

## *The Young, the Old, and the Latecomers*

1 Timothy 4:6-5:1, Matthew 20:1-15

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I'm standing here at the Lord's Table flanked by a young man and an older man. Actually Tony's about my age, but he represents the old days at Harbor Church. He served here for two decades when he wasn't much older than Kadin. No one's ever served that long, and in some ways Tony is the defining pastor of First Baptist Church in its modern incarnation. On the other side we have the seminary intern who has been here less than 3 months. And he looks so young.

These guys represent two sets of polarities which sometimes cause tension within a church. The first set of differences is between the old and the young; the second set is between the long-timers and the latecomers. I don't know of a church where there isn't some tension along those two axes. The texts we read today suggest that it was there in the first century. Paul has to tell his mentee Timothy not to let the older people despise him because he is so young, but he also has to tell him to treat the older men and women with respect and affection. And in the reading from Matthew, Jesus tells a story about how people who worked a long time in the vineyard held resentment against those who had come late in the day.

Our hymnal, which dates from the mid-seventies, contains a lot of country-ish Bill Gaither songs which were popular at that time. One of those songs fit the theme of this service, but it sounded so corny I just couldn't bring myself to impose it on you. Here's how the chorus goes:

Plenty of room in the family,  
Room for the young and the old;  
Plenty of happiness, plenty of love,  
Plenty of room in the fold.

The first verse says "There's plenty of food at the table." That's what I want to remind you of today: there is plenty of room at this table for all of us.

There is room here for both the young and the old. Our text from 1 Timothy seems to be addressed to someone like Kadin, relatively new in the ministry—although most scholars figure Timothy would have been in his 30's at this time. For a pastor, that's still young, and I've discovered from working with ethnic churches that the "youth group" often includes everyone under 30 or even higher, as opposed to the "old folks." Paul tells Timothy the kind of thing I've been telling Kadin all summer: Ignore gossip and what Paul calls in sexist language "old wives' tales." Train yourself in godliness, in spiritual disciplines, because it lasts forever—as opposed to physical training. When I was a kid wanting to avoid Phys. Ed., I latched onto this verse in the King James that says "Bodily exercise profiteth little" (v. 8). But really, Paul is saying that physical exercise is good but its results are short-lived, whereas spiritual exercise is valuable long term.

But I want to focus on verse 12: "Let no one despise your youth" or "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young." That's a strange bit of advice, really. It makes more sense when Paul tells the Corinthians not to despise Timothy (1 Corinthians 16:11) in another letter—although you have to wonder what kind of reputation this intern had if everybody was tempted to despise him. But why would I tell Kadin "Don't let anyone look down on you

because you are young”? Kadin might well say, “Don’t *let* them! What am I supposed to do, punch them in the mouth? How am I supposed to *stop* them from despising me?”

I imagine part of what Paul is saying to the young pastor is “Don’t let them make you see yourself as despicable.” Kadin knows that for decades there has been a large rat painted on the floor of a Princeton Seminary building at the bottom of a large staircase. In my day the rat had a motto painted around it with the words *Illegitimi non carborundum*, which being translated is “Don’t let the b-words get you down.” That’s part of what older ministers always say to younger ministers: don’t let the people that despise you get you down, and don’t accept it as the normal state of affairs.

But Paul goes on, because he has a strategy for the young man to get respect: set the other believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. If they despise you, show them in what you say and do that you are full of love and faith and pure thoughts.

The question I’m wondering about this morning, though, is why there is always this tendency of the old to look down on the young as if they know nothing. And on the other side, why do young leaders have to be told not to speak harshly to an older man, but to speak to him as a father? The old person despises, sometimes in secret. The young person blasts the old man with a critical spirit as if the young person were the first person on the planet to have a sense of ethics and justice.

What Paul is saying, I think, and what I’d like to say is Kadin, is: “Don’t act as if you know everything, but don’t act as if you know nothing either.” If you want to be respected, win respect by loving people, not by reprimanding them because you know so much better than them. That’s a lesson that even an older pastor keeps learning over and over.

But for the rest of us—who are mostly older—I think Paul has a different word: Don’t despise the young. None of us would admit to despising the young. We all love babies, at least when we don’t have to change them. We are glad to see children in worship. We’re all for a youth group as long as we don’t have to work with them.

But when we have conversations about why we don’t have more youth and young adults in our church—why the Lord’s Table has so many empty seats around it—the talk frequently turns to what’s wrong with the young adults, what’s wrong with them as parents, how they just dropped out of church, how they don’t make church a priority the way their parents did. That sounds to me like blaming the victims. If that set of parents had an experience in Harbor Church that made them think that going to worship and being connected to Christ was not really important, that’s our fault, not theirs. That’s especially true of those young adults who at one time attended or were even baptized into Harbor Church. Somehow they didn’t see a passionate devotion to Jesus that turned them on. Somehow they saw the church as more like a social club for older people. They didn’t see the church as vitally connected to issues that concern them like the environment and peace and justice for everyone including minorities and gays.

Some of you have heard stories of how I almost got run out of my church in Kentucky because we had so many unchurched and unaccompanied children and youth coming to church. They weren’t the right kind of kids, according to some. They were causing a lot of wear and tear on the property. They were never going to contribute to the budget; they were just a cost center. Some people actually said that. I don’t think Harbor Church would ever despise youth that way, but there are other things people there said that you hear in almost every church:

1. I’m glad to have young people as long as you don’t change the worship service.
2. I’m glad to have children here, but I’m not going to volunteer to teach Sunday School. I’ve done my turn and I’m old. Their parents should do it. Friends, I hate to say it, but that sounds a

lot like despising youth. If you're physically able to sit in worship you're able to sit in Sunday School and love on some kids for half an hour.

3. I want the church to have a youth group, but I don't want to have to talk to them. We don't have anything in common. I'm not cool enough. Here's the deal: if we wait for God to send us some cool people we may be waiting until hell freezes over—and hell is exactly where these youth may wind up.

So if we want to take seriously the idea that there is room at this table for young and old, we may have to take the bread to them where they are; we may have to take them by the hand and bring them one-by-one to this table; we may have to own the fact that their spiritual lives are our responsibility, not that of their unbelieving parents.

But I do want to talk about the other polarity—between the longtime members and the latecomers. Jesus tells the story about a man who had a vineyard and needed day laborer to pick grapes. The owner went to the town square where laborers gathered at dawn and got up a load to work, promising the usual daily wage of one denarius. Then he went back at 9:00 and got up another load with the same promise, and did it again at noon. He went back and got more at 3:00. But at 5:00—an hour before dusk and quitting time, in a crazy gesture, the owner went back to town to see who might still be hanging around looking for work, the long-term unemployed, as it were. And he hired them on the spot even though they could only work one hour.

At 6:00 it was pay time. The owner started, strangely, with the ones who came last and gave them a full denarius in pay. This got the hopes up of the ones who came at dawn or at 9:00. Wow, if they got a denarius for one hour, we must be going to get a big paycheck! But everyone got the same pay, one denarius. This offends our sense of justice. It's not fair. And of course the owner in the story represents God, and we think that God is not being fair if he gives equal blessings to people who start working for him late in the day. But here's the deal. God is not fair in the sense of punishing those who came late. God is generous.

The longtime workers complain, "You are making those latecomers equal to us!" And so he is. The owner's only rebuttal is that he is free to bless whom he will. But he asks a question of the complaining workers: "Are you envious because I am generous?" The Greek is literally, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" Does it bother you that I am good to those who don't deserve it as well as to those who have worked hard all day? Of course it bothers us, but God's message is "Get over it."

When Jesus originally told the story, the all-day workers were the Pharisees who had dedicated themselves to purity all their lives. The latecomers were the sinners who were being converted by Jesus after spending their lives as corrupt politicians or prostitutes or drunks. How can you act as if they are equal to us? How can you teach that God will bless them in the way he blesses those who have followed the law all their lives? But for Jesus, God the Father is defined by mercy and generosity. As we said a couple of weeks ago, Jesus doesn't want us to live in the old kingdom of tit for tat but to enter the kingdom of mercy and forgiveness.

By the time Matthew's gospel was written, readers probably saw this as a story of Jews versus Gentiles—not just in the conflict between synagogue and church, but between Jewish believers in Jesus and Gentile believers. How was it fair for God to bring these Gentiles into the covenant that it had taken millennia for God to work out with the Jews?

But for most of us, the story is going to resonate at the congregational level. Every social group has these problems. People who have been in the group a long time feel they deserve a level of reward and privilege above that accorded to newcomers. If you work in a church for 40

years don't you deserve to call the shots? Don't you deserve some kind of status that makes clear you are not to be treated the same as someone who just came in the door?

Jesus tells the story in a way that will make us identify with the workers who have been there all day and feel mistreated when they don't get more than the latecomers. But Jesus then says, "Doesn't that amount to envy because we don't want to see God be that generous?" We serve a God who will take somebody into his family who is at the very end of life. We follow a Jesus who rescued people who had wasted their whole lives. Welcome them to the table, Jesus says. Give them a place of honor. Wash their feet. This is your brother or sister who was lost and is now found.

We come to this table as old and young, as longtime members and newcomers. It is the Lord's Table, Jesus' meal. He's the one who invites. Let us be the ones who welcome.