

HOW CAN I DESCRIBE THIS GENERATION?

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 11:16-19

One of the things that has piqued my interest in recent years has been the study of the various generations of American society, and their different and differing responses to the Christian church.

Now it is no secret that this church is a multi-generational organism. On the average Sunday, there will be three or four generations in this sanctuary for the worship of God.

There are a few of you left from the greatest generation. Journalist Tom Brokaw said that the generation that grew up during the great depression and went on to fight World War II is the greatest generation any society ever produced.

My parents were part of that generation, as were my aunts and uncles, and my in-laws, and I'm inclined to agree with Tom Brokaw.

I myself am a baby boomer, born between 1946 and 1964, born as part of the great post-World War II baby boom. My father got home from the service, and nine months to the day, I was born, and there were a lot of us like that! And there are a few of us like that here in this church.

But in between the Greatest Generation and the Baby Boomers, there is a generation that is oft ignored. They were born during the Great Depression or the Second World War, and they are known by some experts in the field as "The Lucky Few". So if you were born between the great stock market crash of 1929 and the end of World War II, you are part of the Lucky Few, and there are really a disproportionate share of those folks in this church.

After the Baby Boom came what is known as Generation X, our offspring, and these start as early as 1964 (some experts say as early as 1961 and extend through the 1970's. Some tie this generation to the Viet Nam War, saying they were born during that era. Others lump all offspring of Baby Boomers together in this generation.

Then come the Millennials, born after the Viet Nam War and before the Millennial year of 2000. I recently heard a seminary professor say that he was tired of teaching Millennials. He said that they hadn't read a book and they couldn't write a paper. They are also known as the Net Generation, as in the internet. They got all their information off the internet, and they cut and paste their responses to the questions the professor asked.

Many of the fastest growing churches in America are those which have set their goals, their vision statements, their mission statements, to meet the needs of the Generation X and Millennial Generation couples, singles, and families.

Then there is what some are calling Generation Z, and that is the children born since 2000, who will be the students at our Vacation Bible School this week. They are the most technologically savvy generation in the history of the world. They were born with a cell phone in one hand and a remote control in the other.

And somehow, the Christian church, the Presbyterian branch of it, and this particular Presbyterian Church, have to figure a way to minister to all those generations.

Paul Smith, pastor at Rivertown Community Church, says their church has set its goals in order to attract a 30 year old man.

I never in my life thought of setting a goal to attract a particular age group, or a particular gender, or even a particular generation. Maybe that is why churches like RCC are growing and the Presbyterian Church isn't.

My vision has been based on what the Apostle Paul once wrote: He said that he must become all things to all people that I might by all means save some.

The great risk in becoming all things to all people is losing our own identity, forgetting who or what we are supposed to be.

I was talking to a Southern Baptist friend this week, and he remarked that the newer, faster growing Southern Baptist churches don't use the name "Baptist" in their signage, in the name of their church. The same is true of many of our newer Presbyterian Churches. They are a "community church", or a "faith community" or a "worshipping community" or a "fellowship."

They've not only lost the denominational brand, they've scrapped the word "church".

Jesus described the generation to which He was preaching, teaching, ministering, as a generation that was like children in the marketplace, calling to one another, saying, "We played the flute for you and you did not dance, we wailed, and you did not mourn." There is a disconnect and a discontent, and nothing seems to satisfy. He said that John had come fasting, living the life of a monk, and they called him a demon, and a trouble maker, and they cut his head off, and then He Himself came, eating and drinking, and they called him a glutton and a drunkard, and they criticized Him for associating with tax collectors and other sinners.

Writing about this passage, William Barclay notes that Jesus was saddened by the sheer perversity of human nature. Some want to celebrate, to play the flute and dance, and others want to be sad instead. And so, when the first group says, "Then let's be sad," the reply is, "We don't feel like being sad anymore." He states: "They were what the Scots call contrary. No matter what was suggested, they did not want to do it; and no matter what was offered, they could find fault in it"

That's it! That's the state of the church! No matter what is offered, someone won't want to do it. And no matter what is done, someone will criticize it!

Barclay wrote:

The plain fact is that when people do not want to listen to the truth, they easily enough find an excuse for not listening to it. They do not even try to be consistent in their criticisms; they will criticize the same person and the same institution, from quite opposite grounds and reasons. If people are determined to make no response, they will remain stubbornly and sullenly unresponsive no matter what invitation is made to them. Grown men and women can be very like spoiled children who refuse to play no matter what the game is." *Matthew, Vol.2, P. 11.*

But wait! There is a punch line, there is a conclusion, there is the last thing that Jesus said on the topic: And Old Willie translated it like this:

“Wisdom is shown to be right by her deeds.’ The ultimate verdict lies not with the cantankerous and perverse critics, but with events. The Jews might criticize John for his lonely isolation, but John moved... hearts to God as they had not been moved for centuries; the Jews might criticize Jesus for mixing too much in the ordinary life and with ordinary people, but in Him people were finding a new life and a new goodness and a new power to live as they ought and a new access to God.

It would be well if we were to stop judging people and churches by our own prejudices and our own perversities; and if we were to begin giving thanks for any person and any Church who can bring people nearer to God, even if their methods are not the methods which suit us.” (Ibid.)

In my work with the Presbytery of Florida, I’ve discovered a lot of single generation churches. Well, they are two generation churches: they have a few of the greatest generation left, and they have a few of the “Lucky Few”, and that is it. Oh, they may have a Boomer or two, but no more.

And they are, for the most part, content in who they are, how they worship, the songs they sing, the music that is played. And they don’t have a children’s program, or a Vacation Bible School, or a Youth Group. And if someone came in playing a flute and wanting to dance, they’d say, “We don’t do that here.”

And if someone wanted to mourn the fact that there were no children or youth in the church, they’d say, “Well, they are noisy and messy, and we don’t have any space for them anyway.”

When you say your prayers tonight, thank God that you worship in a church where there are children, where there are youth, and if they aren’t here, wonder why they aren’t.

Wisdom is shown to be right by her deeds. Who we will be, what we will be, is determined by what we choose to be, and to do.

Let us pray.

Lord, when you pipe, may we dance. When you weep, may we mourn. And when we see others piping and dancing and mourning, may we neither judge nor criticize. May we be all things that we might be to save some, being always faithful to you. Amen.