

Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Imagine Church: All Generations | Psalm 78:6

I feel very Presbyterian saying this . . . a Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, tells a story. That just sounds like you're going to fall asleep before the end of the story. Very Presbyterian. Anyway, Kierkegaard tells a story about a robbery. Some thieves break in to a jewelry store in the evening and they are there for quite a while. The next morning the break in is not discovered because the jewel thieves didn't steal anything. What's up with that? Well, what they did instead of stealing things was they rearranged the price tags. So, the next morning the expensive jewelry was sold as junk and the junk jewelry was sold as the most expensive. Kierkegaard's point is obvious . . . we need some smarter jewelry thieves. No, no! His point is obvious—we live in a world where people switch the price tags. Where the things that should be the most important are dismissed as junk and the most precious things are often overlooked in the shuffle. What do we value?

For instance, in our culture, people are more valued for how they look than for what they can do. They are more valued for what they *have* than for who they *are*. So, have we switched the price tags? What do we value the most?

Let me give you my first little sound bite. Without clarity of values, other people will decide what is most important for you. Unless you are clear about what's most important, other people will decide what's most important. You and I live in a world that shapes our priorities, where other people skew our perspectives, because it pressures us. The crowd teaches us what to value. And instead of permitting God to challenge those values, or confront them, or, God forbid, even replace the values of the world, a great amount of energy is expended, even in church, to attempt to win God's approval and support of *our* values instead of the other way around. We ask God to baptize our standard of living; we ask God to bless our pursuit of financial security.

That leads to my second sound bite. If the first is that without clarity, other people will decide what's most important, the second thing is this: we *talk* our beliefs, but we *live* our values. We talk about the things that we say are important, but our lives reflect our real values, or at least they point toward what we think is most important.

We are, in this new year, starting to celebrate our 60th anniversary as a community together. Sixty years here at 70th and Highway 100. And you will hear talk all through the winter and spring about great plans that we believe God has for our future – that we have prayed about, and argued about, and thought about. Great things that we are really excited for, but do they rest on the right kind of values? And so we decided to start, this winter, this new year, with a recasting of what our values are. We explored them for the first time in November, the six different values of the church. They are in

this book, "Imagine Church". We identified six different places where the world is saying one thing, and we as a community at CPC are saying another. These six values, I believe, will help you decide if this is the best place for you to hear God speak to you, or if you should do something else, go somewhere else. These six values, we believe, frame whether you can hear God's call best here, and follow it.

I'd like to do the first of them. Today, we want to say that one of these values that this church holds dear is that we focus on all generations. We believe that the children's sermon was symptomatic and emblematic of a congregation that thinks that 7-year-olds are really important, and when they had you stand, that 87-year-olds are really important. We want to focus on all generations. Underneath each of these values is a "why is this important" statement. We want to focus on all generations, but why? The why for this, we believe, is that we focus on all generations because faith, for us, is a lifelong journey. So a 90-year-old matters as much as a 9-year-old because the 9-year-old is learning about God for the first time, and the 90-year-old is trying to remember what God said was important and how they can still follow at the end of the day. This value is rooted in the Psalms. The Psalmist says:

"One generation will commend your works to the next." [Psalm 78:6]

In other words, one generation will be born, and grow up, and see God, and learn about God, and follow God, and in that process they'll start to tell the next generation about it. Without that generation in front of us we get off track and without people to follow us, what's the purpose?

So, we focus on all generations. We thought as we looked at these six values that this was the most easy to convince people. When that baby is howling, it's okay if the pastor reminds me this is all generations. When that old person complains again about the music, we're in this together. Okay? We felt like focusing on all generations, frankly, is a Hallmark moment. Everybody loves these kids up front. Everybody loves the picture of this little baby's face reaching out to this older, wise face of a great-grandma. That's what all generations is all about. I have to tell you, I think Hallmark cards are great, but I think they are about this deep. If we're going to be a community that focuses on all generations, I think the reality is much messier, and much harder, and much different, and much better than the Hallmark cards or the kids up in front at the Children's Sermon.

I think this is a biblical value. I think it's always been hard for all generations to stay in a community of faith together, and Jesus, I think, spoke to that. Jesus actually lived in a world that's sort of the mirror opposite of ours. You see, in our age everything focuses on the kids, but Jesus lived in a time where the aged people, where people over 50 were valued, and people over 60 were exceptional, and people over 70 were regarded as being really close to God because only people who are close to God could live that long. Literally, I want to get close to the old people. I want the old people in my house because they must have been blessed by God to discover things. And the kids were

often, partly because they were so fragile and they so often died before five, they were cute, but they were not the center of the world like in our age.

Sarah mentioned to the kids the Levitical blessing. That comes from Leviticus 19:32. It says:

“Stand in the presence of the aged (that’s a sign of respect), show respect for the elderly, and you will be revering your God.”

Those go together. When you bless the elderly, you give thanks to the God who keeps them alive. In the same way, kids were diminished. The passage Sarah talked about with the kids was about when Jesus chastised the disciples and said, “Don’t keep the kids away from me.” The kids are important, too. They are important and He brought them forward and He bounced them on His knee and said, “This is what the kingdom of heaven looks like.” Not just you old people. That was news to Jesus’ generation.

The apostle Paul sees this phenomena in the early church, where the old are valued and the young are dismissed. And he says to Timothy:

“Don’t let anybody look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.”
[1 Timothy 1:12]

Be an example, be a model even though you are young. Why would he say that? Well, I think he had to say that because people were looking down on the young. In that time you would never have a rabbi who wasn’t at least in his thirties, partly because no one listened to people until they were in their thirties and partly because it took so long not just to learn it, but to live it.

Sound bite number three. We live in the opposite world, don’t we? We live in a world that caters to youth, but fails to prepare them. We live in a world that caters to the young, that worships the beauty of youth, but fails to prepare them to live. So, at this place and in this season, what does it mean to focus on all generations? If this is a value, how do we transmit this value?

Values are less about what people hear and more about what people see, more about what people *feel* when they are with us. So how will the next generation engage in our life together, how will they explore the community of faith, and why are so many young people walking away? Why are so many young people walking away from what we say is where life comes? Lots of reasons, but I suggest that one of them, one of the reasons that they are not catching our values, is because we *talk* our beliefs, but we *live* our values. We often live very different values, and it’s unattractive to see somebody who talks over here, but lives over there. So, are we living in a way that attracts young, and middle aged, and old?

The value expresses itself in a couple of ways at CPC. The first is obvious. If we say we focus on all generations, and being a larger community, we focus on all generations by having programs for them. So, we have people right now taking care of babies, and

infants, and toddlers, so that mom can sit here and listen for just twenty or thirty minutes. You know, I never have moms, young moms, complain that the sermon goes too long. They want it to go a little longer so they have just a little more time away. And then we have Sunday school classes. Right now there are about 140 ninth graders—140 of our 9th grade Commitment Class are not here because they are scattered at all different Twin Cities churches. Some of them are going to Orthodox churches, and some to black Pentecostal churches, and some of them are going to the Basilica. We have a couple hundred people in our Sunday communities who are older, and we will have, through the month, well over 150 folks that are over 75 years old involved in Bible studies. We have different ministries in place for everybody, from a toddler learning about Jesus, to the 95 year old, having a Bible study with Rich in their retirement home. That's one way that you focus on all generations—you make a place for everybody.

The second way we try to focus on all generations is to teach them to play together, to interconnect. So that we don't have a single's ministry all huddled together over there, and they are with people they know and like, but they never get treated like ordinary people. Or older people who never get put with folks who run around like little crazy people because they're only 8 years old. We want to have intentional interconnectedness.

I'd like to give you just a small example of this. At our house this fall we talked about what made the church special, and one couple who came to this church when their kids were adolescents, said that when their kids got married here, and then started to have children around here, they needed to prepare for the next step. This older couple said, "So, before we became grandparents, we decided we needed to learn again what it was like to have kids, and so we went and we volunteered in the nursery for two years." And they said it was just amazing how much you forget, how much the world has changed. It was amazing, they said, if this kid doesn't have a grandparent in town, to love them. Interconnecting the generations lets those little babies see people who are older than they, who, even if they don't have grandparents living in the cities, they know what grandparenting is like. And it reminds grandparents what the softness of fresh baby skin smells like.

Both of those are appropriate. That is, having a place for everybody is appropriate, and having interconnectedness at intentional times is appropriate. The key is that we become a community where all generations are valued, where all generations intermingle.

Well, I would like to take this from the communal to the personal, and let me just share with you, through a story, about how this church should become a community for all generations. It's very simple. I believe that every human being needs three people in their lives. Everybody here needs a Barnabas, everybody needs a Paul, and everybody needs a John Mark. These are three individuals from the first days after Jesus' resurrection. Before there was even a church, there were people who were gathering together in houses to follow Jesus, to learn about Jesus. And Barnabas and Paul and John Mark were three of those. I said everybody needs a Barnabas. Barnabas goes

first. Barnabas is an early believer, a Levite. Bar means son or son of. Nabas means encouragement. He was called the son of encouragement because whenever Barnabas walked into the room people felt better. Whenever Barnabas left the room, people wanted to go with him, not because he was so charismatic, but because he saw that you were there; he cared about you. An example of this is that after Saul, the Pharisee, hears about these communities following Jesus, he wants to kill them because they are heretics – they believe that Jesus is God, and you can't have two Gods. He goes around killing the new followers of Jesus. And then, you know the story, he gets whacked off his horse, struck blind and follows Jesus. The problem is, nobody will believe him. Why? Because he's a terrorist. He's been out killing people just for what they believe about Jesus. He's a terrorist. Not to get political, but folks, one of the reasons that you and I should love our enemies and pray for those who do evil to us is that terrorists turn into terrific preachers of grace. Terrorists know all about what grace feels like. Saul becomes Paul, but nobody will believe it. He has turned his life around, but nobody believes him. He knocks on the door of the Jesus followers, *I know you're in there. Come on! I want to find out about Jesus*, and the people inside are going *candy gram, nope, nope, not us, nobody here!* And they fear him, and so Barnabas goes out, talks to Saul, hears the story and says *oh that's so cool*, throws his arm around him, drags him back into the room, and says, *it's okay, put down your knives, he's one of us now*. And they don't trust Saul, but they trust Barnabas, and so Saul comes into the community and joins them for a while. As long as Barnabas is there, they trust Saul, but when Barnabas goes away, Saul gets into more trouble, so he goes back home to Tarsus, where it says, he stays for three years. Because nobody trusts him, because he gets into trouble everywhere he goes, because he's as much a maniac as a Christian as he was as a Jew. And after three years, the movement of following Jesus has just exploded and there's nobody who knows how to teach the young converts, and Barnabas remembers Saul and he goes up to Tarsus, gets him, and *goes you got to do this, you got to help us, come back*. And Barnabas and Saul become a team that changes the whole Christian movement. They work together – the thinker and the lover, the fighter and the gatherer. They are unstoppable and the church flourishes wherever they go together because Paul has a Barnabas. We wouldn't have had an apostle Paul if somebody hadn't said, "I believe you. I believe in you." That's what a Barnabas is. All of you need, at some time in your life, or maybe all through your life, a Barnabas, somebody who says, "I believe in you" Do you have a Barnabas in your life? Have you been a Barnabas to somebody else? For some of you it may be your spouse. That's great, but it also needs to be somebody else. There needs to be somebody in your life who you believes in you and you works together with you.

Let me give you an example. I was talking one time and using some sermon illustration about a conflict in the church and maybe I was whining a little bit and I said, "It's just hard sometimes to do this", and I'm out greeting people afterward, and one of my friends comes up. Big bear of a guy, gives me a big hug, says, "I love you, brother." I go home, take off my coat and inside my coat is a little note that says, "Don't sweat it, brother. I got your back." That's Barnabas. You need that to stay the course. Do you have somebody that says that to you? Everybody needs a Barnabas, not all the time, but sometime.

The second thing is, I believe everybody in the community needs an intergenerational experience and that's where everybody needs a Paul. Paul becomes the great teacher of the early movement. The evangelist. The mentor. As he grows older, more and more young women and young men say *I want to be like that. I want to be like him. I want to learn from him and follow Jesus like that.* And he spends time with them. He becomes a father to people like Titus, and Philemon, and Timothy—because when you focus on all generations, and you talk about values, you see that more is caught than taught. You learn more from what you see than what you hear, and that's why you need somebody who has gone down that road and is coming back to you saying *no, it's a dead end, don't go that way, let's go this way together.*

My wife met her best “Paul” when we were in Washington D.C. I was the Executive Pastor for a famous minister. His name was Louis Evans and he and his wife were in their sixties when I took the position. Her name was Colleen Townsend Evans. Everybody called her Coke; my kids couldn't say Coke so they called her called her Coco. She had been a young actress out in Hollywood starting her career when she came to Christ and fell in love with Louis. The two of them decided that instead of her doing cinema, they would do ministry together. Louis had been the Senior Pastor of several churches, and when they came to D.C., Coke spent time with my wife. And it was like having a second mom. It was Laura's first time away from her mom, and she got to see what a faith looks like when you're sixty.

Coke was on the board of World Vision. She loved the poor. What struck Laura was the way Coke treated everybody. The very first time I'm preaching at National . . . at National you have to walk up these marble steps to this huge cathedral-like pulpit, it's a wonderful thing. I'm up there preaching and I'm just getting going and right over here is a homeless woman, fairly regular in attendance, and she stands up and just starts to talk. Nonsensical, loud, and interruptive, and you can tell the ushers are getting a little nervous, and I'm rallying and I talk louder and she talks louder and Coke just comes from a couple of pews away and comes and puts her hand on this woman's hand and she sits down and Coke has her arm around this woman. That's who Coke was.

We had a small group of people in that church who were being real jerks. These people were being deliberately disruptive to where we needed to go, and they were clinging to the old ways, but 1935 was never going to come again, and they just wouldn't believe it. And the worst of them was an older gentleman, Phil, who had an invalid wife, and at every meeting that we led, he would have sixteen objections. It had nothing to do with the issue; he just didn't want to change. His wife dies and he gets worse. One day there was a concert in the Fellowship Hall and Laura was walking through. She looks over and there is Phil and there is Coke. Coke has her arm around Phil and Phil is weeping because he misses his wife so much. And Laura comes home to me and she describes this and she goes, “So John, who do you think is the real jerk here”? I didn't like that question too much, but I learned what it's like to model grace.

I think this is desperately why we need all generations present, because older generations model how to sacrifice for their children. They show how to live a different kind of life; how to invest for the future of the kingdom of heaven, and that changes the whole church. Somehow it changes them too. When you model what it is like to sacrifice for others, *you* change more than you change others—that's so true of us. Many of you who are adults are here because you dropped your kids off here on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights for years. Wednesday nights you dropped them off and you ran to the Galleria and you thought *thank God I've got 47 minutes by myself*, and sooner or later you started to come here occasionally on a Sunday, and then more often, and then you were enfolded into the community, but you had modeled for your kids the fact that they ought to come, and then you came along behind them. The older generation shows how to sacrifice for our children, but the younger generation reminds us what's possible if we risk change and let go. It's very hard for older people to let go. They've done what they've done for a long time. They need help letting go.

Everybody needs a Barnabas to say *I've got your back*. Everybody needs a Paul to say *Oh, that's what it looks like up ahead*, but everybody also needs a John Mark. A John Mark is a younger person whose trajectory is still being determined. You're not sure whether they'll go well or they'll go bad. Once again, Barnabas is right in the middle of the action. Barnabas says, "John Mark, follow Jesus with me." John Mark is excited to be with this famous guy, and he does. Then Paul joins them and they go on a trip together to tell people about Jesus. As so often happens, the trip goes bad. They get kicked out of town after town after town. After the third town, John Mark is thinking, *this isn't fun anymore. Can I go home? Paul goes you can't go home. We're just getting to the good stuff*. John Mark says *I got to go home* and he leaves them. They finish the trip without him.

The next year, Barnabas and Paul want to go out and see how everybody is doing in those brand new churches and Barnabas says *let's give John Mark another chance. Come on; let's take the kid with us*. And Paul goes *are you kidding? He could get us killed this time. You've had some bad ideas Barnabas. This is a terrible idea*. And it says they argued so fiercely that they split up. And there's no record in the Bible that Barnabas and Paul ever were together again because Barnabas says *I'm taking John Mark with me. If you're not going with us we're going alone*. Because Barnabas wanted to give young John Mark another chance. He says, *You know what young people do? They learn. You know how they learn? They make bad choices*. Barnabas gives John Mark another chance and they go off to Rome. Paul does another journey and makes history. We don't know if Barnabas and Paul ever see each other again, but we do know that Paul sees John Mark again. John Marks goes with Barnabas to Rome, falls under the influence of apostle Peter, ends up being Peter's scribe, writes down the stories about Jesus, collects all those stories, doesn't put them in order, but he starts to distribute them, and it is called the gospel of Mark. That's how we get Mark's gospel. This guy that Barnabas gave another chance to. And at the end of his life Paul writes one more letter and he says, *So send me my cloak, will ya? And make sure that you bring my books and if you would, send John Mark. Send John Mark with you because he's been useful*.

Who do you need to encourage because they've messed up? Who do you need to notice that nobody else is noticing? What young person around you needs another chance? One of the great things about our student ministry is that with those 140 kids scattered to all those churches in the Twin Cities are a dozen seniors in high school who are taking care of the 9th graders. Young people taking care of younger people, learning what it's like to be Barnabas, learning what it's like to be Paul. And those kids believe that somebody other than their parents believes in them. Who do you need to do that for now?

That's where a focus on all generations takes us. It's very personal and it's also very practical. If this community has a new mission statement, the new mission statement is to boldly extend the invitation Jesus extends to us, to everyone. That means to John Mark, too. How will all generations be welcomed here?

We will be talking about building new facilities here. Let me be crystal clear – that building is not for us. It's not to make us more comfortable. It is for those people we believe God will bring in with us, that God will bring in after us. Our spaces have not been upgraded in decades. We need to do better.

Three years out of four, we have small groups of high school and junior high school students meeting in the stairwells. We need to change that if we are going to be welcoming as well as inviting. Last fall we had an elder who brought her grandkids to church for the first time. She knew to check them in over here—we don't have a check-in place, so you do it over there—brought in the kids, and at the same time, one of our staff spouses was bringing his kids for the first time. They both got the kids checked in, got their nametags, went to look for the classrooms, and they both got lost. Neither one of them could find out where they were supposed to take their kids or their grandkids, and it's not because they were dumb and it's not because they didn't know the church – this is a staff spouse and an elder. We need to do better than that. If we believe that all generations are important, we need a facility where people don't get lost.

What does it look like to focus on all generations? I'd like to give you just four minutes of what that looks like from somebody who has experienced it. This is Carrie Gleeson. She is our Director of Student Ministries and doing a terrific job.

Carrie

We wanted to give you an opportunity to see, to put names and faces together this morning, to see how our church works to provide spaces and ministries where all generations work together. And as I was thinking through this, I came up with a very short list—and I know I have missed so many areas—but this is just a glimpse of some of those places.

- **Women Who Inspire** A group of women who get together and plan events to inspire other women. The leadership of this team is multi-generational, and there is every generation represented at those events.

- **Seniors with Seniors** A couple of years ago we asked our seniors in high school to meet with some of our retired friends at their retirement communities in town, and they had amazing conversations about life.
- **Small Groups** John Mitchell leads a small group every Friday morning with men who range in age from their twenties to their seventies. They are doing life together. They listen to each other and learn from one another.
- **Bob Burns** has been working with our 2-year-olds for thirteen years.
- **Van**, one of the guys with me in Student Ministries, not only loves being with our middle schoolers and high schoolers, but any chance he gets, he will fill in for Rich Phenow at the 7500 York Bible study, because he loves being with our seniors.
- **Sharon Sampson** and **Barb Harmon** lead a small group at Vernon Terrace every week.
- The **ARMS group** is a group of retired men who come in and work with our facilities team every Thursday to make this place shine.
- Each year, over 60% of our **college interns** are students who grew up in Kids' and Student Ministries and want to come back to serve the kids and younger students that they once were.
- **Wednesday Night Programming**, Every generation is represented in our students and volunteers involved in our kid's choirs, our Kid's and Middle School programming, and in our High School programming.
- Our **adult choir** is intergenerational.

There are so many other examples in our congregation, of families who have been here for generations. And it all hits home for me because I, like so many of you, grew up in this church. So in my 20+ years of being here at CPC, it has taken a village build my faith and to give me a firm foundation. I think back to Sunday School, and I think of people like Sue Payne, Sallie March, and Cindy Willeke, women older than me—a generation older, two generations older—I think of these women who poured into me and taught me about Jesus. And then as I moved up into middle school and high school, I think of people in the generation above mine, people like Brooks Wilkening, Janna Northrup, Kurt Vickman, and Karen Conrad. I think about Laura Mulliken, who led me as a college intern. And now, I get to look back to the generation coming behind me, and see how I am a link in that chain as well. Brooks Wilkening, who led me, now has twin girls in Commitment Class, and I mentor their student leader, who turns around and leads them, and they in turn, lead kids on Sunday nights at the Table. It is a beautiful picture of how God works through the generations, that faith is a lifelong journey and that we are in it together. So what does it look like for you?

John

I know what it looks like. Some of you need a Barnabas. Some of you need to suck it up and be a Paul to somebody else. Some of you need to look around and find a John Mark that nobody else believes, so that all generations will be blessed. Let's pray.

Lord, I thank you that even on this terribly cold morning, You've brought the warmth of a community that cares for the youngest and the oldest, and that wants to grow with everybody in between. Where we honor, and learn, and serve You through other people who are different than us. I pray that some of the people here have the courage to admit they need a mentor and reach out. I pray that others will look around and see someone that they can encourage like Barnabas. And that there will be those like John Mark, discouraged and messing up, who will hear someone say *let's take a walk. Let me tell you about how I messed up and how Jesus found me.* Bless us, all of us youngest to oldest in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.