



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The First Sunday after Trinity, May 25th, 2008

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

What is called the generation gap is really not all bad. Some gaps are good things. Like in spark plugs—the gap has to be just right to make the spark that drives the piston that runs the engine. In fact the Bible does not try to obliterate the generation gap; instead, it teaches us how to understand the gap and how to cross it with special kinds of respect.

Here at St. Stephen's there are older saints and younger saints and some of us in our forties and fifties who have a foot in both boats. What I believe the Lord wants me to do is apply the Word of God to these groups and seek the wisdom and power of God's Spirit to pull us together for the great work we have to do as the people of God in this city and around the world.

The more I have thought about this the more I am persuaded that Christ is calling us to explode some stereotypes about the generations. What is God's calling for an older saint? How early in life does God look for visionary and responsible ministry from our youth? Is it God's idea that we have come to regard as normal and inevitable the excessive style-consciousness, the disrespect, the self-centeredness, the indifference that so often goes with adolescence? Have we just gradually over the years in the American church conformed to the lowest common denominator of what is possible for the old, and what is expected from the young? Have we searched the Scriptures to learn what God's will for older people is? Have we searched the Scriptures to learn what God aims to make of a teenager or a baby-boomer? Or do we just absorb the media models? Perhaps we can make some good progress together searching the Scriptures. I think you will find exciting and encouraging what God can do and wants to do with old and young in this parish.

So let's think this morning about being at the upper end of the age spectrum. The world is getting old. The more developed a country becomes, the longer its people live. And the gap between the older and the younger is not all bad. The Bible does not try to obliterate the gap. For example, Paul wrote to the younger Timothy, "Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would a father; treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity" (1 Timothy 5:1–2).

If Paul had wanted to obliterate the generation gap, he would have said to Timothy, "Don't make distinctions in the way you treat the old and the young. Treat them all the same." But that is not what he said. He said, Recognize the distinction between an old man and a young man; acknowledge the gap, and treat the old man one way—like a father—and the young man another way—like a brother.

If we were to do away with the generation gap, we would nullify some very important Scriptures. Some Scriptures can only be fulfilled by recognizing the generation gap and owning up to the fact that it is good.

I want to illustrate this with a text from Leviticus 19. But before I do, let me set up an outline for the rest of the message. I want to say three things about older people, and I choose words that rhyme in the hope that you may remember them and think on them and pray them into reality at St. Stephen's. 1) Older people are to be PRIZED. 2) Older people are to be MOBILIZED. 3) Older people are to be EVANGELIZED (which we'll discuss later).

Here is where I want to quote Leviticus 19, specifically, verse 32. "You shall rise up before the

hoary head, and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord."

There are tokens of respect and demonstrations of honor that belong to older people, simply because they are older. God has granted them to live long, and you shall fear your God by honoring the men and women who have born his image to old age. This is why it is so important not to obliterate the generation gap. This text commands the younger ones among us not to stride presumptuously and carelessly into the presence of an older person as though we were crossing no gap—as though we and they were simply peers with no special respect and honor to be shown to them. "You shall rise up before the grey head; you shall show honor to the face of an old person."

How? Respectful postures. Respectful forms of address. Respectful deference in sitting and standing. Respectful clothing. These are not just arbitrary, old fashioned manners and customs. The text says, "Honor the face of an old man, and fear your God." Customs of respect and deference to older people are rooted in God and the fear of God. And the loss of these manners of respect from baby-boomers and teenagers is directly related to their small view of God and the contemporary foreignness of the idea of the fear of God. If God has become a buddy, you can hardly expect people to stand when an old man enters the room.

So we must learn to fear the Lord in humility and trust, and then to let that trust and humility and fear show itself in respect and honor for the people the Lord has made to bear his image a long time on the earth. This is what I mean when I say, Older people are to be PRIZED. Anything that signifies disregard, anything that signifies that loss of strength means loss of honor, is wrong.

The way we treat our elders is a test of faith. It has to do with reverence for God. Paul said this too in 1 Timothy 5:4, 8: "If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God . . . If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

In other words, we will prize older people the way we should when we prize God the way we should. When you stand before an older person, the issue is: will God be revered in this moment by the way I treat this person? Now that has implications for the older person too. It means that he or she exists for God. And that leads us to the second point this morning.

Older people are to be mobilized. Now this assumes two things. First, that there are mobilizers, equippers, leaders who expect older people to be actively serving Christ as long as they are alive, in whatever way their health will allow. And, second, it assumes that there are older people who expect to be actively serving Christ as long as they live, in whatever way their health will allow.

I want to encourage both of those assumptions. And I think the best way is to point your attention to verse 18 of Psalm 71. The old saint prays like this: "So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, till I proclaim thy might to all the generations to come."

Here is an old man with gray hair pleading with God to sustain him in old age so that he can press on with his ministry. That is what God wants at St. Stephen's: Older people who say: "Well, if my society says that my profession is finished at age 65 but my God says that my ministry is finished when I die, then between 65 and 95 I am on-call full-time for God."

"So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, till I . . ." Now right at this point I want you to fill in your ministry (and if you don't have one come see me). Every Christian is given gifts and called to ministry and there are no age limitations. Your ministry will change with the different chapters of your life. We are all called to minister, and the more time we have free, the more ministry we are called to do. So how will you finish the verse: "Even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, till . . . "?

If you are willing, God will show you how to finish the sentence in verse 18 in a way that fits your strength and your gifts.

In closing I urge each of you to search your heart with these questions: Is there some older person I have not PRIZED the way I should? Have I risen up in respect before the grey head? Have I slipped into an unchristian way of thinking about my retirement, and neglected to dream God's dream for me these crucial years? What ministry, what service is God calling me to?

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.