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“The Greatest Generation”

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Matthew 11:16-19;25-30

"To what shall I compare this generation?" asks Jesus. It is a question every adult asks at one time or another: "What's up with kids today?" It's always been a national pastime -- total bewilderment over the younger generation and their lack of values, integrity or something or other. It is comforting to know that even Jesus scratched his head over generational differences. Matthew's 11<sup>th</sup> chapter begins with the imprisoned John the Baptist sending his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Although Jesus' first response uses positive images, he soon begins to discuss the attitudes and outlook of the generation that fails to see him as "the one who is to come." Jesus compares "this generation" -- that is, his own contemporaries -- to "children." While he did tell his disciples to become like children in order to enter the Kingdom of God, in this case such a comparison is hardly a compliment.

The behavior these "children" are engaged in, however, adds further insult. They appear to be harassing one another for refusing to join in children's games: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." The flute-playing and dancing are boys' games; both were part of men's celebratory activities at weddings. The "wailing" and "mourning" are part of another rite children could play-act. Women served as the official, sometimes even professional, mourners at funerals. Jesus is disgusted and disappointed by the behavior of this generation and how they are missing the point. In fact, as Matthew tells us, the generation that first heard Jesus gave him a terrible approval rating: They said, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

"To what shall I compare this generation?" asks Jesus. In utter frustration he bemoans the stubbornness of their hearts. Jesus is frustrated, because no matter what he does in the name of the kingdom, they find some reason to dismiss and ignore him. "Woe" he says. Woe to that generation that tries to trivialize me -- make me irrelevant. Woe to those who fail to see God

Every generation misses the point in some way or other. Every generation seems self absorbed to the one that came before it. Whether it is Builders, Boomers, Millennials, or Generation X, every generation is rebelling against or reacting to the values of the one that preceded it, and totally blind to certain things.

NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw comes flat-out and tells us who is "The Greatest Generation." In a book by the same title written in 1998 he argues that it is the GI Generation that stormed the beaches of Normandy in World War II, came home to work in American factories and make this country great -- that is the greatest generation. These are the ones, women and men, the living and the dead, who willingly gave their lives, who gave their sweet dreams of childhood over to the enduring nightmare of war, the war that changed history and saved the world from fascism, the war that guaranteed safety, democracy and prosperity.

When the war ended they returned to their homes to marry and raise children, to rebuild a nation damaged by the Depression. They did so community by community as active citizens, as Good Samaritans. They knew nothing but hard work, sacrifice and service. When we look at our parents or grandparents of the GI Generation, it's hard for our own generational self-esteem not to take a beating. How can you top what they have done for us? It's been more than 50 years since the war ended and many of that generation are now gone, and we will not see their kind ever again. They are awesome and impressive and we owe them so much.

But theirs is not the greatest generation.

No doubt that generation changed things. In fact, they unwittingly carved out more social change than many of their peace-marching children of the Baby Boomer generation. The women of this generation were true pioneers. Women's Lib got started when Rosie the Riveter went to work 30 years before they thought of calling it Equal Rights. Women serving in fighting units right now in Iraq and Afghanistan are a direct and traceable result of women serving in the WAVES and WACS and the front-line nurses of WW II. They were ordinary women like Colonel Mary Hallaren of the U.S. Army, Women's Auxiliary Corps, and General Jeanne Holm of the U.S. Air Force, who got their start in WW II.

Brokaw quotes Margaret Ray Ringenberg saying, "My father said, 'I didn't get to serve and I don't have any boys, so I guess you'll have to do it'" So off she went to fly all sorts of aircraft in the Woman's Air Force Service Pilots. Ringenberg was typical of ordinary patriotic women of her day. The country was in trouble, there was a need, there was a job to do, so the women stood up and did it.

But still, they're not the greatest generation.

What about the generation that lived long before them, 230 years ago, and

were driven by a vision of a free and democratic country? They suffered and sacrificed, they stood up for the truth, no matter who told it, they advocated for justice no matter who was against it. They envisioned a nation devoted to freedom of religion, conscience, dissent, speech, assembly. But they paid a terrible price for that vision, some of them paid the ultimate price, branded as traitors by the British, tortured and murdered. Their bold experiment in democracy survived and flourished and has been a beacon of hope to all people everywhere.

They envisioned a land with values such as those set forth by Emma Lazarus: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” That was their vision of an America open to all people everywhere, and it persists in some circles to this very day.

But they were not the greatest generation, either.

So which is? You could argue that it is those coming of age today, young people who are more technologically savvy, globally connected and service oriented than their parents. It’s not only that they understand the Apple iPhone, and they are good at text messaging. It’s that they have a big picture of the world and their place in it. I have to tell you that the more teenagers that I get to know, the more convinced I am that theirs is a great generation. They honor diversity and they care about the earth, they respect others and want to leave the world much better than they found it. Our work team that spent last week at the McCurdy School in Espanola, New Mexico is a good example. Fifteen youth and adults went down there to do construction on the campus of the school which serves K through 12 in this very poor community. The McCurdy school offers the students there a future beyond anything else that would ever be possible for them. Our team worked so diligently and quickly that they ran out of projects by the middle of the week! They replaced ceilings, tore out a gymnasium floor, did yard work, and made a positive impact in that community. Every time a group from this church goes out on Mission, they always, without exception prove to be the hardest working most dedicated people there.

So which generation is the greatest? Actually, that is the wrong question. Every generation brings its own unique gifts and idealizing past generations limits us. If we always look back, we will not seize greatness ourselves as we try to move forward. The greatest generation is not limited to people born between a given set of years, but the people of any age, who live at any time in history. The question is not of generational greatness, but internal and spiritual greatness.

People who see beyond the limits of their own reality, time and place. People who try to bless and enrich this sad and tragic world. Those who see the hand of God in all things and all people.

There has always been a remnant of the spiritual, both in Jesus' day and every generation that has followed. It is those people who are not completely seduced by the values of this world, who believe in that which they cannot see, who trust mystery, who try to serve God and leave this world better than they found it. It is people in every age who catch a vision larger than themselves. And they pass that vision on to those who follow. In the words of Peter Gomes, "It is reassuring to know that those saints who went before us were aided by the very same God whom they loved and served, and that this great God and great cloud of witnesses is rooting for us now."

That's our legacy and our inheritance. The inter-generational company of faith, marked not by the year of our birth, but by the claim of God upon our lives. Together we have a chance to be not THE greatest, but truly a great generation, one whom others will be talking about and remembering many years from now. Together we have a chance to sacrifice, serve, and leave a spiritual legacy for those who come after us. Not many congregations are given the sort of opportunity we have been given, and it is an incredible gift from God. We must use that gift wisely indeed. I hope that someday those who come after us will consider us an amazing collection of people, assorted from all ages and backgrounds, who had a vision much larger than themselves. Maybe we will be remembered as those who miraculously did great things for God. Amen.

A great thing that God did for us was to become one of us. In Jesus God entered our human condition in the most tender and personal of ways. And through the Sacrament of Holy Communion we remember that we are God's and God is ours, and nothing can ever change that. This Sacrament connects us to those who have gone before us and links us to all those who will come after us. More than anything else, it reminds us of the living Christ, with us and within us.