

Cantor Jill Abramson
December 20, 2020
Sermon, Sunday 10am
St. Francis Episcopal Church

What a pleasure it is to be with you this morning. The Psalmist reminds us “How good it is when brothers and sisters can dwell together.” While the pandemic of COVID-19 has kept us from worshipping together physically, it has also prompted us to find new ways to draw close, and this morning, I feel the bonds of friendship and fellowship transcending the distance between us.

I am deeply touched that Pastor Mark invited me to preach at St. Francis Episcopal. He is a cherished and highly respected colleague and I am grateful to have come to know him through his work leading the Interfaith Council of Southwestern, CT, a council on which I am proud to serve, and one which has sought to unite peoples of diverse faiths for nearly 70 years. Rev. Lingle’s commitment to interreligious dialogue, justice and inclusivity are a model to us all, and I am honored by the invitation to be with you this morning. Special appreciation to Rev. Debra Slade for her leadership and warm welcome and additional words of thanks to Richard and Frank for the beautiful music. I bring greetings from my synagogue, Congregation Shir Ami of Greenwich, and I pray that in this new year, we may soon welcome all of you to our community as you have welcomed me to yours.

Before I became a cantor, I attended Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa where I studied anthropology, music and religious studies. During those years, I encountered the scholarly writings of American feminist and theologian, Carter Heyward, an Episcopal priest, whose defining book, *Our Passion for Justice*, played a critical role in the development of my own theology and my understanding of how we pursue justice in sacred community. Surely we are enriched when we can learn from each other’s wisdom traditions, and I feel privileged to share in that kind of exchange with you today.

In this morning’s reading, we encounter the words of the 89th Psalm, which draw our attention to the importance of generational continuity. The Psalmist exclaims:

חֲסִדֵי יְהוָה עוֹלָם אֲשִׁירָה לְדֹר וָדֹר | אֹדִיעַ אֱמוּנָתְךָ בְּפִי:

I will sing of the mercies of the Eternal forever; To all **generations** will I make known Thy faithfulness with my mouth.

כִּי־אֲמַרְתִּי עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבְנֶה שָׁמַיִם | תִּכַּן אֱמוּנָתְךָ בְּהֵם:

For I have said: 'Forever is mercy built; In the very heavens Thou dost establish Thy faithfulness.

כָּרַתִּי בְרִית לְבַחֲרֵי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְדָוִד עַבְדִּי:

I have made a covenant with My chosen, I have sworn unto David My servant:

עַד־עוֹלָם אֶכִּין זְרַעְךָ וּבְנֵי־יָדָי לְדֹר־וָדוֹר כִּסְאֶךָ סֵלָה:

For ever will I establish thy seed, And build up thy throne to all **generations.**' Selah

Twice in this passage, we encounter the words “to all generations.” The word for generation in Hebrew is “*dor*.” If we look closely in the Hebrew, we see that the word for generation is surrounded by two prepositions “from” and “to,” which literally means *from* one generation *to* another, underscoring the *transmission* of faith from one generation to the next.

As a person of faith, a leader of a congregation, and an instructor in a seminary, I spend a great deal of time thinking about the continuity of our faith tradition from one generation to the next. I wonder how we can continue to infuse our ancient practices with contemporary relevance? How can we ensure and create vibrant and engaging communities of practice? How do we balance legacy and innovation? How might we ensure the continuity of cherished ritual? And as I age, these questions grow deeper and ever more pressing.

Apparently, I’m not alone. Ever hear of the word gerotranscendence? It refers to the more urgent search for meaning by older, rather than younger, individuals.

Swedish gerontologist, Lars Tornstam, developed his theory of “Gerotranscendence” over a period of two decades. “The core of the theory suggests that normal human aging includes a range of vital and commonly overlooked components” (Thomas).

Elaborating on this theory, geriatric authority, Dr. Bill Thomas writes, in the later years, “There is an increased feeling of affinity with past generations and a decreased interest in superfluous social interaction. There is also often a feeling of cosmic awareness, and a redefinition of time, space, life and death. The individual becomes less self-occupied and at the same time more selective in the choice of social and other activities.”

As I consider my own aging, I realize that I wish to spend more time in efforts that bring diverse groups of people together. While surely I’m committed to a strong, vibrant and dedicated Jewish community, when I look at my calendar, the invitations I value and make time for (to teach, preach or sing) center around interfaith dialogue, examining faith through the lens of race, and working to combat systemic racism.

While aging bestows its share of indignities, the more urgent search for meaning (that gerontologist Tornstam describes) has the potential to enrich our lives in countless ways.

In a landmark multi-decade study known as the “Longevity Project,” researchers Howard Friedman and Lesley Martin sought to understand what characteristics are

correlated with those who live the longest. They found that people (who see ripe age) do not die from working long hours at a challenging job--[in fact] many who worked the hardest lived the longest. Getting and staying married is [also] not the magic ticket to a long life. [And] It's not the happy-go lucky who thrive--it's the prudent and the persistent who flourish over the years."

Well, what factors do correlate with long lives?

One of the key markers to health and long life was..wait for it... participation in a congregation. Not stand-alone piety or religious belief, but being part of a community of practice. Friedman and Martin write "The guideposts we identify...do not point directly to the church, the synagogue or the mosque. Nor do they steer us to the meditation garden with incense and candles. Instead, the most important characteristics...are linked to social networks and community engagement." (Friedman and Martin, 2011, 156).

Being part of a congregation or community and finding people with whom we can mark life's transitions or soften the impact of 'curveballs' not only nourishes us, but has the power to help us live longer lives. Novelist Tara Isabelle Burton explains that most of us long for "...a meaningful world, a viable place within it, a community to share it with, [and] rituals to render ordinary life sacred." (Opinion piece, Tara Isabella Burton, Aug '19 NYT).

The 71st Psalm tells of an aching plea: "*Al tashlicheni l'ayt zikna.*" "Do not cast me off as I grow old." The Psalms remind us: we are all aging. And as we age, we are given, each of us, a gift: the gift of gerotranscendence. It allows us to ask in ever deepening ways: what is the meaning of my life? What inspires me? And how can I pass on my highest values to the next generation.

I'm inspired by a groundbreaking interfaith effort in the middle east. "After Pope Francis' historic visit last year to the United Arab Emirates and his meeting with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, the Imam announced the establishment of an Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi where a Mosque, Church and Synagogue will be co-located in the same complex." What a statement of unity to future generations. The words of the Psalmist ring true "how good it is when brothers and sisters (and all human beings) can dwell together."

One thing we surely know: we will not live forever. But we can find even deeper meaning as we contemplate, in sacred community, how we may pass on our highest values from one generation to the next. *Eloheinu v'elohei doroteinu*, our God and God of all generations, bless us with wisdom, insight and understanding. Sustain us and enable us to pass on our most precious teachings to generations yet to be. May our eyes shine with the light of Your holy presence; guard us, keep us and bless us with peace. Amen.