

Why are we here and what are we doing? The answer to why we are here is to worship God- to praise, honor, and give God glory. Every day is filled with opportunities to praise, honor, and glorify God through what we do and say, but communal worship together on Sundays has become a sacred time of celebration and inspiration as Christ's church united. The answer to what we are doing, at least for today, focuses on the second half of our mission statement here at FPCLY- inspiring the next generation for Christ. Much of our attention today will be on youth in church, but to be clear, to inspire the next generation is not really about age, for in fulfilling God's will and mission, age is but a number.

A text that invites us into this conversation today is 1 Samuel 3:1-18 and it is about God's personal call to Samuel at an early age and the mentorship of a priest named Eli.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!"^[a] and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So, he went and lay down. The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore, Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So, Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore, I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” So, Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, “It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him.”

A couple things we can glean from this story: One is that Samuel is a boy, likely an early teen, when God comes to him in the night. Samuel was a child when he began his mentorship with Eli at the temple and he remained a faithful student throughout his time and service. Two is that God chooses to go to Samuel and not to Eli. God had a purpose for Samuel and God knew he was able to fulfill it. And as we would learn, what Samuel is told by God about Eli and his family is not just “baby food.” Three is that Eli accepted God's choice and helped Samuel to know how to respond. Without Eli, Samuel may not have known that it was God calling. Did Eli know that what God wanted to do was share the fate of his family with Samuel? We don't know exactly, but what we do know is that Eli honored God and showed respect to Samuel. Eli could have disregarded the boy and brushed off the message as though Samuel didn't know what he was talking about. Eli didn't. God's message was God's message, whether from a boy named Samuel, or from an angel/messenger of God coming directly to him.

To God, I believe, age is but a number. God's will and mission can be fulfilled in you no matter the number of years around the sun you have traveled. Consider the youth of Joseph, Timothy, David, Mary, Jonah, Jeremiah, Jesus, etc. Consider the age of Abraham, Ruth, Sarah, Anna, Moses, etc. God can empower us all no matter our age, young and old alike.

What does this mean for us? Our call to answer God and fulfill God's will and mission doesn't end with a retirement party and it doesn't necessarily come to be with a certificate of graduation saying we are ready. God knows us all. God wants us all. God is willing to call us all. This means we need to be prepared and ready at any given point. As Paul would offer, the function of Christ's body requires each of us to do our part. One age cannot say to another they are not needed. Christ's church needs us all.

Yet somehow, there seems to be a kink in the hose. With that I mean there appears to be fewer and fewer youth and young adults involved in church. I began work in youth ministry 20 years ago, and there has been a pretty common question asked by church leadership and congregants on Sunday mornings. That question is, “Where are all the youth?” I will add that since Covid, the question here at FPCLY has nearly doubled in occurrence. I also would like to clarify that the word “youth” implies an age of students a few years older than those who come to children's moment up to college graduates. “Where are they? How come they are not in worship on Sunday morning?”

As vital as I believe communal worship on Sunday mornings to be, participation in God's will and mission and the church isn't limited to Sunday mornings; therefore, even though we may not see someone as much on Sunday mornings (no matter how hard we try or encourage), doesn't mean they are not connected or engaged with God and church. I believed that 20 years ago when I was in full time youth and college ministry, and I believe that still today. I believe that too for those who are home centered and find it difficult to get to church due to health.

However, the reality of youth in church has changed some in recent years. To be clear, very clear, youth are not absent. Youth have not fully boycotted church never to return again. As a matter of fact, the annual PC USA calendar I receive is chalked full of images of youth in action, even during the challenges of Covid. This summer here at FPCLY, opportunities such as VBS, Massanetta Springs MS Conference, and Impact Week all involved a considerable amount of youth engagement. This fall we look forward to an active and engaged Confirmation class and growing College Cares ministry. The attention and devotion of youth is demanded from many different competing influences- work, school, sports, family time, church, service, travel.

Youth in church looks different today because the culture of youth has changed. Times are different, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing. Just because we may not be able to follow the same approaches we did 20 years ago doesn't mean the relationship between youth and God, youth and church, must go away. If anything, I think the change in times means we, as fellow members of Christ's church, have that much more of a responsibility to tend to youth in the now. And to tend to something is not a touch and go, but an engagement.

I would like us to consider this. If we don't see youth, there might be a good reason. And that good reason might not necessarily have to do with the youth, but the rest of us. One church reflects, "I tremble at the thought that it might ever be said of our church what was said of Israel in Judges 2:10: **"All that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel."** How could that happen? Easy: The history of the great works of God were not shared and passed on. They did not pass on the life of God in their midst. It happens today. We would like to be the kind of church where that is not the norm."

Questions of reflection can be considered: What have I done lately to know a youth by name? What have I done lately to listen to a youth? What have I done lately to support a youth? What have I done lately to cheer on a youth? What have I done to be an Eli for a Samuel? And I don't mean only the youth in our families we are related to. And I don't mean one time. Research has shown that youth who have developed and transitioned into the latter stages of life more successfully have had at least 5 adult mentors outside their parents (teachers and coaches

sure, but also just friends and fellow church members). You know what that tells me? Youth are open to these relationships and need them. It says older adults have an opportunity to truly impact the future with whether they are willing to be in relationship with youth. Think about that for a moment. If you are someone worried about the future- of church, of schools, of industries, of the world- the way to shift that future is to consider the impact now. In that case, youth are not only the future of the church, they are the church now. It is as though we are to ask not what can youth do for me, but what can I do for youth? What can we as the church do to ensure youth have a voice, youth have a space, youth are mutually respected and honored? What can we do to inspire the next generation for Christ?

A mature author writes, “The Lord Jesus has pressed on me again and again as I have aged into my seventh decade that there is, for a short time, a calling on my life defined by Psalm 71:18, **“Even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come.”** I take that very personally. I am called to proclaim the might of God — the power of God, the majesty of God, the sovereignty of God — to another generation.

Let me say this about youth. They have great potential. It is like dynamite. Dynamite can do great good when used in the right way. It can pave the way for new buildings, schools, lakes, highways, and numerous other projects which will benefit humankind. In the wrong hands, though, it can be used to take life, often thousands of lives. Young people have the same potential for good or bad.

The strength of youth comes from their idealism. There are worlds to conquer, battles to win, deeds to be done. Youth believe in the ideal because they have not yet been limited by reality. And because they believe, they are willing and able to try more and accomplish more than ever before. Partner a youth’s boundless energy with their drive and wow. Youth seem to never tire in whatever work they passionately believe in. Youth also can approach many things with a clean slate. Youth don’t have many of the old prejudices that older adults may have. But with these things there are some dangers. Youth can be naïve (which is why wisdom needs to be shared). Youth do not have the value of experience (which is why teachers and coaches and mentors are vital). They can often give into the siren call of temptation that older adults have learned to weather (which is why grace and positive reinforcement is vital).

Both the benefits and dangers give us all the more reason to connect and engage. Samuel’s life is not what it is without Eli. And Eli’s life is not fulfilled without Samuel.

For God’s will and mission (which is our highest calling and purpose), we must remember that age is but a number. To close, I will offer what an inspiring young author writes,

“Age is irrelevant.” He writes. “There are Christians who, in spite of their older age, are as immature as children. And there are young Christians who, in spite of their youth, are wise beyond their years. If the only factor that mattered in wisdom was experience, older people would always be wiser than younger people. After all, they have had more life experiences. However, wisdom that is from above, is gained through the learning and application of God’s word. James 3:17 says, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.” I know many older Christians who are not peaceable, not gentle, and certainly not open to reason. In other words, I know many older Christians who are not wise. If it were just a matter of time and experience, all older Christians would be the wisest among us, but sometimes that is not the case. Conversely, there are younger Christians who are extremely wise. They, like Timothy, have proven their wisdom in their speech, life, love, faith, and purity (1 Timothy 4:12). They may not have a comparable number of years of experience, but their wisdom is equal (sometimes superior) to older Christians. That being said, as a general rule, older Christians still *tend* to be the most mature. Why? Because they have spent many years learning and applying the truth of God’s word to their lives. What I am trying to offer is, it isn’t the age that matters, it is the knowledge and application of God’s word. It is God’s word which matures us and equips us (2 Timothy 3:17). You can be wise at any age. If you want to be wise, seek wisdom from God (Proverbs 2:1-15; James 1:5). Likewise, you can be useful at any age.”

I love you. God loves you. Let’s love one another. Let’s learn from one another. Regardless of our age.

Commissioning of College Students

Today we have the wonderful privilege of commissioning a group of college students who are preparing and entering a new chapter and year ahead. A list of those we have been able to connect with are included in your bulletin and I ask that you please be in prayer for them all.

Name them... (if they are here they can come up to the table)

Summons by John Bell is a great commissioning hymn for us all, and I ask us all to hear God's calling to us this day and every day, regardless of our age.

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown?
Will you let my name be known?
Will you let my life be grown in you, and you in me?
Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare, should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?
Will you let the blinded man see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen?
And admit to what I mean in you, and you in me?
Will you love the "you" you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell that fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around
through my sight and touch and sound in you, and you in me?*

God is calling. Will you answer?

Let us pray. God, we pray this day in full gratitude for you and your calling upon our lives, regardless of our age. For your will and your mission, age is but a number, because your power fills us and uses us in ways we can never imagine. May we not limit your power. May we be open to your calling and your transformative power, not only in us, but with us, and through us. We pray this day for each of these college students- those standing here and those out doing your work in a variety of other ways- that they may each hear your calling and turn and follow you and never be the same. May they go with you, wherever your love and footsteps show. May they move and live and grow in you and you in them. May all of us God, as Christ's church, walk with each of them and be a supportive presence and inspiration of your mighty deeds and work. As members of Christ's church, we offer ourselves to your purpose and calling God. We offer our thoughts, words, and actions to your service, even if that means sacrificing comfort and convenience for strength in connection and community. For those that doubt and push back, help them to know and see and adapt to your calling today. For those who are willing and ready, empower them as instruments of your peace and hope. Each person matters, because of you, God, each person matters. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior, we pray together...