January 26, 2017 Milepost 271

***Aging with Grace and Updating the Nursery***

Since the dawn of time, humanity has revered the three-generation household. Among many reasons: all three generations had things to learn from and teach the other two. The shift to two-generation households, has exacerbated the challenge congregations face in passing the torch to the next generation.

Aging is to be embraced. We all know some who resist it. I have proposed an “Aging with Grace” small group in many congregations, primarily for the benefit to biological families, and secondarily for congregational benefit. It materialized once, and was a very positive experience…for the seven women (ages 25-78) who chose to participated. (What’s up with that, men?)

Parents will always be parents to their children. But as parents age,

adult children slowly begin to parent their parents. Things go more smoothly if this natural process is embraced. In the beginning, parents feed their children, and in the end, children feed their parents.

The metaphor breaks down a little if applied to the congregation,

because we are brothers and sisters in Christ.. But if we are honest, subtle or subliminal power dynamics akin to a parent-child relationship do exist in many congregations.

Should it not be similar to the biological aging process? As we age in the congregation, we need younger folk to keep encouraging us older folk to grow and try new things. And older folk are needed to impart wisdom from life experience.

When a generation is missing in a congregation, the challenge of passing on the torch is greater. Shalom has half a generation missing.

There are many very empty nesters, and a delightfully growing group of nest builders. But there are few parents with youth ages 13-23. The gap is greater in some congregations.

There’s no generation gap in our caring at Shalom. Most groups include both generations. Most of our values cross the generation gap. And yet generational differences exist.

Perhaps few things need to change. But the younger generation needs the freedom to express what those few things might be. That happens best when the older generation is aging with grace rather than resisting the aging process. Graceful aging in the congregational context means celebrating what has been accomplished, and accepting

an increasing dependence on the younger generation.

It’s a delicate dance. This is not about putting grandpa and grandma out to pasture. They need to keep dancing, even with walkers and wheelchairs!

To paraphrase Garrison Keillor, Shalom is where everyone is above average. The boomer generation is remarkably gifted, but so are the nest builders. If allowed, they will build well on the solid foundation the boomers have built, although perhaps at times with different tools and different materials. –Gary Martin