

Love That Kid

John 13.31-35
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When he had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’

Revelation 21.1-16

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.’

Why is our country so divided? Is it politics, culture, religion (or the lack thereof)? One reason may be that, for the first time in our history, we have six generations all alive at that same time. Relations among the generations—any of you remember, “Never trust anyone over 30?”—have always been complicated, but what makes the relationship even more fraught now is the speed at which the world is changing. In 1975, Intel Founder Gordon E. Moore formulated what is known as “Moore’s Law.” He predicted that computing power would double every two years, as semiconductors get smaller and smaller. So far, he’s been spot on. Today, your child’s smart phone has more computing power than the computers that got the

Apollo 11 astronauts to the moon. In 1996, world chess champion Garry Kasparov beat IBM's Big Blue computer in a series of chess matches. The following year—1997—Big Blue beat Kasparov, because Big Blue had acquired far more knowledge in the intervening year than Kasparov possibly could. How many of you remember, in 2011, when a computer named Watson played two former human champions on Jeopardy? Watson won the one million dollar prize, and promptly blew his winnings at the casino (I'm making up that last part). In counterpoint to Moore's Law, it's helpful to remember Murphy's Law: anything that can go wrong will go wrong. Not all scientific advances are unequivocally good. Given Watson's and Big Blue's triumphs, how much longer will human beings remain masters of our own destiny? Consider that people in the most economically developed parts of the world are getting progressively older. Japan now has the highest median age in the world—46.1. Out of necessity, Japanese corporations are urgently developing robots to provide geriatric care for their aging population. Here's hoping our future robot caregivers will be kind. There's a scientific word, "homeostasis," which has to do with the stability an organism needs in order to survive. Whatever else we are as a country, as a world, as a species, we are not stable.

Bear with me for a little bit while I relate some findings about those six generations that make up our country. Please remember that these are broad generalizations; individuals in any generation can be vastly different from other individuals. That said, within the generations, there are common experiences that tend to make for some common characteristics.

The oldest is what used to be called "the GI Generation," but we now use the term (rightly so) "the Greatest Generation." People in the Greatest Generation were born before 1927. That generation suffered a lot, but still preserved freedom, saved the world and built a great nation. In the words of Dr. Jill Novak, a professor of

marketing at Texas A&M University, “Their Depression was the Great One; their War was the Big One; their prosperity was the legendary Happy Days.” Members of the Greatest Generation tend to have a strong sense of civic duty, personal morality and near-absolute standards of right and wrong. They believe deeply in teamwork. They were used to sacrifice. Marriage was understood to be a lifetime commitment. They felt strong loyalty to their employers, their schools, their civic groups, their churches, and their country. “Retirement” consisted of volunteering—i.e., working for free—until they died or couldn’t work anymore. Because they were children of the Depression, they dreaded debt and saved. They had a saying: “Eat it up, wear it out, make it do or do without.” Many of them grew up without electricity or indoor plumbing. They remember life before television. Many also remember days when they didn’t have enough to eat, or saw other young Americans killed in front of their eyes. As a generation, they resolved to do all they could to spare their children from what they had endured.

The next generation—those born between 1927 and 1945—have sometimes been called “the Silent Generation,” perhaps in reference to Richard Nixon’s invocation of a “silent majority.” Their childhood and adolescence were marked by the Great Depression and World War II, but it was their parents or older siblings who lost their jobs or went to war. After the war, there was an economic boom, which was often manifested by a move to the suburbs and the purchase of a black and white TV. In their childhood, they might have heard Big Band or Swing Music, but they grew up with Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley. Some young men fought in Korea, some in Vietnam; a few fought in both. In their youth, there were the first stirrings of the Civil Rights movements. Women were either stay-at-home mothers or, if they worked outside of the home, tended to be teachers or nurses or secretaries. They were avid readers of newspapers. In general, they were disciplined

and orderly; “conformity” was not a dirty word. Dr. Novak observed that, in grade school, the largest teacher complaints had to do with passing notes or chewing gum in class. The Silent Generation tended to share the values of the Greatest Generation, but most were spared the worst hardships of their elders, so when they retired, they became the freest-spending retirees in history. Incidentally, we have never elected a President from the Silent Generation. George Herbert Walker Bush, the last president to come from the Greatest Generation, was born in 1924. The next three Presidents—Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—were all Baby Boomers.

“Baby Boomers,” like me, were born between 1945 and 1964. After the Great Depression and World War II, our mothers and fathers were fruitful and multiplied, which makes us (so far) the largest generation. Ours was the first TV generation; Superman and Davy Crockett were my first heroes. As a young boy, I remember the deep sense of security that came from living in America during the Eisenhower years. But I also remember school drills where we prepared for nuclear attack. I remember the day President Kennedy was assassinated and watching, from the second floor of Jefferson Davis Junior High School in Hampton, Virginia, as the custodian lowered the American flag to half-mast, and then stood there, for a long time, with his hand on his heart. When I was in 8th grade at Jefferson Davis Junior High, the bravest kid I have ever known, Ronnie Burke, became the first African-American I had ever gone to school with, despite the fact that my hometown was at least 40% black. Even though my sister and I were partly raised by a wonderful African-American woman named Lilly Parrish, I was, shamefully, a young racist until Ronnie Burke and I became friends. Ours was also the generation where divorces multiplied and even came to seem unexceptional. Even though America’s longest war before Afghanistan, the Vietnam War, was being fought from the time I

was in 8th grade to my senior year in college, and there was a draft, kids like me, whose parents could afford to send us to college, got 2S deferments. My great high school friend Mike Rowe came from a poorer family. He enlisted in the Marines after high school, and, in Vietnam, lost a leg and a lot of his platoon. Jill Novak says there were two classes of Boomers: the “save the world revolutionaries” of the ’60’s and ’70’s, and the “party hardy career climbers (Yuppies) of the ’70’s and 80’s.” As a generation, we tended to oscillate between youthful idealism and self-indulgence, which is why we were also called “the me generation.” We wanted universal justice. We wanted war to end. We wanted equality for all. We also wanted to be able to use drugs and be sexually active without either censure or consequence. Our rock star idols are now old. Paul McCartney is 73. Mick Jagger is 72. Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys is 74. We watch pledge week on PBS because the fundraisers all feature old rock concerts. Because we tend to take pretty good care of ourselves, we expect to live a long, long time after retirement. I am advising my children now to start saving for one of those Japanese geriatric care robots. Spend extra to get a nice one. I don’t want one of those Battlestar Galactica models.

The generation after the Baby Boomers is called Generation X. They were born between 1965 and 1983. Because their parents were usually either both working or divorced, they were sometimes called “latchkey children,” because after school they went to an empty house. Generation Xers tend to be skeptical of government institutions, and are very individualistic; they’re more interested in saving their own neighborhood than they are in saving the world. A high percentage of them engaged in illegal drug use when they were in high school and college, but most of them grew out of it. Because so many GenXers have seen how divorce blows up families and affects kids, they are often wary of commitment, and often, when they marry, it will only be after cohabitation. But if they do have kids, they tend to be very

focused on their well-being, to the extent that they're sometimes referred to as "helicopter parents" because they hover so much. GenXers are often obsessed with individual rights, believing that, if an activity doesn't hurt somebody else, it ought to be legal. Because their emphasis is often on self-fulfillment and family activities, they sometimes find themselves heavily indebted to credit cards. Often, their preferred mode of interaction with a loved one is not a conversation, but watching a video together. It was during their growing up years that they experienced the transition from text-based education via books to digital information. GenXers were the first true computer generation. They also really liked the music of Michael Jackson and Prince, who both died too young.

Next comes Generation Y, or, more helpfully, "The Millennials." They were born from around 1983 to 2001. Millennials tend to be optimistic and focused and to respect authority, as long as they perceive that authority to be just. During their growing up years, there were falling crime rates. But because they've also seen a lot of bad things happen in the world—9/11, school shootings, the Great Recession—they can also be a little anxious about security. They want to do well; they want to thrive; they have great expectations for themselves. If they are in school, they tend to feel enormous academic pressure and they schedule everything. They prefer to work in teams, but because they have never known a world without computers, their interaction more often than not comes through social media. They like the concept of marriage for life, but unlike older generations, they don't see marriage as the cornerstone they build everything else on, but as the capstone—they will marry after they graduate, after they get a decent paying job, after they achieve this or that or the other. They have to take care of the checklist first. For the most part, they're a sweet-tempered generation; they're nice to be around. I heard recently—and I believe this to be true—that one reason for all of these positive developments with

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the Millennials is that they grew up without exposure to leaded gasoline fumes or lead-based paint in their homes. Lead in any form is toxic to young brains, and can be a causative factor in violent behavior, which is why what happened to the water supply in Flint, Michigan is so shameful. Very often, Millennials also have really high student loan debt, which, understandably, increases their anxiety. If you wonder how a curmudgeonly old guy like Bernie Sanders got so many college-age supporters, that's how.

Finally, you have Generation Z, the “Boomlets,” the kids born after 2001. These youngsters have never known life without a screen in front of them—a computer screen, a television screen, a cellphone screen, a Jumbotron at AT & T Stadium. All this digital inflow is changing the way their brains process the world. In 1990, the average target age that Mattel, the toy company, tried to reach was 10. In 2010, that target age had dropped to 3, because kids were leaving toys behind and getting invested in electronics at an earlier age. There were a record number of births in 2006, 49% of them to Latino families. From 1995 to 2006, the percentage of children born out of wedlock rose from 32 to 41%. It was 40% in 2014. That greatly increases the risks to those children's well-being. But the circumstances of their birth makes those children no less precious in the eyes of God, or the church. Incidentally, if you're an old guy, like me, and you have a vested interest in the preservation of Social Security, or in being cared for in your latter years by an actual human being instead of a robot, then you should get down on your two knees—assuming you can get back up again—and thank God for these children, who will spend a lot more years paying for our Social Security than we will spend paying for their public education.

America is changing, and growing more diverse. So be it. America has always been a country that, more than any other, contained a greater variety of the people

whom God, in God's infinite wisdom, saw fit to create. Incidentally, I'm sure you have heard that Harriet Tubman, a pious African-American Christian woman who consistently risked her life to deliver God's people from slavery into freedom, is replacing Andrew Jackson on the 20 dollar bill. Some people suspect this simply a move based on political correctness, and there may be something to that: there *is* something deeply suspicious about a pillar of the Democratic Party like Andrew Jackson being supplanted by a God-fearing, freedom-loving, gun-toting Republican like Harriet Tubman.

So, how do these generations deal with one another? For Christians, the answer is obvious. Jesus told us in our scripture reading:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

We are blessed to have six generations in our church. Our oldest member, the beautiful Glorie Steele, will turn 101 this May. Little Maris Cate Moran is a little over one year old. We endure because we love each other; because the great light by which we see is not any one generation's culture, but the light of Jesus Christ our Lord, whose word encompasses all the generations.

I recently read a remarkable column by Michael Gerson. You can find Gerson in the Editorial section of the Times Record News along with such other remarkable writers as our own Deanna Watson and Shirley Craft. In this particular column, Gerson was talking about a new book by former Presidential correspondent Ron Fournier entitled, "Love That Boy." Fournier has a son, Tyler, a teenager with Asperger's Syndrome. Asperger's is a condition on the autism spectrum that causes inappropriate behavior and what can seem like a lack of empathy. Because he had been gone so much in his job, Fournier wanted to go on some excursions just to be

with his son. He called them “guilt trips.” Tyler was interested in the Presidents, and because Fournier had been a Presidential correspondent, he got to introduce his son to Bill Clinton and President Obama and George W. Bush. The Presidents were all very gracious, but Fournier was always worried that his son would say something embarrassing, and then afterwards, be ashamed of himself for having felt that way. The book’s title comes from Tyler’s encounter with George W. Bush, who is very empathetic but was having a hard time getting Tyler to talk to him. Finally, he just grabbed Ron Fournier’s arm and said to him, “Love that boy.” All of his days, Fournier had wanted his son to be athletic and popular, and Tyler was neither of those. But he was brave and forthright; he even tried a stint of standup comedy, knowing he would likely be ridiculed and mocked. When Fournier finally gave up the idea that his son could be whom he wanted him to be, he began to accept and cherish him for who he was: unique, a gift of God, Tyler. Gerson wrote,

“Boiled down, Fournier is urging those of us with children — or parents, or other close human ties — to accept the awesome givenness of our relationships. Other lives can be guided, but not really shaped. People have some irreducible core that can only be accepted. And acceptance is the completion of love. As parents, our job in life is to wholly, truly, wish and work for the benefit and happiness of another human being, not to seek what makes us happy through them.”

Someday, by God’s grace in Jesus Christ, we’ll be in heaven, where pain and sorrow will be no more, and the tear will be wiped from every eye, and we will fully understand, even as we have been fully understood. Until then, we are where we are, with all of these people, and all of these generations, and a commandment from Jesus to love one another as he loved us.

Love that boy. Love that girl. Love one another.

Amen.