

Title: Faithfulness Sustains the Generations

Text: Genesis 2:9

Date: November 04, 2018

I have all kinds of thoughts on my mind as we gather around the Communion Table this morning. I am bringing to the table thoughts relating to the meaning of All Saints Day, and the deep reflections many have on this day. I am bringing to the table the still fresh horror of the massacre in a Pittsburgh synagogue a week ago, and how people of faith are trying to grapple with that harsh reality. I am bringing to the table our annual stewardship campaign, and your aspirations to be faithful to what has been built here through the generations. I am bringing to the table the questions and opportunities facing you as a congregation as you are trying to envision what the future holds for you. On the surface you might wonder if I have Attention Deficit Disorder, but I rather think there are commonalities to these divergent threads that can be woven together.

The memories associated with this day can be very personal. I am sure that many memories were triggered this morning with the reading of our Memorial Prayer. While several of the names mentioned are known only to you, I have been here long enough so that the names of Greg Lloyd, Pat Brown, and Bob Proudman now mean something to me as well. We now see with new clarity the significance of their lives.

And as sobering as it is to remember those loved ones who have gone before us, this day should also remind us of our individual destinies. I think of a poem by W.S. Merwin entitled "For the Anniversary of My Death."

**Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out.**

With this in mind we are challenged once again to grapple with the words that are drilled into our consciousness each week:

"With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."
Has that awareness sunk into the deep places of your life?

My mind now jumps to those who gathered this weekend for Shabbat services at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, where eleven people were killed a week ago. As candles were lit, songs were song, and prayers

recited one wonders if that was “enough” to address the pain felt so deeply.

As we gather here to reflect on our sorrow at the lives of loved ones lost to illness, how would we react to the hateful violence experienced by those in the Tree of Life Synagogue? Would we give up on the God who was not there to protect us? Joanne Rogers, widow of the beloved Rev. Fred Rogers, and a Squirrel Hill neighbor, addressed the congregation saying, **“It’s been confusing for me; I’ve been frightened. I have had trouble dealing with the fact that this happened, but I don’t want to give credit to the fact that it happened. I want to tell you how wonderful you are. How beautiful you are. I love you.”**

Our text today was from the beginning of Genesis: **“Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”** (2:9) We have partaken of both trees.

Last week we ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We tried to explore both the root of evil and the Spiral of Violence that springs from that root. In some sense we grappled with the timeless questions posed by Rabbi Harold Kushner in “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.”

This week I would like to invite us to partake of The Tree of Life. There is something sublime that has sustained our Jewish ancestors in the faith throughout the generations, especially considering the unspeakable atrocities that they have endured. Partaking of the Tree of Life is not an intellectual exercise. The fruit can only be received most profoundly in a faith community.

Marcia Stewart, age 88, has been a member of Tree of Life for four decades. She spoke of her deep need to gather once again saying, **“Tree of Life needs to be there together again, or we will lose our identity.”** She is giving voice to the kind of faithfulness that sustains the generations, that transcends a pursuit of “the right answers.” Linda Gelda, age 64, said with full emotion, **“I’m partly here out of outrage. I feel like it’s one thing I can do. It protects against a feeling of despair and helplessness.”** Whatever the reason, the people felt a need to gather. The importance of this cannot be overstated.

My mind jumps again to the church’s annual stewardship campaign, and the phrase that I believe was popularized by your former pastor: **“Faithfulness Sustains the Generations.”** I have no idea what Randy was

thinking specifically when he latched on to that phrase, so I am free to speculate. Of course, faithful financial stewardship to the work of this church must be a part of this, but I am sure there is so much more. There must be faithful involvement in one another's lives. There must be the faithful investment of talents to sustain the fabric of the community for generations to come.

Last week I very much had "Faithfulness Sustains the Generations" on my mind when I led a Confirmation Class for our young people. I spoke of the tragedy at the Tree of Life Synagogue because I did not want our young people to associate our faith with a silly superstition that cannot handle the harsh realities of this world. We do not rush to simple answers – as though they existed – but we come together to grapple with the big questions in all aspects of our lives. We share in the fruit of The Tree of Life when we gather together in community. In the book of Proverbs we read: **"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but violence takes lives away."** (11:30)

It is more than traditions that sustain the generations. It is faithfulness. It is more than church traditions of spaghetti dinners, and Strawberry Shortcake Festivals that sustains the generations. It is faithfulness to each other's lives, and faithfulness to the needs of the world. It is faithfulness to hearing the voices of our spiritual ancestors speak in our contemporary settings. This faithfulness is rooted in an assurance of abundance. In the Book of Revelation we read: **"On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."** (22:2) What a beautiful image.

Since you have previously been alerted as to my fondness for Carl Jung, you should not be surprised that I reference him in saying, **"The advocates of Christianity squander their energies in the mere preservation of what had come down to them, with no thought of building on their house and making it roomier."** I hear in this a reminder that the faithfulness that sustains the generations is expansive, open to new growth, and called to expand its welcome.

So then it is as an expansive community that we discover all that we are meant to be. Elizabeth O'Connor writes, **"When we describe "Church," we like to say that it is a gift-evoking, gift-bearing community. This is why "Church" implies a people; no one enters into the fullness of their being except in community with other persons."**

Our “sermon hymn” today was written by Carolyn Gillette, a Presbyterian pastor and hymn writer. Set to a familiar tune, I believe this hymn speaks to the kind of faithfulness that sustains the generations even in the face of the unspeakable hatred and horror experienced at The Tree of Life Synagogue last week. It is a call to seek God’s face, but a reminder that that face is sometimes seen most clearly in community.

Look at the faces of those around you today. This is *your* Tree of Life. When tragedy strikes, either individually or corporately, this is where you come to be fed and sustained. May this be true today, *and* for generations to come.

Amen.

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