

2nd Timothy 1:1-14 Ministry to/with the young

The 12 year old girl I mentor through Mentor Duluth, D'Leah, told me about a family experience she'd had when we met last week. D'Leah is Ojibwe, and I have noticed over the course of our 6 year relationship that her family and culture have a really strong sense of community. D'Leah's great-grandfather died a few weeks ago near White Earth, and she described to me how all of the family came together to grieve his death and perform the funeral rituals of her culture. There were over a hundred people present and 5 generations represented: her great-grandmother still lives, then her grandmother, her mother, herself, and the children of one of D'Leah's older siblings was present. 5 generations, and together they prepared the body for burial and performed the rituals, said the prayers, and placed the casket in the hole they'd dug. It was a sad time for her family, but I could tell she was glad she'd been a part of the experience and that she had been able to participate. I could also tell that through participating, she had learned something about her culture and beliefs, and that she felt some pride in them. Powerful things happen when generations, when young and old, share in significant moments together, mentor one another, and learn from one another, passing along their beliefs and values.

Here's a Sunday morning random fact for you: Did you know that this is the first time in history that there are 6 generations living? Due to the extended length of life that has been achieved relatively recently in the history of humanity? Perhaps some of you have 4, 5, or even 6 generations in your family living at present; maybe you got to experience that mix of young and old even over this past summer, when families often gather for reunions or vacation time. So, you know what it means to see one's family, as well as one's faith and values, carried on from generation to generation. It doesn't happen perfectly, of course, not just as we'd like it, but

still---there's a huge blessing in the interaction of generations. And church, when we stop to think about it, is one of the few places in our society where all the generations come together in an organized kind of structured way, in which relationships are encouraged. Yes, you might have people of all ages at a sporting or cultural event, but there's likely not quite the same relational component to such events as there is to church. Here our 90-somethings can sit next to children in the first decade of life, not only to worship, but to visit afterwards during coffee time, or to share together in eating or working at a Fishcake Supper or to delight in seeing a Holy Baptism for a great-grandchild, as we did when Bud and Vicky's great-granddaughter, Victoria, was baptized this last August, a 4 generation experience. Wasn't that the best? Church is a place for everyone, young and old, for all the generations.

In Paul's 2nd letter to Timothy, our first lesson this morning, he addresses both the importance of generations and of mentoring, of passing along our faith and values between generations. Timothy, we learn in this lesson, came to faith in part because of the faith of the generations of his family before him. Paul references how Timothy's grandmother and mother were both faithful Christians, and how that faith now lives within Timothy. And in fact, Timothy has not only benefitted from the witness and faith of the generations of his family; he has benefitted from Paul's tutelage. From what we can ascertain, Paul was a mentor to Timothy, an encourager, a supporter. It seems that Timothy was a young pastor at the time of this letter being written, and Paul, as a seasoned minister, is seeking to guide and encourage him. Paul understands the value of good theology; he writes to Timothy, "Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me." And Paul also perceives that faith is a gift that should be highly valued. He writes, "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you." Faith is a treasure, a

treasure that we both guard and spend for the good of the world. And faith is not only taught; it is caught; it is like a contagion, it rubs off on us as we encounter those around us, in our families, in our churches or communities, who take the time to be teachers, mentors, encouragers, friends.

This Sunday, once called Rally Day, is when we begin the educational component of Children's Church for k-2nd grade, and Kid's Connect, for 3rd grade and up, once again. This month, for the first time in decades, we also begin our own confirmation program for three young people in 7th and 8th grade. On such a day, it is crucial for us to think about children and young people and to reaffirm our commitment to them. We must ask ourselves-- How are we passing the faith on to them, how are we mentoring them, how are we welcoming them *and* what can we learn from them? Because the young do have something to bring to the table for *us*, don't they? In the Gospels, Jesus tells us that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child cannot enter it. He holds up the young as models of faith for us. Children aren't merely empty vessels for us to fill, they already have their own witness and wonder to share with us. They aren't just the recipients of our adulthood, *they are givers*.

Think about the Biblical witness to the ministry of the young. According to our Christian faith, a child came even to save the entire world. In the prophets we read, "A little child shall lead them" and again, "Unto us a child is born". The Bible is full of child heroes. Think of Miriam, the older sister of Moses. When Moses' life was threatened, it was big sis Miriam who took baby Moses and hid him in the bulrushes, and who then cleverly saw that he was adopted into the household of the Egyptian princess at the time. Or think about David. Although he grew to be Israel's most famous and beloved king, he began as a shepherd boy. A shepherd boy who

had a gift for singing and composing and playing the harp. A shepherd boy with a man's courage, who slayed Goliath, the giant enemy of his people. Think even of Mary, the mother of our Lord, who was very likely a relatively young teen-ager –perhaps just several years older than our confirmands--when the Holy Spirit called on her to bear a child and raise a Christ. Children are not merely cute; they are courageous and full of faith, called by God to minister to *us* through play and learning and loving. Anyone who knows children, knows that they have surprising insights into matters of faith. Loving a child also teaches us that children are powerful; they have the power to make your day or break your heart with a few simple words or actions.

So, the young bless us in a whole variety of ways, and *we* are to welcome them, share our faith with them, mentor them, accordingly. Paul is very clear that faith is transmitted from older generations to younger, from teachers and mentors to students and learners. And Jesus, along with holding up children as models of faith, also is insistent that children are important and are to be welcomed within the community of the faithful. In fact, Jesus actually says, “Whoever welcomes a child in my name, welcomes me.” So, this morning, we intentionally consider--how do we do that? How do we welcome, teach, mentor, and pass on faith to the young? How do we do that *here* at Knife River Lutheran Church? This is a question that requires a little thought to answer, because things aren't like they used to be, are they? At one time, this church, like most churches, had about as big a Sunday School as it did a worshipping congregation, in fact maybe more Sunday School children than adult worshipers. And those two units, Sunday School and congregation, were perhaps a little more separated from one another here, as they were in most churches. For years and years, there were basically two models of Sunday School: you had it during the worship hour, or you had it after or before the worship hour. I grew up in a

church with two worship services and two Sunday School hours, one during each worship service. That was in the years when baby boomers were literally growing the church through being born, baptized, confirmed, and so forth....which was the cultural norm and expectation of the time. Needless to say, that is no longer the case; our culture no longer has any expectation of religiosity at all. Which may not be *such* a bad or unusual thing; many argue that the relatively brief period from the 1950s-1980s when mainline Protestantism blossomed as it did, was actually the historical oddity, the exception to the rule of the church standing over against the culture. Whether or not that is so, and whether or not we wish those days back again---what is, is. Whether we like our times or not, we have to minister now in the present context.

And there *was* a downside to that old Sunday school model. If you attended Sunday School during the worship service, then children never worshipped with their parents and grandparents. If you attended before or after the worship service, many families fell into a disheartening practice of not attending worship at all, but simply sending children to Sunday School. Frankly, neither of those practices was such a good thing. And in today's world, where some children spend every other weekend with a different parent, or sports and other weekend activities make consecutive Sunday attendance unlikely, it's even a more uphill battle. One of the more intriguing books to come out in recent years, written by church youth guru Rich Melheim, is entitled: "Let's Kill Sunday School, Before Sunday School Kills the Church." It's an intentionally provocative title, obviously, but the point is that Sunday School models from previous decades that may have worked once, are not working so well anymore. If you do a survey of churches along the Shore, you'll find that there is a surprising degree of variety in the efforts to provide Christian formation for the young. Some have given up altogether. That's

unfortunate. Some try an evening program. Quite a few do as we do, a Children's Church and Kid's Connect approach. Here's what I like about that approach: it encourages generations, all 2,3, 4, 5, or 6 of them, to worship together at the beginning and end of worship. And it provides age appropriate learning time for the young, downstairs, and hopefully for us adults, upstairs during the Scripture and sermon portions. All of us sing the opening hymn together; all of us are at the communion table, one way or another. I think that's an invaluable witness to children, and one of the ways we pass along our faith to younger generations.

As I mentioned earlier, this fall we are starting a new Christian education effort with confirmation, something we haven't done in decades. Previously, our confirmands participated in the Two Harbors program with Bethlehem and Emmanuel, which was fine. But the traditional weekly evening confirmation programs, like the traditional Sunday School programs, are also struggling now to maintain, and it seemed to us that it was worth our trying to do something a little more contextual and indigenous for our church confirmand age children ourselves. It will look different than confirmation did when many of us attended in our youth; and it should. We're not living in the 20th century anymore. But we intend to use creative and sound approaches to pass on the Christian faith to these young people in a way we hope and pray will be effective. We also hope to involve them in worship and service among us, because they have gifts to share with us, too. It would have been easier not to try this, but we aren't called to take the easy way out, we are called to pass on our faith, to teach and mentor younger generations, and that is what we seek to do. I'm glad we have that commitment!

And here's another thing that makes me glad: for Children's Church, Kid's Connect, and Confirmation, we have an awesome group of teachers, most of whom are parents or grandparents or active church members themselves. Did you see how many Children's Church teachers we have? And we have around 6 or 7 teachers for confirmation, too. It's nearly unbelievable! I can't tell you how many colleagues have said they can't find enough teachers within their congregation to keep their children's education programs going. We are so blest and fortunate to have these amazing teachers! And we haven't given over this important task to "the professionals" or someone else; *we* are doing it. And that's how it should be. In fact, Martin Luther was very clear that *family members* are the primary teachers of faith for their children, not some professionals elsewhere. He wrote, "Parents are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who first introduce them to the Gospel." It is primarily the job of parents, grandparents, and family and friends to pass along faith to our children. That's why, after we baptize a child, I so enjoy carting them about the congregation and saying something like, "This is our newest little brother or sister in Christ. They are ours to love, teach, and provide support and faith for in whatever way we can." We actually mean that. Passing along the Christian faith to children is the job of their church family. Let me be very clear on that. I don't expect, or even want, the public schools to do that job for us; how could they? They're already overwhelmed and we're a diverse society. *This is on us*, as it should be. *We* pass on the faith. We welcome children and pass along our faith into our midst, and in doing so, welcome Christ. Our take away this morning might be that all of us have a role to play in this crucial ministry. Whether formally or informally, each one of us becomes a teacher, a mentor, a good or bad example, as we interact with the young. And it's important that we do interact! I have a friend who's a teacher who told

me she makes it a point to intentionally smile and say hi to every teen-ager she sees anywhere, because she realized that people tend not to do that. Be aware of children and teens; smile at them; engage them in conversation; don't judge them or criticize them, enjoy them and pray for them. Be a part of that Christian faith contagion where faith is not only taught, but caught. Be an active and enthusiastic part of passing along this treasure of faith to future generations.

Amen.