

5 June 2016

On Youth in Church
Jeremiah 1:4-8; 1 Timothy 4:6-12

One of the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible was Jeremiah, whose ministry began as a youth. We read from his own account of his calling, in Jeremiah 1:4-8:

*Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’
Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But
the Lord said to me,
‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’*

Another who served in ministry despite his youth was Paul’s protégée Timothy. We read from Paul’s letter to Timothy, 1 Timothy 4:6-12:

If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives’ tales. Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe. These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

I want to talk today, on this Sunday when two young people confirm their faith and join our congregation, about youth in the church. Now the first thing many of you thought when you heard those words was, “There aren’t as many as there used to be.” That’s true; I’ll come back to that later. But since things have changed, I should probably start with how things used to be.

So let’s go back to the 1930s. (Surprised you, didn’t I? Normally in church when we say we want to talk about how things used to be, we go back to the 1950s, as if that were when the church were invented. Curious, if you think about it.) But today let’s start in the 30s. It was a time of economic upheaval in the US, the Great Depression, and things were hard all over. Churches struggled, too. According to the General Social Survey, about 35-38% of the American population regularly attended church then, mostly in smaller churches of 100 or fewer members. You see, our nation was more rural at that time, and most churches were in smaller communities where there just weren’t as many people. In those smaller churches, there weren’t many separate age-level programs. Mostly everyone was together: children, youth, and adults. Certainly all ages

attended worship together, and everyone was involved in the church's ministry to the extent that they were able. That being the case, as soon as you were old enough to do more in the church, it was expected that you would. In that era, most ministers experienced their sense of "call" in their teen years, and they probably preached their first sermons as adolescents before their home congregations, people who had changed their diapers or taught them Sunday School. (This is a good way to preach a first sermon, by the way: those people tend to be tolerant of first sermons.) Those youth who did not experience an official call to ministry didn't get a pass, though. Whatever path they took as they grew up, they didn't grow out of church but simply grew into new roles and responsibilities there.

We see something like that in our two Bible passages: young people being who were raised in their faith communities, suddenly given adult tasks. Jeremiah may have been a child, or at least a young teen, when God called him, and look at his task: *I appointed you a prophet to the nations*. At an age when he probably couldn't have imagined talking back to his parents, he's sent out to confront kings and prophets and priests. But not unprepared, exactly. He would have been raised in the community of faith with the understanding that one day he would have a role there. Anathoth, where Jeremiah grew up, was a priestly city, settled by the descendents of one of David's high priests. Jeremiah had been raised in faith, and obviously already knew scripture. When he began preaching, he obviously had the book of Hosea nearly memorized. No wonder God said, "Don't say 'I'm only a boy!'" Then there's Timothy, some 600 years later, serving as the pastor of a church where, evidently, most people are significantly older than he is. In this church, a new teaching had arisen that Paul wanted Timothy to confront. Paul had been Timothy's mentor since he was a child and had taken him on missionary journeys, and he depends on Timothy to correct that false teaching and to set an example to the church. As Paul says, *Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity*. From these two scriptures, young people should learn two things. First, don't tell God you're too young to do something, and second, don't let anyone else tell you that either.

Now let's move again to the US and visit our usual "good old days," the 1950s. Unlike the 30s, these were boom years. Maybe not so great for people who weren't, you know, white, but they were certainly big years for the church. World War II vets had come back, gone to college on the G.I. Bill, got married, got good jobs, had children – *lots* of children – and formed the backbone of this thing we used to have called a "Middle Class." And they all went to church. From 35% church attendance in the 1930s, the US went to over 50% just twenty years later, and that boom was driven primarily by adults in their 20s and 30s, with their kids. *Lots* of kids. The average Methodist family in the 1950s had five-point-something children.

With that many children – and then a few years later, that many teenagers – a new approach became popular in churches. Starting in the 50s, they began to separate the young people from their parents, into their own groups. Remember MYF? Methodist Youth Fellowship? By the 60s and 70s, when those five-point-something kids hit their teens, every church was expected to have a separate youth group that ran parallel to the adult church, but wasn't always very connected to it. This separate program was led by a "Youth Minister," a position that had never existed before in the entire history of the church. Now this new approach had many benefits. It gave youth a safe place to explore God away from the shadow of their

parents; it offered them non-parental role models in the person of the youth minister and other volunteers (and adolescents *absolutely* need faith role models other than their parents), and it gave youth a chance to personalize their faith to their own preferences. They could worship God in their own musical style, for instance: wearing tie dye and playing guitars.

But there were some disadvantages to the separate youth ministry, too. For instance, successful church youth programs seemed to lean heavily on how many *fun* activities they offered, making church a source of entertainment, and even more on how cool and charismatic the current youth minister was. Youth ministers didn't usually stay very long, though, so teens would often migrate with their friends across town to whichever church currently had the coolest youth leader. Worse than that, though, was the way that the youth were separated from the rest of the church. Teens learned to think of youth group as fun and cool, and whatever their parents were doing in church as boring and uncool. And, since they had very little connection to the rest of the church, youth were certainly given no responsibilities or roles in the larger congregation. Unsurprisingly, when those youth graduated out of their youth groups, a vast number of them disappeared from church entirely.

That brings us to today. As I mentioned at the start, we don't see as many youth in church now as we used to. There are surely many reasons for this, and we do *not* have time to go into all of them, but one reason at least is demographics. Where Methodists in the 50s had five-point-something kids, United Methodists today average one-point-something. Moreover, church attendance as a whole has declined. From that peak of 50% in the 1950s, attendance has slipped so much that as of 2010, we were back at about 35%, at the attendance levels of the 1930s. What this means for youth and the church is that the model of a separate youth program with its own designated staff member, the model we've used since the late 50s, just isn't as viable. Larger churches can still pull it off, if they work at it, but not every church. As this has become clear, a few youth ministry specialists have come up with a creative new approach: What if youth were not separated from the larger church in a designated youth program but rather were incorporated into the larger church from the start, given responsibilities, given a voice? And what if the larger church surrendered the notion that church was for adults and instead planned their programs with everyone in mind. What if youth, and for that matter children, were not just expected to endure Sunday worship – which had been designed around their parents' preferences – but rather were incorporated into the worship, even given leadership roles? It sounds crazy, and it's never really been tested – *except in every single church that has ever existed from the time of Christ until 1950* – but it's worth a try.

Which brings me to what we're doing today. We have revamped Confirmation in this church over the past few years. It used to be mostly about attending a required year's worth of classes and learning some basic Bible facts and the history of Methodism. Well, we still do some of that, but mostly what we do is designed to train our youth to be active followers of Christ in this church community, starting now. We have them experience ministry – through mission trips and volunteering in our own church and community. We have them get involved in church programs – nursery or helping with worship. We assign them a year with a non-parental mentor. Some confirmands and mentors have made nursing home visits. And they confirm their faith when they are done with all the goals, not when the year is over. And again here's why we do this: Chloé and Allie, we don't just want you to be members with nametags and certificates. We

want you to be leaders, helping to guide this church on into the rocky century that we've started. We don't just confirm you today. We don't just welcome you. We need you. And don't say you're too young. And don't let anyone else tell you that either.