

Learning with Our Youth
1 Timothy 4:7b-16; Matthew 19:13-14
October 15, 2017 – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

This is the fifth in our five sermon series on “Our Guiding Principles,” and I have saved the best for last. This is the principle that says “We appreciate and invest in our youth.” I don’t usually start my sermon preparation by trying to come up with a title, but this one I did; and I struggled for a few minutes. I started with, “In Support of our Youth” – No, that doesn’t quite say it. Then I thought about our scripture, and the young Timothy; and I thought “Learning from our Youth” – No that’s not altogether realistic. Then I thought about our Youth Mission Trip, and today’s title came to mind: “Learning *with* Our Youth.”

You see our mission trip is not about a few adults taking youth to a mission site and giving orders. Oh no. Our mission trip is about adults and youth working together, working side-by-side, working equally hard, sharing the work, sharing the experience, and sharing the love of God. Our mission trip is also about encouraging the youth to make the decisions, to decide which direction we’re going and what type of work we’ll be doing. Our youth are encouraged to set the example, meet the challenges – thus our mission tag line: “It’s Their Mission.” It is their mission it’s the youth mission; and still, I tell you as a sixty-four year old preacher, I never go on a youth mission trip that I don’t come home filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with the Spirit because of the love we have shared with the communities we served, and the love we have shared with each other. Mission trips are hard work, work from the time we get up in the morning until we go to bed at night; and that time in bed is usually way too short. But I tell you, that week on mission trip is one of the most rewarding weeks of my year.

Sometimes people say to me, “The youth are the church of the future,” and our guiding principle reiterates that. It states: “The future of our church depends on the vitality of its youngest members,” and of course that is true. But when people say to me, “The youth are the church of the future,” my usual response is, “No, the youth are the church of the present.” To the youth that are present today, I tell you, “This is as much your church as it is your mother or father’s church or your grandparents’ church. This is your church.” Our nominating committee would love to get youth on the various committees of the church. Sadly, our youth are very busy, and we have not been real successful at recruiting youth for our governing bodies. Again, I say to our youth, “You are entitled to serve on any committee of this church except for the Trustees. The government invests certain legal responsibilities in the Trustees; and, as such, by law you must be 18 to be a Trustee.”

My involvement with youth means that I have a lot of tee-shirts. I get a new tee-shirt on every Youth Mission Trip; and this past year was my thirteenth youth mission trip. I get a new tee-shirt at every Youth Annual Conferences that I attend, and I have attended about a dozen of those. But a few of those tee-shirts have become favorites of mine, sometimes because of the colors; but more often because of what they say; and the 2007 Youth Annual Conference tee-shirt is one of my favorites, because it has part of today's scripture across the back: "Don't let folks look down on you because you are young." I like to wear this shirt when I'm in the presence of youth as a reminder to them and to myself – their thoughts, their opinions, their feelings, their desires and hopes for the future are as important as anyone else's.

Paul wrote these words to his young friend Timothy. We don't know a lot about Timothy, and like many things in the Bible, there are minor contradictions between what Luke writes about Timothy in the Book of Acts and what Paul writes about him in the letters. I also would not be doing my job as an academic if I didn't tell you that the letters to Timothy were probably not written by Paul, but rather by one of Paul's followers. That having been said, we do know that Timothy was a young follower of Paul, a disciple, if you will. He was probably in his mid-teens when Paul recognized the great gifts that Timothy held and thus mentored him in the Christian faith.

Paul's words to Timothy are appropriate to every youth, but not just to youth – to all of us. Hear them again, and I'm reading them from the Common English Bible translation:

“Train yourself for a holy life!”

Now, guys, that doesn't mean we walk around praying all day long. That means we love and respect ourselves; and we love and respect all other people, because we love and respect God. So. . .

“Train yourself for a holy life! While physical training has some value, training in holy living is useful for everything. It has promise for this life now and the life to come. This saying is reliable and deserves complete acceptance. We work and struggle for this: “Our hope is set on the living God, who is the savior of all people, especially those who believe.”
Command these things. Teach them.

Do you hear that? Paul is telling the teenager to go forth, to teach, to teach the ways of holy living. And he goes on. . .

“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young. Instead, set an example for the believers through your speech, behavior, love, faith, and purity.

Folks aren’t going to stop looking down on your youth, folks aren’t going to totally respect what you have to say just because you or I or Paul tells them they should. No, folks respect you because of the example you set.

I will never forget being on a youth mission trip, and driving a van full of boisterous and happy youth to a work site. Suddenly we passed an auto accident; and, from the back of the van I heard one of the youth shout, “Hey guys, we need to be quiet. We need to pray for those people.” Right then and there, that seventeen year old girl led the entire van in prayer for the victims of that accident. Not only was her prayer powerful and helpful to those in the accident, but it set a wonderful example for everyone in the van, the pastor included. I said my own silent prayer when she had finished, a prayer of thanksgiving for the Spirit at work in a seventeen year old girl.

Indeed, the youth are the church of the present, called to set an example, to lead others, to share the love of Christ. Still, having said that, don’t hear that I want to treat our youth as adults. I do not want to rob them of their youthful vitality, their inherent joy, their love of life, their boundless energy. Indeed, we want to encourage those things, and that’s what this guiding principle is all about. Our principle states: “We seek to provide a vibrant set of programs and activities for our youth, to instill in them a love for Jesus, a strong sense of community, a deep-rooted set of Christian values, an understanding of how to use faith as a life tool for problem solving, and a strong desire to serve our neighbors.” Those of you who have worked with youth know the exuberance and vitality that they hold is contagious. It rubs off on you and on me. It rubs off on the church. It brings an energy and an excitement to all we do. So, while youth may be vital to our future, they are also vital to our present.

Our guiding principle goes on to say that we invest to enhance youth experience. Folks, once again I’m speaking about those two main ingredients: time and money. It takes both to make a successful youth program; and a successful youth program is critical to the health of our church, both now and in the long term.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, for to such as these belongs the kingdom of heaven.” Now, of course, Jesus was not directly referring to teenagers. He was speaking about preschoolers and young school-aged children. But we all know that metaphorically, Jesus was speaking about everyone of us. He teaches us to take on the innocence, the trust, and the faith of a little child.

I find it really sad, that in the world which we live, and teenagers cannot live in innocence. The world is a nasty place, full of traps just waiting for teenagers to fall into. Teenagers are daily faced with decisions about sex, drugs, weapons, alcohol, and indeed life itself. Of course, a life of peace and joy and exuberance is still available to them; and that's where the church comes in.

I believe it is part of our calling to minister with these young people, to set an example with these young people, to share the love and joy of Christ with these young people, indeed to learn with these young people so they can set an example for others. In so doing, the world will be a better place.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,

Lead and guide the youth of the church and youth everywhere,

in the way of holy living, that they may set an example for others.

And lead and guide this congregation,

to be an ever present support to youth within our congregation and beyond.

In Christ's Holy Name we pray. Amen.

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