

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Generations

(Proverbs; Luke 9; Titus 2)

Introduction: Stations of life...

One of my fondest memories in life centers around Thanksgivings at my grandparents' farm in Denton, Texas when I was young.

Between twenty to thirty of us gathered for the purpose of - at least in my memory - eating. At these get togethers there were the very old and the very young. They were VERY multi-generational.

Then, after the meal and after the cleaning up, my family would drive back home to Dallas, to spend the rest of the weekend normally. Then, my twin sister and I would start school on Monday where we would associate with peers, and only peers.

I've had a few years to consider the two versions of life represented in those two images. One, mixing it up with people my own age; two, mixing it up with the broad spectrum of generations.

I've concluded that there is a place for both kinds of gatherings. But I've also concluded that there are important lessons that can be learned about life that can only be learned from another generation.

This morning I want to speak to some of the benefits that different generations can bring to each other - if we will allow it.

This morning I really want to get across two ideas.

The second of these two ideas is profoundly biblical and oozes from dozens of passages found in both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, it is one of the more prominent themes of the Bible's story.

The first idea I want to talk about, though, is more of a life observation I've made in recent years, and we won't spend anywhere near as much time on this first thought as we will on the second more demonstrably biblical one.

What I'm going to say over the next five to seven minutes I couldn't have said twenty years ago. I didn't know it. Now I know it.

Most of what I have to say here at the beginning is addressed to those of a certain age. Not quite arbitrarily, I'll suggest that if you can even see age "40" from where you sit, I'm talking to you. (The rest of you, relax and enjoy; your time is coming...)

First off, I want to talk about physical flexibility, about being limber.

REJECTING RIGIDITY (learning from those coming after us)

Physical Flexibility

Benefits of flexibility

The term "flexibility" refers to a joint's ability to move through a full range of motion.

As you probably are aware, there are tremendous benefits that come with physical flexibility. Numerous sources list the following upsides to flexibility:

- Better physical performance in sports
- Less chance of injury in high intensity activities
- Less muscle soreness after exercise
- Better posture.
- Reduced lower back pain
- Increased blood flow to joint structure and muscle tissue
- Greater overall coordination
- More enjoyment of normal physical activities.

However, there is a reality with which all of us will eventually have to contend. That reality is that as we age, we tend to become less limber, less flexible.

Decreases as we age

This is a normal part of aging. The tissue around joints thickens. Connecting tissues become less pliable with age.

I know this. I live this. I have never at any point in my life ever been limber - and it is getting worse.

I recently went to a gym to work out with some other folks (yes, a Crossfit gym). I got through the workout OK, but the post-workout stretching time was quite embarrassing. My lack of flexibility was so apparent to everybody that one of the people in the class (a much younger person, but then, they were all much younger people) politely suggested that maybe I should sign up for a yoga or a stretching class.

So, of late I've been working on my flexibility. But physical flexibility is not really what I'm aiming to talk about here.

The body as a picture of the soul...

I've long been of the opinion that the physical body can serve as a picture of the soul. God created us as integrated, material AND immaterial beings. And I believe that what is going on in our material bodies can often provide insight into the workings of our immaterial soul.¹

I'd like to apply this thought to the issue of flexibility...

Personal Flexibility

Problems associated with rigidity

Every benefit associated with flexibility disappears if we are inflexible.

If we are not limber, physically, we will have decreasing ability to perform in sports and athletics. We'll be more easily injured when we do exercise. We'll suffer from poor posture and lower back pain. We will lose coordination and will just generally not feel very good.

¹ For instance, a man's physical strength pictures the protection he is to provide to his loved ones. A woman's softness pictures the nurturing love she can give to those around her.

As I've mentioned, there is a tendency to become less flexible as we age. So, using that "the body is a picture of the soul" idea, I will suggest that as we age there is also a tendency toward *personal* inflexibility.

And just as there are downsides to physical rigidity, there are also downsides to personal rigidity.

If we become inflexible people, we will be poor performers in the complex world of relationships. We will be awful at problem-solving in an ever changing world.

In the same way that being physically inflexible leads to chronic pain - back and otherwise - being an inflexible person will just make us a pain.

As Proverbs might say it, the path of personal rigidity just isn't a wise path to follow. Becoming a flexible person (thinking outside the box; rolling with the punches; living creatively) brings joy and freedom and productivity and blessing.

Now, this is not necessarily a "years = age" thing. I know some people who are well into their sixties and seventies who are extremely flexible - physically and mentally and relationally. And I have known some really old twenty-somethings.

But I've somewhat arbitrarily chosen those who are approaching the age of forty as my primary target audience for these first few minutes. (which obviously puts ME square in my own cross-hairs!)

So, if you can see "40" in your windshield, or even if "40" is a fading memory in your rear-view mirror, I'll recommend three stretching exercises for the soul that I think might help keep you personally limber.

Stretching exercises for the soul

- Try new things

Learn to text. Take on a new physical challenge. Change up your weekly routine by breaking from technology for a week. Eat new foods. Travel to new places.

- Do old things in new ways

Reverse directions in your walk around the neighborhood. Take a new route to work. Try a new breakfast routine. Experiment with your personal devotional life - change the times of your prayer times and work in new ways to explore Scripture.

- Listen to new voices

Read books that are outside of your normal realm of interest. Subscribe to a new magazine. Read editorials you disagree with.

As well - and this is REALLY important - listen to and pursue and engage with those who are younger than you are. People who are younger than you have a very different frame of reference than you do. That different frame of reference will stretch you and help you limber up.

Younger people often think that Conan is cool, for the most part, Leno is not, and they have no memory of Johnny. They have no use for a landline phone. VHS is an unknown technology and they'd never use a paper map (There's an app for that!). They don't watch the evening news and catalogs are as pointless as camera film.

We can learn from those who are younger. They will help us remain or become flexible.

The alternative to becoming flexible is to settle for a personal rigidity that is neither appealing to those around us or to the Lord.

We could become like that guy on whose tombstone was written the memorable words, "Died, 2005, Buried 2011." Get flexible and resist an early rigor mortis.

Summary: So, I recommend that we who are older work hard at staying or getting personally limber. And one of the best ways to go there is to be schooled by those who are younger. We have much to learn from the up and coming generations!

Preview: But, the Bible makes it clear that we who are older need to come alongside those who are younger and be their biggest cheerleaders as we train, equip and mentor them for life AND for life with Jesus.

As I said earlier, this thought permeates the pages of Scripture. And my life has been dramatically marked by the mentoring investments of those who have been a few steps ahead of me.

EMBRACING DISCIPLESHIP (mentoring those coming after us)

My Life, Mentored

High School experience

I came to Christ as a teenager and quickly began attending a church where the people believed the Bible and lived it out. Three men involved in the youth ministry of Grace Bible Church led what they called a *Discipleship Group*. I joined, which had me rubbing shoulders weekly with Bob Livesay, Bob Hendricks, Dwain Camp.

They poured their lives into me and in the space of two years, helped me grow from an atheistic teen to a committed disciple of Jesus.

College

Their personal investment equipped me to help launch a ministry on the campus of Stephen F. Austin State University when I went away to college.

While there I was further mentored by Pastor Jon Aldrich, and by men like Billy Tucker, Ralph Busby, and Dick McLain.

I was further equipped by professors and fellow students when Kathy and I went through the Dallas Seminary experience together.

Northwest

Since 1982, I've been constantly mentored by people in this church who have built into me.

Elders - and it used to be that the Elders were actually older than me! - have mentored me. So have many other men and women in this church, and so have some I've never actually met (Eugene Peterson and Gordon MacDonald come to mind).

Life skills

In addition, my father-in-law has mentored me in the care and handling of cars. Ned Dreyer, Harold Turner, and Mike Taitano trained me in the fine art of South Texas gardening (a particular challenge given our lack of soil!).

Lots of people have helped me to figure out some things financially and technologically. And I am still being mentored by experts who train me in how to successfully backpack into wild places.

It may be that I just look like I need help. (It's not unusual for me to be approached by Boy Scouts - and little old ladies - with offers of assistance when crossing a street.) But I frankly don't know what I would have done had others not taken me under their wing and guided me at crucial points.

If you have been mentored to any extent by others as I have been mentored, you should know that your experience is thoroughly biblical. God's plan has always been for the older to guide and equip the younger.

Mentoring, Considered Biblically

Old Testament

Moses, the great lawgiver, was an excellent mentor. Before he left the scene at age one hundred and twenty, God arranged for a younger man, Joshua, to shadow Moses, learn everything he could from him, and take the reins of national Jewish leadership after Moses was gone.

Solomon wrote Proverbs to his son - **[1:8] Hear, my son, your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching** - and every man or woman who has ever read the book of Proverbs has benefitted from Solomon's wise mentoring.

One of the greatest Jewish prophets was Elijah. He left behind a protégé, Elishah, whom he had personally trained to take his place.

We can find evidence of other young people who were mentored by more mature adults in the Old Testament,² and we should never lose sight of the fact that the home was and is to be the central spiritual and personal training center for the young (See Deuteronomy 6).

Inter-generational equipping was close to the heart of the ancient Jews. The New Testament carries on this theme of inter-generational baton-passing.

New Testament

The younger Timothy was trained by the Apostle Paul. Barnabas mentored his nephew, John Mark. The husband-wife team of Priscilla and Aquila equipped Apollos with a more accurate knowledge of the way of the Lord.

But of all those who came alongside those who were coming after them, the greatest was Jesus.

It's hard to find a more complete statement of His life mission than these words from Mark's Gospel.

Jesus, the Master Mentor

Jesus' mission: Mark 10:45

[Mark 10:45] For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Jesus came to the earth for the most radical of reasons. He intended to overthrow the rule of Satan, turn the kingdoms of this world on their heads, and usher in the reign of Almighty God.

His plan involved living a perfect life, dying a perfectly ghastly, sacrificial death - and then rising from the dead and returning to Heaven.

For His plan to be completely realized, He would need to collect and train a group of followers to carry out what we call "The Great Commission" after He was physically gone.

² For instance, young King Joash was equipped for the throne by the godly priest, Jehoiada; Mordecai trained his niece, Esther

So, Jesus spent the better part of the last three years of His life mentoring His followers for Kingdom-of-God sized tasks.

Jesus' method: Train a small group who would train others...

He called them to follow

He trained a small group who would train others who would train others who would, in turn train others... (you get the idea)

It all began on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Keeping in mind that many of His first disciples were fishermen, Jesus' first words were striking.

He called out to two sets of brothers - Peter and Andrew, along with James and John - and said, *[Matthew 4:19] "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men."*

On that day they dropped their nets and followed Him - and every day for the next three years He poured His life into them and into the rest of the disciples. He mentored them.

He mentored them

He first modeled generosity and service and prayer and then He guided them into lives of generosity and service and prayer. He modeled moral courage and faith and an eternal perspective and then led them into lives of moral courage and faith and an eternal perspective.

Viewed from one angle, the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are largely records of how passionately and how wisely Jesus mentored - the Bible's word for it is "discipled" - His followers. Equipping those coming after Him (disciple-making) was always front and center on His mind.

You could fill bookshelves (libraries!) with the volumes that have been written about Jesus' disciple-making ways. We could spend months - YEARS - exploring Jesus' training methods together.

And while we won't do that, we will look at one particular event that highlights His commitment to equip those coming after Him, to train the Twelve.

Aside from the resurrection, there is only one miracle recorded in all four of the Gospels. Evidently, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John considered this one miracle VERY important. It is the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.

The Master Mentor's Exhibit A: The Feeding of the Five Thousand (Luke 9)

The miracle is recorded in Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9 and John 6. Today, we'll view the miracle through Luke's eyes.

The miracle took place in the beautiful wilderness area of northern Galilee, not far from the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus and the Twelve had been meeting with a large crowd far away from the villages. He had been teaching and had been curing those in need of healing. (9:11)

We notice how giving Jesus is. He gives of His time, His energy, His resources to help people in need.

Then, Luke lets us know of a looming crisis. And it was truly a genuine crisis.

A crisis of resources (v. 12)

[12] Now the day was ending, and the twelve came and said to Him, "Send the crowd away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat; for here we are in a desolate place."

The crowds were not just needing a snack. They needed food, sustenance. They were miles and miles from home. The situation is desperate.

So, fully aware that they didn't have the resources to care for the people, the disciples helpfully pointed out to Jesus that there were no conveniently located Dickey's BBQ's or AmeriSuites.

There was no place to stay and there was no food to eat.

As far as we know, Jesus didn't address the lack of lodging. Luke does tell us, though, what He did about the lack of food.

His response to His followers was surprising/ridiculous/insensitive (you choose) - but emphatic!

[13a]...“You give them something to eat!”

A very predictable response (v. 13b-14a)

To which they responded, not with sarcasm, but genuine confusion, **[13b] “We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless perhaps we go and buy food for all these people.” [14] (For there were about five thousand men.)³**

They are clueless about what to do and just as clueless about what Jesus is about to do.

He promptly turned this desperate situation into a discipleship lab.

Training in Kingdom Building, 101 (vv. 14-17)

[14]...And He said to His disciples, “Have them sit down TO EAT (emphasis added; Sit down to eat? To eat what? There's no food!) in groups of about fifty each.’ [15] They did so, and had them all sit down.

Can you even imagine what must have been going on in the disciples' minds as they divided the 5,000+ people into groups of fifties? They had to have been wondering, “*What is He going to do NOW?*”

Luke tells us what He did next.

[16] Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them⁴, and broke them, and kept giving them to the disciples to set before the people.

³ The women and children were not included in this reckoning. They would have been much less numerous than the men, not as in some situations where men stand for heads of households representing several people.

⁴ The Talmud says that “he who enjoys aught without thanksgiving is as though he robbed God.”

[17] And they all ate and were satisfied; and the broken pieces which they had left over were picked up, twelve baskets⁵ full.

Notice. As Luke tells the story he doesn't give us one word about the response of the crowd to what happened.

Why? Because while this is an event with a “point”, the point is not the effect of the miracle on the crowd. The point is this:

The disciples learned that they would spend their lives meeting people's needs through the resources Jesus provides.

The event was all about building their faith in His miracle-working power. It was all about putting a heart within them for meeting needs. It was all about developing a passion for service.

Jesus used this event as a training exercise to prepare His followers for life after He was gone.

We could multiply examples of Jesus doing this kind of thing all day long.

He trained them through experiences on boats and experiences in the Temple and in synagogues. He trained them while they were walking along the road, while dealing with demon-possessed people, and while battling religious bigots.

There was an urgency to His training.

He only had a brief time to equip them for the time when He would be gone. He would be passing the baton all too soon. They had to be ready - so He threw Himself into pouring Himself into the lives of those who were coming after Him.

And, sure enough, in the end, after three years of being mentored by Jesus (and of course, after receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost), Peter, James, John and the rest were thoroughly equipped to take the world by storm. (a story found in the book of Acts)

⁵ The baskets (*σπυρις*) were large enough to hold a man (Acts 9:25).

The heart of Jesus to disciple and mentor “generation next” reflects the mentoring heart of every mature believer who preceded Him in Old Testament times. And His mentoring example has inspired every believer who has ever followed Him.

Here the vision for mentoring in these words from Paul to a young man whom he personally disciplined, Timothy.

Needed: The Master’s Mentors Today

Biblical examples

Pass the torch (2 Timothy 2:2)

[2 Timothy 2:2] The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Look at the generations of disciples in view here. Paul learned from Jesus and then he taught Timothy. Timothy is to teach others who can build into still others. As I count it, that’s five generations!

Or again, when Paul wrote to another of the men into whom he poured his own life, Titus, he gave clear instructions about the need for inter-generational mentoring.

YOU - Called to be a mentor (Titus 2:3-6)

[Titus 2: 3] Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, [4] SO THAT THEY MAY ENCOURAGE THE YOUNG WOMEN to love their husbands, to love their children, [5] to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored. [6] Likewise URGE THE YOUNG MEN to be sensible; [7] in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, [8] sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.

Older women know things that younger women need to know.

The genius of our church’s Interface ministry is that it brings more mature women into the fast-spinning orbits of younger women, with the result that the younger women are equipped for life and life in Jesus.

Older men know stuff that younger men need to know. It’s everything from handling money to leading a family in the things of God to relating well to a wife to handling temptations.

And you’ll notice where Paul places the burden of responsibility for seeing that this inter-generational equipping takes place: squarely in the lap of the older.

Hmmm...

You probably noticed, too, that when I was talking about how much those who are older can benefit from those who are younger, I urged the older to pursue and engage with the younger.

If it seems unfair to you that the responsibility for engaging seems to always be on the older, well, get over it.

It is not up to the younger to reach up for help (although some mature younger people will do so). It is up to those who are older to reach back.

You and me in 2011...

So, my final words this morning are addressed to those who are a few steps ahead of some others.

Nurture a focus on the rearview mirror. Learn to look back at those who are coming after you. Cheer them on. And help them.

Jesus calls each of us to mentor those who are coming after us...

...older adults

...younger adults

...college age

...High Schoolers

...Middle Schoolers

...Elementary students

Here is a personal challenge:

Will you be willing to look for ways to come alongside those who are just a few steps behind you?

Would you help someone younger or less mature in the Lord, for Jesus' sake?