-shopping” became a term during “Generation X.” Do you have what I’m looking for? If you don’t, I’ll go to that other denomination. When I was kid we talked about what denomination we were. Not anymore, because you go where they meet your needs. You are no longer defined by your denomination.

There is a new movement afoot. We are tired - even “Generation X” people are tired - of the self-serving “me, me, me.” There is a change. We feel it in society. Mega malls, mega groceries and mega churches are beginning to slip. Acoustic music is now bigger than arena rock. Ken and I were talking this week, kind of frustrated because for the last seven years acoustic guitars were out-selling electric guitars. You don’t need amplifiers. You can play it anywhere. It is great for small venues because it is more intimate, and we want more intimate. We would now rather go to the little store to buy our groceries or even better the farm market, than Costco, or Wal-Mart, or Sam’s Club, to get our groceries. There is a change afoot. People are even buying smaller homes. There is even a show about tiny homes now. I don’t want it to go that far. I can’t climb up to the top area. [Laughter.] They want smaller homes, so they have more money, so they can make memories and show off, placing their memories on Facebook. [Laughter] I just read an entire article about how sad people were because their lives never lived up to Facebook. It made me feel so much better, because the article said their lives aren’t living up to what they are putting on Facebook. [Laughter.]

Many of our stories are generational. My generational story does not include showing off on Facebook, but it has my own story that influences who I am. Your story influences who you are. Their stories, which no longer even deal with Facebook - because you guys are on Instagram, and God knows whatever else that I don’t want to know about, frankly.

But listen to their stories for just a moment. I told you a story about Willie Glanton being the first African-American woman to hold office in this state in 1964. In 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr. was still alive. In 1964, they [racist individuals] were still – sadly - in parts of this country, hanging African-American men and women from trees. She [Willie Glanton] stood up representing us. That is a strong person. She is part of our story, part of their story.

Sometimes we get frustrated with old people because we allowed - as a society - that kind of injustice to exist. But it isn't always fair to judge everyone by the same brush stroke; the way we shouldn't say all high school students are lazy, so focused on video games they can't do anything else. That is not fair, for most of you. (Just teasing.)

It isn't fair to say that about all older people - that they are all prejudiced. They have come a great long way. And, in this congregation, to have Luther and Willie being courageous enough not only to represent us in the state and around the country and around the world, but to represent Westminster; and for Westminster to accept them in 1953. It is an amazing example for all of us to follow and emulate as we move forward in faith. We were interracial before there was a term for it, here at Westminster; and that movement needs to continue as Christianity transforms in the weeks, months, years and decades to come.

Zechariah's time was fearful but there was hope for renewal in the second Temple. Our time is fearful as our churches decline [in attendance]. We lose emphasis, we lose power. We lose the ability to transform our world. Authority is no longer something to be respected, but to be questioned. When I was growing up you respected authority. You said, "yes, ma'am." You said, "Yes, sir," if you were stopped by the police. It was how high do I jump and what do I do?

Now everything from our clergy to our policemen to our politicians is under question, and no one has the right to authority, because we have ruined it all. In great part, I think that came because of Watergate and then everything else. For clergy, well, Jimmy Swaggert didn't help us. With prostitution, certainly all of the clergy who were involved in very bad abuses did not help the Church. But more than the Church, we helped destroy respect for authority. Sometimes authority is necessary. Somehow we have to reclaim that in a positive way.

We also need to affirm how we relate to other people. We were wonderful about mission in the past, but Carol Howard Merritt said we need to change the way we do mission. We were amazing in the way we did it in the 1950s. We had mission organizations. We had mission committees, but it was mainly charity. You go back to that old phrase, "Give a person a fish and she eats for a day. Teach that person to fish and you will feed her for a lifetime."

We are learning now, as part of this new movement in the Church, how not to do charity, but how to do mission in such a way that it can change lives, so that people can take care of themselves over the long term. We are no longer just sending food to El Salvador, we are sending fertilizer so they can do it themselves. That is just one tiny example of the movement and the transformation in how we do Church. We have to learn from each other. Even those who we are providing assistance to are not to be beat down, but are one of us. That is something the Church needs to continue to work on.

We need to push ourselves to be more comfortable in uncomfortable situations; to study, to struggle, to strive, and we can do it. We are doing it in so many ways. It requires radical compassion, according to Carol Merritt. It means opening our minds and offering a loving heart. It means a movement where social justice is more than just being an advocacy group. If all this Church is about is social justice, they do it a whole lot better in another venues. But if all we are is a spiritual group of about me and my God, then we are not fulfilling the

Gospel. It is both/and. Doing social justice, caring for others in Christ's name, bringing our hearts and our compassion together, and reaching out. We are doing a great job of it, and we are going to continue to improve that call. We need to learn from "Generation Xers," and the "Millennials."

The biggest thing we need to learn is how to be open. In Waterloo there was this wonderful woman. I could argue with her all of the time, but we got a long great because we both like to argue with each other. I think I have told you this before. One day she got so frustrated with me. (She was in her 70s then, maybe 80s.) Anyway she said, "Scott, I want younger people here. I just want them to do it my way." [Laughter.] I loved it because she was so honest.

"They are not going to do it our way anymore," I said to her. It was one of those moments. (I'm good two hours later, I know what to say two hours later.) But I hit it once with her, maybe because I felt so comfortable with her. I said, "It's not about you anymore. It's not about me. You get to a place where you are supposed to have such spiritual maturity and depth that you don't have to worry about yourself as much. You turn to those who need it more than you; who need to learn, who need to strive and struggle; you're there now for them – not for you."

That was a transformative moment that she took back to her Circle and to other places in the Church. We became a more mature congregation, a more faithful congregation from that moment forward - and it is our task here. The movement is about becoming mature enough so that we can reach out to those, no matter what their age, who either don't know Christ, or don't trust Christ, or don't want anything to do with Christ. We have a much more difficult task now.

Talk to them sometime - those in high school - and ask them "how many of your friends go to Church? How many of your friends call themselves atheists? How many are struggling?" And they will say, "The vast majority."

It is our task to guide them in maturity. What they need to do is get to a place, so they can guide a society that is no longer "Howdy Doody" and go to Church. It's, "Do you have a reason, Church, to exist?"

Now before "baby boomer" and back, it was not a problem. You knew you were going to go to Church, it was just which one. We have to earn the right again to exist. We have to show that we are worthy to have a voice and we are not doing a very good job of it, mainly because we are not tooting our horn loud enough. We are not moving beyond charity; and they need us to do that or there won't be anyone left. We need a movement and we owe it to younger people to make it happen.

God answered Zechariah and the people's prayer and brought the Temple back. We don't need another Temple. We need another movement where God through Jesus Christ becomes relevant; where they can see that God is at work in the Social Justice we perform. They need to see that it is coming from a heart that is transformed by the love of God that makes us so loving and so compassionate we cannot turn away. It begins with each of us supporting each other, loving each other and encouraging one another. I hope we are doing that for you [senior highs], because I know you are doing that for us, especially on this trip. We look forward to hearing about what you have done and the lives you have changed, and

how it has affected your own life. That will only encourage us, through your example, for the rest of us to follow suit. I pray that from our own history and our own experience we will be bound together in a faith that will transform lives now and forever more. Amen