

THE PRECIOUS GIFT OF GRANDPARENTS

Several weeks ago there was a segment on the news about grandparents and I found it very disturbing. It was disturbing because the basic thrust of the feature was directed at parents on how to guard your children from your own parents values on religion, politics, economics etc. How sad it is when we protect our children from gleaning the wisdom and values and perspective of people with more experience than ourselves, people who come from another time and history who have something of precious value to teach the generations who come after. So we would like to spend some time today reflecting on the precious value of grandparents, and whether or not you are a grandparent or great grandparent, I hope this message will be for you, because we have children and youth and young adults in this congregation who need you, who need your stories and your wisdom and your perspective, who need a relationship with you, as do your own families. In fact I know of many grandparents who now have the responsibility of raising their grandchildren because of single parenting, divorce, incarceration of the parents, substance abuse or death. In the US today there are 5 million households headed up by a grandparent. Our society is in a bit of a mess when it comes to our families, and you have something of great value to pass on to the new generations and it is urgent in my mind that you do so.

Our story of Simeon and Anna today remind us of the precious value of listening and honouring the wisdom of the elders that are around us. The young parents Mary and Joseph have made the journey to the Temple in Jerusalem to name and dedicate their child. They are observant Jews. When Jesus was 8 days old they had him circumcised in keeping with the Jewish custom of carrying the sign of the covenant with God to the Jewish people on his

body. And now they are observing the Jewish ritual of going to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate their first born son to God and to offer a sacrifice of 2 pigeons to God in thanksgiving for this gift and to observe the purification and cleansing of Mary after her menstrual flow has ceased post-partum -- so Jesus is approximately 6-8 weeks old when our story begins. They have come to the temple and brought their son to the temple priests and to offer their sacrifice and give thanksgiving but the story doesn't talk about the temple priests at all. Nothing is said about the ritual, the focus is on the response of two elders – a woman named Anna who has been living in the Temple, in the Woman's court for 84 years since she was widowed after 7 years of marriage, and another elder Simeon who has been praying all his life for the chosen one of God to save Israel from Roman oppression and has come into the Temple on that particular day. And when they see this 2 month old baby, they recognize him as the hope of the nation, a light for all people. The focus of this story as told only by Luke, reminds us of the value and difference wise elders make in our lives. The gift they bring this child who is not even aware of their words and his young parents is immeasurable and serves as a model to us about the importance and impact of older generations upon younger. Simeon and Anna offer the next generation the gift of PERSPECTIVE. Simeon reminds Mary that this child will bring both Salvation and the Sword. Simeon says to the young people, my eyes have seen my salvation and a sword will pierce through your heart also. In other words, life holds both pleasure and pain. Simeon doesn't mean to terrify these young parents but he was honest with them about the reality of bringing children into the world – our children will not only have wonderful experiences they will be hurt by life as well. Simeon is honest about the dark side of life and doesn't try to protect the young people from life's harsh realities. By

now, most of you who have lived into your senior years are aware of the paradox of human life on earth – you know it holds both wonder and danger, joy and sorrow and you have learned to honour the existence of both extremes. Because you know this, you can give the next generations perspective on their lives. You can be there when loss and grief comes to them as it inevitably will; we cannot protect our children from life anymore than Mary could protect Jesus from the cross. But we can be there for them when they suffer them. The young people in this place need your perspective and support – they are facing a more complex world than you have ever imagined, with temptations and seductions around every corner – and they need your wisdom and perspective and guidance to manoeuvre through them and ground them. When I was a young person, it was my cousin, a contemporary of my mothers who could bring perspective to me about my parents and remind me of who my mother had been as a teenager. She could bring me a new perspective on my family or on a problem I was facing. Many of you have been married to the same person for over 50 years – you can offer a great deal of wisdom and perspective to all of us about how to make relationships work.

Young people need the wider lens of an older generation to help them see their lives and their choices in a new way. PERSPECTIVE, this is a gift that you can give to our young people. This year, Traci is inviting older folks in our congregation to come and spend time with our young people and share some of their life experiences. You have great stories to share with them and they need to hear your stories to bring perspective to their own. Because even though there may be 60 or 70 years of living between you, the human experience of love and loss and money and work and relationships and struggles and temptations and study and

romance are all the same. Culture around us might change, but the struggles and hopes of the human heart remain the same. Our needs and hopes aren't that different from one another, but we can gain perspective and hope from the generations that have come before us.

Another gift that Simeon and Anna give to the infant and to the teen parents is their PRESENCE. Mary and Joseph's own parents aren't there at the dedication; the priests aren't mentioned – the only people truly present to the young people are these wise elders, surrogate grandparents. Never underestimate the power of your presence to the younger generation. Young people need the presence of older generations in their lives to ground them. I remember my own grandmother coming to visit and sleeping over and sharing my bed with me. And I remember lying next to her in the darkness pouring out my 14 year old heart to her about my parents' drinking. She was a safe place to confide my fears because she knew and cared for them. And though no words came back to me through the silence, she reached out her hand and squeezed my own, so that I knew she had heard my pain and was present in that moment to me in it.

This week we have been gifted with the Presence of Traci's mom with us – I have witnessed the joy of 4 generations coming together, to be present with one another and to play together – to play teddy bear with Luke, to play cards and games with her grandchildren and children and new stepgrandchildren. Patti's presence with us has been a holy gift to all of us. We wanted to just spend time BEING with her. Never underestimate your time to just BE with younger generations. Watching the generations from 10 years to 90 years come together at Games Night is a powerful witness to the importance of PRESENCE. Watching

Ruth and Chester and Jack play ping pong and be present with our young people is one of the highlights of this congregation. Where else can generations come together and just BE and enjoy the company of one another but in the church? We have a rare opportunity to be a place of intergenerational play and presence – let's make the most of this time.

Another gift that Simeon and Anna give to Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus is the ability to see the POTENTIAL and PURPOSE in this new life. A wise counsellor once said that the purpose of a parent is to be a mirror to our children so that they can see reflected back to them their own divinity. But because so often our own mirrors are so cracked and flawed and we cannot see the divinity in ourselves we are blind to the divinity in our own children. Perhaps as Grandparents who have hopefully mended most of our cracked mirrors, we can see the divinity within the child that stands before us; we can see their holy potential and purpose. Simeon and Anna recognize the divinity in the child and share what they see with his parents. They can see his potential and his destiny. Grandparents need to see the divinity in their grandchildren. While their parents are worried about what they are not as they are trying to guide and prepare them for the world, they need to hear from you about what they are, of what they could become. These young people in our church need you to see their divinity, their holy potential, their purpose, their promise. So often the world tells us what we are not – we are not pretty, we are not smart, we are not talented, we are not good enough... We are evaluated from the very beginning of our lives – we go to the doctor and we are measured against all the other babies – 50TH percentile on this 90th percentile on that, we are evaluated at school and graded from the age of 3 on, we are evaluated and measured on school teams and community teams, we are evaluated by what is said and what

is not said. Our young people need to know the potential and promise and purpose that they possess. Every Christmas I used to write a letter to my children reminding them of who they are as children of God. Simeon and Anna SEE and RECOGNIZE the divinity of Jesus and share it with his parents, we need to SEE the children and youth in our midst. They need to be seen, to be recognized, to be known. I invite you to get to know the children and youth and young adults in our midst – befriend them, see the divinity that is within them.

Another gift that Simeon and Anna give to the young people at the Temple is the **PASSING ON OF THEIR FAITH AND HOPES AND WISDOM**. They try to pass on and plant their faith and hope in Mary and Joseph. They intentionally approach them and share with them what their hopes are for this child. They don't beat around the bush, they are very direct. So often we hold back and don't share with our children or grandchildren what we want to teach them; we are way too subtle. I remember thinking that my children would just pick up my faith by osmosis and then I realized that I had to share with them my experiences of God and what values I hoped to instill in them. So I wrote a Mother's Day Letter to my children and shared with them the 5 values I hoped to pass on to them to prepare them for adulthood. I was open with them in the ways I had failed as a parent and in the hopes I still had for them.

Now I talk to them directly about what values I hope they will choose to hold.

Another gift that Simeon and Anna give to the young child and his parents is **PRAYER**. They have been praying for this family since before any of them were born. Sometimes we live at a great distance from our children and grandchildren or perhaps we are alienated or estranged from them because of other reasons and we have no or little contact with them. That doesn't mean we cannot be in their lives or influence them for the good. Even if you have not been

able to make peace with your children or been involved in the lives of your grandchildren, you can pray for them and prepare our own hearts for that possibility. There have been countless studies done on the effects of positive thoughts or prayers directed to people even when they didn't know it. I didn't know til near the end of her life that my mother prayed for us every night of her life, and I know Traci prayed for her children and grandchildren before they ever existed. Prayer is a powerful gift we can give our families. To be held in prayer is to be held in the heart of God. We cannot always protect our children or be present to them or play with them or to have them hear our perspective, but at the very least, we can always pray for them and in doing so place them in the care of the one who made them from the beginning.

Grandparents and wise elders are one of the most precious jewels this congregation possesses. You are our greatest resource – not money, not the ministers, not the building – you. You have so much to offer our generation. You believe that the children are our hope for the future, but you are our hope – we need Simeon and Anna as much as Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus did. You are a blessing to us; we give thanks for your gifts of PERSPECTIVE, PRESENCE, PLAY, POTENTIAL, PURPOSE, the PASSING AND PLANTING OF YOUR FAITH AND PRAYER. May you live out your gifts with us today and everyday. In this you give us hope in our every day. Amen.