

Sermon TUMC – August 21, 2016  
**Borders and Boundaries – On Welcoming Children**  
**Jeremiah 1:4-10, Mark 9:33-37**

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This morning, on the theme of borders and boundaries I'd like to talk about those between generations.

First, let me put you all into categories, pick one of these, according to your birth year. Which category do you belong in?

- Traditionalists or Silent Generation: Born 1945 and before
- Baby Boomers: Born 1946 to 1964
- Generation X: Born 1965 to 1976
- Millennials or Gen Y: Born 1977 to 1995
- iGen, Gen Z or Centennials: Born 1996 and later

BTW, there are many different ways of defining these categories. Sociologists and business people, marketers (and church researchers) use them to make general assessments of age cohorts. See if they ring true for you.

Let's start with an easy one, **communication styles**:

Traditionalists, you prefer face to face communication or letters.

Boomers, we apparently prefer meetings

Generation X you prefer email

Millenials you prefer email and voicemail

And iGen's I think it's safe to assume you seem to prefer texting or snapchat.

**How about strengths and weaknesses:**

Traditionalists: the chart I consulted does not have your strengths and weaknesses, sorry, you must not be part of their market.

Boomers: Loyal, hardworking, Patient, good mentors persevering, wise, strong sense of values. (Why do I feel like a boomer wrote the list?)

GenX: Adapatable, flexible, tech-savvy, goal oriented, socially proactive, politically proactive and responsible

GenY: tech-savvy, innovative, creative, confident, sociable, flexible, daring

Sorry, iGen, the chart I consulted did not care about you because you probably don't have jobs yet.

## The weaknesses

Baby boomers: resistant to change, low-tech, inflexible, too conservative, authoritative

GenX: impatient, lack attention to details, lacking in commitment, no loyalty, poor communicators

Gen Y: Impatient, lack focus, impulsive, no loyalty, high cost to company.

iGen: again, the no jobs thing.

*How did it feel to be put into an age cohort and have a set of value judgments imposed on you?*  
(Answers: Too general, annoying, stereotypical, restrictive, biased)

It's important to remember that many many of the categories we create, especially the age-related ones, vary from culture to culture. For example, in our culture, when our children get married, we assume that they will set up a home elsewhere. In other cultures, they are simply added to the family. When my sister lived in Nazareth it was common practice for homes to be 2 stories or more; as each child married, another floor was built on the main house.

These cohorts are not the way things ARE, they are one way of looking at our experience, or at a particular set of people grouped in a certain way.

There are many practical reasons why it might be helpful to put people into such categories. When it comes to programming, or Sunday School, these divisions *can* be very helpful in practical terms, because we are dealing to a large extent with learning and there are different skill sets and abilities. This is not a bad thing.

In churches, we tend to use a few generational categories. Some time back we tried a worship litany where people were to stand up according to age, and it was very awkward. What is middle age? We don't know how to draw those lines, we are not comfortable with it. We talk about nursery, children, junior youth, youth. Up to youth we think we have it figured out because we can use a parallel from school and that helps us to slot people in. But when it comes to young adults (though we struggle with naming this one here at TUMC, preferring the 20's and 30's designation), where's that line? And what is an adult, if not someone in their 20's and 30's, and possibly someone at 15 who decides to get baptized.

The danger is that when we set these kind of age-boundaries, we tend assume that there are important differences in our experiences, interests and tastes. This may or may not be true. We must be careful we don't assume too much about any particular age group, be it seniors or youth. I have my bias, we make a lot of assumptions about children and youth.

At church the generations are to be seen differently, the usual boundaries do not apply. I venture to say that the church needs to bear witness to the wonders of intergenerational community. To put it in "churchy" language terms, it means not to be programmatic; being intergenerational is missional. It is a way that the church is different in the world, it's a witness in the world.

Some of the previous sermons in this series on borders and boundaries have reminded us that when we gather as a church, we gather with Jesus at the center.

I would venture to say that Jesus might not be as interested in dividing us up in age categories as we are.

Did you notice how in our Mark passage, Jesus messed with the disciples' categories of greatest and least? How did he do that? What exactly did he say?

*Whoever **welcomes** one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

Children, in the first century (Jewish and Roman cultures) were insiders left on the outside. "They represented the future—they would carry on the family name, provide for their aging parents, and produce the next generation. But in the present, they were a liability, [another mouth to feed]. Small children, especially, were more likely to contract an illness and to die."<sup>1</sup>

In this interaction with the disciples, Jesus, on the one hand is doing his usual reversals, but on the other hand, he is actually talking about welcoming children! It's not metaphorical, it's about children. "It is not so much a question of who is great and who is not, but instead it is a question of welcome."

How **do** we welcome children in this church? (And by children in our context I mean anyone from womb to whenever "kids these days" finally mature.) **How** do we welcome children in this church?

Lets keep asking ourselves this question, because the answer, according to Jesus himself, is about how we are welcoming God in our midst.

One path of welcome I would like to especially encourage this morning, is that **we welcome children (and youth) as equals on a journey of faith.**

Think about it: *What are some of your early memories of God or of church?*

I'll share with you a couple of mine.

My parents were missionaries in Brazil, so I was in church ALL THE TIME growing up. Every service that there was at church our whole family was there, because we had to do everything as a family. We had Sunday School, but not children's time, and we had to sit still during the whole service.

I can still sing a song I learned in nursery Sunday School, probably when I was 4 or 5 (*Sou uma florzinha de Jesus*, I'm a little flower of Jesus).

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<sup>1</sup> (David True Wilson) <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/politics-mark-930-37-welcoming-child/>

*(This next one I know I told here at TUMC some time ago, but here it goes again.)*

One of my earliest memories of my own spirituality, my own connection with the Divine, comes from when I was about 7 years old . We were planning a picnic with another family and I was very excited about it, but as I lay on the backyard lawn and looked up to the sky, I could see that it looked like it was going to rain. Oh, no! This wonderful picnic was going to be ruined!

So I started praying: "Please, God, we are going to have a picnic, please, please don't let it rain!" Then it occurred to me that at that exact moment there might be someone who was praying for it to rain. What was God going to do? How was God going to answer both of those prayers?

When picnic time came – it drizzled! Not enough to ruin the picnic but enough that it had technically rained. And I thought, "God is a genius! God managed to answer both of the prayers at once!" It was a formative experience.

These experiences (of going to church, of learning songs, of growing up with a sense of prayer, a sense of the Divine in our lives) all helped form my faith, from a very early age.

When I was a teenager, before I was perhaps unduly influenced by biblical historical criticism and read the Bible mostly devotionally, this Jeremiah passage spoke to me, it was like God was talking to me, it *was* God talking to me.

"Before I created you in the womb I knew you... (Michele) Don't say, I'm only a child" Where I send you, you must go, what I tell you, you must say. Don't be afraid, I'm with you, declares the Lord."

Powerful stuff for a young teenager – who now at 50 something finds herself in ministry!

But I don't believe I am at all unique in having spiritual experiences as a child.

This Jeremiah passage is also telling us that God forms and knows us humans in the womb! It is part of how we are made to be in relation with the Divine.

Children, as full human beings, experience all the things that make other human beings, of any age, turn to God and others: love, gratitude, fear, anxiety, questions, hopes, etc. There is no magical lower or upper age limit or cognitive capacity that limits any of these experiences.

Author David Csinos reminds us that: ...Children have faith. They're born with the inherent gift of faith, a gift that can grow and change over time, but which is whole and real from the first moments of life. Children might not always be able to articulate or express their faith in ways that we can understand, but this doesn't mean that their faith is less real. Perhaps, in fact, it means their faith is *more* real, for it has yet to become encumbered by language and cultural norms and other human-created limitations that box in the full potential of faith."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/Topics/Passing-on-the-Faith/Passing-Faith-David-Csinos-09-19-2013>

“We need to be more concerned about children’s inner needs than about keeping them entertained at church” says one of the editors of the *Shine* curriculum we use in Sunday School. (Rose Stutzman<sup>3</sup>)

Those of you who have ever taught Sunday School know what I’m talking about. (*I remember Richard Ratzlaf once preaching on something that had come up from a conversation with a 4 year old.*)

It’s true, often you learn more than you teach at Sunday School. Isn’t that wonderful? This year I had a chance to sit in on the senior kindergarten class for a bit on Valentines Day. I was killing time until the teacher arrived, so I decided to go around the circle and try to name together who are the people in our lives that we love.

I expected that we’d list Moms, Dads, sisters brothers, but to a child, they each named each other! (Jacklyn, Ava, Lucas, Jarett) It was so beautiful, it was church for me that day! I can honestly tell you that I don’t remember the sermon, or anything in that service, but I remember witnessing those kids name their love for each other. In that moment, they were “not the church of the future, they were the church of today.”

*“Whoever **welcomes** one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*

We need to see children as full participants in the worshiping community.” So, this means – as we have named before, and as we celebrate here—that “children’s presence and noise are a sign of God’s kingdom.” I’m grateful that TUMC has come a very long way in knowing this and living this! God’s kingdom is not always convenient, is it? ☺

I could go on and on (and you’ll find links in my sermon online if you want to read further). Let me finish by offering us some collected wisdom about some small ways that we might continue to break down the boundaries between the generations and be more welcoming to kids:

(I want to stress again that I’m not only talking children, but also, youth or pretty much anyone you think you can condescend to because of their age. Throw that out, it’s different in church.)

- Let’s remember that congregational life is vital to the spiritual formation of children (and all of us!). Children are not on the sidelines.
- Let us tell our faith-shaping stories to each other, children, adults, youth. We learn by hearing each other’s genuine experience.
- Let us stay open to having young children wander among us during worship, letting them be the responsibility of each of us rather than making parents or grandparents feel they need to leave or manage on their own. We’ll keep them safe, but they’re with us. Don’t we all love Samantha who comes and wants to see all the action from the front? It’s a gift to the church.
- Let us as a congregation, decide not to condescend nor laugh at children during children’s time. I know it’s tempting; they’re so cute. But they’re having a genuine

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<sup>3</sup> *Faith Formation Involves us All*, by Rose Stutzman, Leader, Summer 2014.

faith experience, geared to their understanding (or at least that is what we're aiming for). They are not at the front to amuse us, they are at the front perhaps even to teach us. Let's try not to laugh, to respect that when we're doing church together. Except when it's actually funny – humour is still OK.

- Let us continue to take opportunities for inter-generational relationships by learning the names of kids and youth and each other. We work hard at keeping this a safe environment, and within that safety, it's OK for you to befriend the children. One of the researchers I read this week talked about how important is that each youth in the church have at least 5 significant adults within the congregation that they relate to, who aren't their parents.

Yes, you've hired me as Associate Pastor for youth, but that is why I need to tell you that it's your responsibility to seek out relationships with our children and our youth.

- (More ideas)<sup>4</sup>

*"Whoever **welcomes** one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

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<sup>4</sup> As parents, we have the power to help our children use memory to consider the meaning of their experiences, both good and bad. Consider the following questions, which you might use over dinner or (as we sometimes do) before bedtime.

What was something that made you happy today?

What was something that made you feel sad?

What are you looking forward to tomorrow?

These three simple questions can be a springboard for follow-up conversation: "Let's thank God for what made us happy; ask God to help us with what made us sad; and ask him to be with us tomorrow." And so on.

Children need Ignatian spirituality because it can help them learn the value of slowing down to take stock of what their lives mean. Many children today lead heavily programmed lives, limiting the time to develop creativity and independent thinking. It is good to teach them our language about God using traditional language-based methods (reading the Bible, learning our customs and beliefs, and so on)—but we suggest that it is also important to supplement those methods with encouraging exploration, reflection, and prayer. Every child learns differently and resonates with different ways of exploring the world. Encouraging your children to explore spirituality in this way may resonate with some children who less likely to sit down and read a Bible story. To the extent that we can encourage children to connect the word "God" with their very own concrete life experiences, we offer them an entry point into an expansive shared pilgrimage of faith.

<http://www.patheos.com/Topics/Passing-on-the-Faith/Why-Children-Need-Tim-and-Sue-Muldoon-08-20-2013>