

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH (UCC)
Sunday, August 27, 2023
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

SERMON – WHAT DO THE YOUNG PEOPLE EXPECT FROM US?

Scriptures:

Romans 12:1-8

NRSV Translation read by Vernon Pang

Romans 12:1-8

A Living Sacrifice

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Humble Service in the Body of Christ

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your[a] faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,[b] do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Sermon - What do the Young People Expect From Us?

Last week, I talked about the Biblical call to listen, grow and change. We’re meant to hold each other accountable in community and be fully present with suffering, conflict, and discomfort, even if it means having difficult conversations. If we don’t commit to fully loving each other, including through disagreements and hardship, we don’t have the ability to deliver that love outward to new disciples or people in need in our community.

I talked about how when we forgive in the narrow sense of tidily smoothing things over, we are doing an injustice to each other and to God. Instead of vacantly using forgiveness to make things pleasant or easier, we should be doing the deeper, harder work of seeking redemption and transformation as a result of forgiveness. God expects great things from us, including rising up to challenges of Spirit. This week, I’ll elaborate on why being present in growth and discomfort is not only what the Bible asks us to do, it’s what’s going to grow this church.

The problem is that many good, well intentioned church people don’t like to be uncomfortable. We like our potlucks, and our prayer meetings, and miss those simpler days of the past where churches were bustling centers of life and activity that didn’t

involve having to stretch our imaginations too much. For many years, the church enjoyed functionality that was fun, predictable, and loving. Unfortunately, those days of carefree joy in discipleship have passed.

God is clearly doing a new thing with the church, and we can't look at the ghosts from the past to see what that new thing is. The past is gone; young people are never going to come back to the church just because we laugh together and have excellent potlucks. It used to be that churches were places of fellowship, where we gathered to listen to beautiful music, absorbed some hope and peace from a weekly message, maybe do a couple volunteer tasks with the youth groups or committees, laugh and gossip with our friends, and then go home. And then my generation effectively did away with that entire model.

A study done by a religious attendance research group called Barna shows that statistically, my generation agrees with itself that churches just seem like "cliquey social clubs" that have "no positive effect on society" and at best are a boring thing to do with a weekend morning and at worst are the most destructive force in the history of the world. So we young people left the pews and found our fellowship on the internet, which is a poor replacement for live fellowship, but it says a lot about our opinions of the church that we preferred the raw anonymity of the internet to the live experience of church.

Of course, it's not true that churches have no positive effect on society. The church worldwide is the largest humanitarian organization in history, rendering more social aid collectively than any other institution ever. Most hospitals, homeless shelters, refugee and disaster assistance, and other designs of care for the poor and needy were built by the church. The church also played a pivotal role in many of the world's most iconic movements for positive social change – the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, and the Liberation Theology movement of Latin America were all led predominantly by pastors. Queen Lilioukalani herself preached Jesus' message of love of enemies and hope of redemption to help hold her people steadfast as the Hawaiian Kingdom crumbled around them; her Christian faith was credited as perhaps one of the reasons she was able to help her people sustain such a united Hawaiian identity in the wake of devastating loss.

Yet, the church also shows up in the news throughout history for atrocities such as the Inquisition, Manifest Destiny, child sex abuse scandals, and murderous boarding schools for indigenous populations. And my kids could tell you that yes they love God and have lots of big questions about Him every day, but church as the thing we do on Sunday morning is kinda boring. We young people do have a point: church is boring and has a mixed track record. And even if we didn't have a point, it ultimately doesn't matter, because we've made our choice – the bustling, easy churches are yesterday's news and they're not coming back. Not like they were, at least.

So what are young people expecting from us, if a safe, loving place of fellowship that does some good work in the community and provides ono pupus every week isn't good

enough? Well, I think they're expecting exactly what God is expecting of us – and that perhaps God is speaking through them in their mass exodus. So what is God, and by proxy the young people who left us, expecting from the church?

Paul often answered this same question as he visited struggling churches across the Mediterranean in the first years of Christianity. What is God expecting from us? What is the church supposed to be doing? In Romans Chapter 12, Paul responds to this question that we are meant “to offer [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Sacrifice, transform, renew. If young people saw churches sacrificing themselves to help others and being places of transformational change and renewal, I honestly don't think they would have left the church. Instead, they see us doing things that they could do just as well or even better without judgment and boring religion dictating how to do it.

I'll give you an example of what I mean. When I directed Refugee Services at UCC National Ministries, I'd repeatedly see this problem that service professionals call “sponsorship dependency.” Sponsorship is when nice, loving, well intentioned people take on the arduous task of welcoming a refugee family to their country and provide them friendship and help getting started in their new environment. Often it's a great success and a very noble, kind hearted thing to do. Churches can do it. Atheists can do it. Anyone can do it. You don't have to have a heart for Jesus or a sense of religiosity to feel called to take care of another human being.

Sponsorship turns into “Dependency” when the trauma and odd cultural practices that the refugees bring with them confuse the sponsor, which in turn causes the sponsor to create problems for the refugee. One time I got a call from a church saying that the refugee family they were sponsoring had been burgled and beaten in the middle of the night by other refugees in their apartment complex. Why had this happened? The answer was that the nice, well meaning church had basically given their sponsored family too much stuff. They were getting their rent paid for, they had nice furniture and an always full pantry. The other refugees looked at this and thought “well, that's not fair, why do they deserve that while I live in squalor?” and then forcibly took some of that nice stuff the church brought for themselves. The church had created a dangerous situation for their sponsored refugee family to live in by making the refugee family dependent on their generosity.

And many sponsors do this – overcompensate with their hosted refugees to the point that it puts the refugees in danger. And the reason we feel the need to overcompensate to help poor, desperate people is not noble, or nice, it's actually very selfish: we want to make ourselves feel better about the other's situation. I'll say that again – we want to make ourselves feel better. Just like when we expect a rape survivor to forgive her abuser, or a hand a dollar to a homeless person so that they'll stop looking so pitifully at us; our actions aren't driven by love, they driven by the desire for our ministry to be polite, tidy, and easy.

It's easier to give old furniture to a refugee than it is to sit with them on the furniture and learn about their experience. It's easier to give a homeless person a dollar than it is to hold their hand while they cry. It's easier to ask a rape survivor about forgiveness than it is to listen to her rage. And we young people saw the church take these easy routes through the hard moments that we thought the church was meant to truly address, and we decided we didn't need the church anymore.

Isn't the church the place we can turn when we want the spiritual strength to do the hardest things? Paul expected this from us. And even more importantly than Paul, Jesus expected this from us. And now our pews have emptied out and the young people have gone looking for the answers to the hardest questions elsewhere, because the young people also expected this from us.

The good news is that Paul isn't asking for all of us to be very good at talking to schizophrenic people talking about how the whole government is aliens or refugees who had watched their family be lit on fire in front of them. I've been doing ministry to highly volatile populations for 15 years now and it still takes a conscious effort for me to hold the hand and look into the eyes of a woman sitting on the sidewalk covered in excrement and tell her no, I can't give you \$20, I'm just here to listen to you. Because handing her \$20 would be way easier than enduring that stench and that heartache! No, ministering to broken people is not easy, even for those of us who are gifted at it. And while creating relationships with broken spirits in search of renewal in Christ Jesus is the ultimate goal, Paul recognizes that there's other ways that each person in the church can provide spiritual strength; he recognizes that everyone has their own gifts in church.

For some of us, that may mean cooking a hot meal to be served at the church so that others can use that meal to spend intentional time with those who are broken, lost, or afraid. For others, it may mean providing funding for the ministry to survive. No matter how each of us use our gifts, we have to be sure that we are using them with a united and clear intention to bring the lost and broken into new life in Christ rather than shrinking into what may be easiest or most convenient for us.

When young people see a church that's making an earnest effort to provide spiritual growth and wellness for the people they serve, I'm confident the young people will come back. Because if there's one thing that young people have not figured out how to replicate without the church, it's the spiritually sustaining community that creates healthy spaces for people to thrive. The internet is not an efficient replacement for that. Young churchless people have figured out that we can sponsor a refugee or feed a homeless person just as easily as a church can. We've figured out how to have potlucks and sing and enjoy fellowship with each other without the church. But we young people have not figured out how to develop healthy communities that bring people out of brokenness and back into light without the church. Because there is absolutely no replacement for that.

The old days of churches being simple places for fellowship are gone. Much more is expected of us now in order to stay alive, and I think rightfully so. Young people have tasked us with a big project, and it seems to match the project that God originally

intended for the church. This season for us is the perfect chance to get back to the roots of what Christ calls the faithful to do, so let us get uncomfortable together and invite the lost and broken back into belonging, even when it's messy, involves sacrifice, and imagining what the church looks like together differently.

Amen.