

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: April 7, 2019
Sermon Title: "A Generation Z Church"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Joel 2:28

Joel 2:28

Then afterwards

*I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.*

A few weeks ago I entertained you with a sermon about being old. "Older Than Dirt, Part II," I called it. So it seemed wise to go to the other end of the spectrum: Youth. The world of being young. This old/young dichotomy is interesting to observe.

I was up at Yale this week and picked up a copy of the Yale college newspaper, and there was a front-page article about the firing of the Yale fencing coach. The coach is 87 years old. He's been the Yale fencing coach for 49 years. His team just finished seventh in the nation, and he was named Ivy League Coach of the Year.

Later, I went out to the Yale athletic field to do my exercises, and there's this old man there throwing the hammer. The hammer throw is part of Track and Field, and the "hammer" itself consists of a metal ball attached by a steel wire to a grip. You go into a sort of steel mesh cage, you grab hold of the hammer by the handle, you twirl around inside the cage and let it fly. And this old guy was sending it far out.

In both instances, I guess, age is what you see, along with your assumptions. One old guy is too old, despite success, by the standard of others. The other old guy is measured only by results, and he was getting good results.

Jesus never got to be old. That's what led me to this sermon. I was remembering he was only 33 when he was killed, 33 years old. That's young. Even by today's standards, that's young. Thirty-three-year-olds nowadays are just getting established in careers, just getting married, just starting a family. Jesus himself was just getting started. He had been in his career, so to speak, only three years. Everything about him was on the upswing: success, popularity, name recognition, the size of crowds—all pointed to great years ahead.

Actually, lots of things have me thinking about youth and age and the "dash in between," as I talked about in my old-age sermon. The "dash" is where we live today, between our beginnings and our endings. It's our *now*, and now is always a mixture of the old and the new. Complementary to each other. Not one or the other. Both.

When Christianity was just getting started, a few weeks after Easter, when everybody was excited and hopeful and unified, St. Peter preached a sermon that rocked the world, announcing the dawn of a new age of faith. And in that new world of faith, old people and young people were yoked in faith. Quoting the Old Testament Prophet Joel, St. Peter preached, "And God declared I will pour out my Spirit on all people, and your children will prophesy, and your young people shall see visions, and your old people shall dream dreams." (Acts 2:17)

That's quite an amazing picture of a real Church at work. All hands on deck. The kids have their part to play. Our young people have a major role. And we older ones, God's not done with us, we still have dreams worth dreaming.

Jesus was consistent in this. He raised old man Lazarus from the dead, as if to say, "I'm not done with you yet. Get up. Back to work. You're not done yet." At the other end of the age spectrum, Jesus consistently affirmed children and even childhood itself. He reserved his harshest condemnation for those who hurt kids. He told the Disciples, "Let the children come unto me, climb all over me, interrupt me, disrupt everything around me, for to such belong the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 19:14)

And if that wasn't clear enough, Jesus told us, "You must be born again." He took an image of birth, of childish innocence, of unbridled enthusiasm, of newborn energy, of unconditional trust, and he tells us to be like that. Even at 35, even at 55, even at 75, even at 95. Be born again. Be like a kid on Jesus's lap. Be as bold as teenage David taking on Goliath. Be as faithful as Daniel standing up to a tyrannical government. Be as courageous as young adult Moses, taking a stand against injustice.

In God's work, you're never too young for anything, never too old for anything. We can all be as if born again, back into childhood exuberance and faith. And in a Church with all the people we have across all the breadth of ages, we can still be a place of visions and dreams. God isn't done with any of us, yet.

Two experiences come to mind. I don't go to Appalachia, ASP, with Alida and her 300 closest friends. I have nothing to do with it, so I feel free to brag about it. There's nothing else in our Church that blends youth and age so seamlessly. Year after year, I watch our 13- and 14-year-old freshmen climb on the bus to Appalachia along with our 45-, 50-year-old parents carrying the sleeping bags, along with our long-since-retired business folks with their tool belts, all headed for the hollers of West Virginia to sweat away their days, sleeping in gyms, eating peanut butter and jelly, and working long shifts side by side, young with old, teams, crews, friends, all fulfilling Jesus's most blatant order: "Do unto the least as if you were doing it just for me."

And I'm not the first to recognize that for that one week in Appalachia, everybody's young—aching bones and arthritic knees aside—everybody's young. The other image was last Sunday night. Our high school youth led a worship service that practically defies description. I tried to write a thank-you note to them, and I actually started with, "I don't have words." But I'll try. We had exceptional music. We had true Holy Communion. We had soulful readings and prayers. And my goodness, we had preaching. Five sermons: Biblical. Faithful. Personal. They talked about the power of Scripture. The power of mission. The power of forgiveness. The power of prayer. The power of family. The power of example. The power of "doing unto others," of "going into all the world," of "forgiving your enemies," of remembering your blessings.

If I'd preached all that, you'd greet me at the door and say "nice sermon," and you'd think to yourself, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course he believes all that, he's supposed to; of course he knows all that, he's lived so long; of course he tells us all that, that's his job."

But these are 16-year-olds. High school juniors and seniors. Fresh off baseball fields, lacrosse practice, basketball courts, school play and chorus; Counties, Prom around the corner, college visits, SATs. And they're up here outlining the "visions" and "dreams" God gives to us in every age: of grace, of justice, of faith.

I'll close with something I'll expand upon much more later on. At "Religion in the News" last Sunday, we looked at an article about Generation Z. *Generation Z*. That's anyone born in the 21st century, especially fifth-graders to college sophomores. You know: the kids you don't understand, whose music you don't

understand, who live in a world you don't understand, using technology you don't understand. Generation Z. Well, we had a good discussion.

Then Tuesday I'm up at Yale, working in a coffee house, sitting across from a gentleman. We introduced ourselves, as men do, sort of cautiously, not wanting to offend or let too much out of the bag. Well, little by little, we learned a few things: I'm a Christian. He's a Christian. I'm involved in mission work. He's involved in mission work. I'm amazed by young people. He's amazed by young people. I mentioned that "Religion in the News" article on Generation Z. He mentions . . . well, his whole life is Generation Z. He's just published a book on Generation Z. He has YouTube presentations on Generation Z, and he believes that Generation Z is the key to the future of Christianity. If Christianity is to thrive and Church is to survive, the next generation up to the plate is Generation Z.

They are a whole generation whose experience, whose worldview, whose knowledge base is much different from ours. It's not just the usual, "Oh, those kids!" Long hair. Rock 'n' roll. Tie-dyed T-shirts. Not that. Today's generation Z experience life in microchips, sound bites, mini-screens—everything moving at the speed of light. Watch your children in action, your grandchildren. On their iPhones, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube—everything communicated in short spurts—words, photos, videos, ideas. Quick as a flash on to something else.

Me? If I have something to say to you, I say it in a 20-minute sermon, or I write a 140-page book. My 300th Anniversary White Paper is longer than the Bible! I have a new essay coming out this spring called "My America," *an essay*, and it's 38 pages long. That's not Generation-Z style. Generation Z would take my book of short stories, turn it into a series of two-minute videos set to electronic music, live-streamed worldwide to an audience of millions. They'd take my 38-page essay on America, make it 90 seconds long, full of images and visuals, sparse words in varying fonts and sizes, even colors, upload it, make it go viral, and pack a wallop.

I'm not saying I'm bad and they're good, or I'm old-fashioned and they're newfangled, or I'm deeper and they're shallower. I'm saying it's a new world. And if a 300-year-old beautiful, classic New England Church wants to thrive, we can't just speak "olde English."

In fact, my Yale friend's main point is that we've got to learn their language if we care to connect. *IF we care to connect*. My friend, Robert Stevenson is his name, Robert Stevenson likens it to the old days of missionary work. When Christian Churches wanted to send missionaries to Central America, to China, to Africa, what was the first thing they did? They learned their language. They learned their language and translated the Bible into their language. Then they could get to

work. Our young people speak a different language. They hear in new ways. They communicate in new ways. They learn in new ways.

If we care about them, we have to care enough to learn their language. That doesn't mean we lose our own language. I'll keep preaching 20-minute sermons and writing 38-page essays and handwritten letters. That's me. That's my style. That's my world. As I said two weeks ago. I'm old. But I'm still excited to learn a new language.

Last Sunday night's worship service by our Junior Deacons was as good as it gets. It wasn't lesser worship. It wasn't "worship lite." It wasn't amateur hour. It was full bore, full Bible, full worship. It was just what the Prophet Joel promised, that "God will pour out the spirit in such astounding ways that old and young alike will speak a new language."

Let's stand and sing our final hymn this morning, "The Lord's Prayer," No. 307:

*Our Father, which art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil:
for thine is the kingdom, and the power
and the glory, forever,
Amen.*