Life Together
1 Samuel 3:1-10

If you aren’t familiar with the story of Samuel, he comes at the end of the time of the Judges. Israel doesn’t have a king yet and Samuel is going to be the last of the judges, but at this point in the story we don’t know that yet. What we do know is that Samuel’s mother was barren which was a huge deal in that time for several different reasons. She prays for a son and vows that if God gives her a child, she will give that child back to God. Samuel is born and after he is weaned, which would have been about 3 or 4, she gives him to Eli who the high priest at the time to raise Samuel in the temple and this is where the chapter begins.

There are two things to notice in the story we read. The first is who is hearing the Lord. It’s not Eli. The person hearing God is not the priest, who has been studying God’s word for years, been serving God his whole life, going to church every week since before Samuel was born. The person God is talking to is Samuel, the kid, the youth, part of the worst generation. And if Eli wants to know what the Lord is saying, he has to ask Samuel, which he does just a few verses later. But here is the second things we need to notice; in order for Samuel to know that God is speaking to him, who does he need? Eli. Who had to walk barefoot 10 miles in the snow to get to church, uphill both ways. The one so out of touch with society he was literally blind.

This is a story about a generational change but what is so impactful about the story is Eli and Samuel need each other. It’s not a story where Eli dies and then Samuel gets to be in charge, it’s a story were Samuel takes over when Eli is still around. Samuel needs Eli because Samuel is young and doesn’t know what God’s voice sounds like yet. Right? Without Eli, Samuel is just hearing voices that apparently sound a lot like Eli’s voice. But Eli needs Samuel because God is doing a new thing and if Eli wants to hear God, he needs to listen to Samuel. The beauty of Church is that we need each other. The challenge of Church is that we need each other. It’s a challenge because we don’t generally like the same music. We don’t usually have the same taste in décor. And we sometimes have very different perspectives on what it means to be the Church in our community.

And before we start to draw hard lines on young and old, let’s remember that those terms are relative. For example, when I was in college there were two social networks. High schoolers had MySpace and college kids had this brand new thing called Facebook that you had to have an .edu email address to get. For some of you that makes me a baby. You remember writing your college papers in pencil. But my middle schoolers have more social networks than I know what to do with or can keep up with. They have no idea what Y2K is because they were all born years after that occurred and ipods were outdated technology before most of them even wanted one. So old is a relative term. But regardless, we are in a world that changes faster than at any other point in history. And change makes us uncomfortable so we start saying things like, “all these kids nowadays are useless with their phones attached to their hands! When I was their age we had relationships with people instead of computers!” And then there is the predictable retort, “all these old people living in the past! Don’t they realize the times have changed, they need to start catching up!” Here’s the thing, both sides are wrong. Because here is what happens when that gets translated into church. The older generation doesn’t actually believe the younger generation is capable of hearing God’s voice, so they are reluctant to change, and they are unwilling to give up positions of power. The younger generation doesn’t actually believe the
older generation are capable of change, so they are reluctant to grant compassion or understanding because they are frustrated that are never trusted with positions of leadership. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian and he wrote a famous book called Life Together, and he writes, “He who loves his dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.” In essence, what he is saying is that when Eli and Samuel refuse to give up their personal preference of what they want Faith Church to look like, they are destroying what Faith Church is supposed to be. “He who loves his dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”

Most of you know that I used to work in Pasadena, CA and it holds the largest seminary in the country called Fuller Seminary. I attended a different seminary a few miles away, but I have a lot of connections with Fuller, especially their Youth Institute. About a decade ago they started what they called the Fuller Youth Institute and the purpose of this was to do research on the Millennial generation, which is people born between the years of 1980-1997, give or take a couple years depending on which study you are reading. If you are bad at math like me, this means people currently between the ages of 35-18. They started this institute because they were seeing a trend where more and more people were leaving the Church after high school than ever and less and less of them were returning. We’ve almost always had a trend where people leave around age 18, and then return sometime around 23, but now the gap is larger and the return is smaller than ever before and if you need proof, just look around basically any church. So Fuller started what is now known as Sticky Faith and started researching this phenomenon. Among some of their findings was that when 20 teenagers were asked to articulate their parents faith story, this is how their parents came to faith and why faith was important to them, 0 of them could do so. None. Most of them couldn’t articulate their own faith story. Furthermore, they had never been given an opportunity in church to practice telling their story. The majority of teens had never been given a position of leadership outside of youth group and most felt both uncomfortable and unwelcome in what was commonly referred to as “big church.” This was a trend across denominations. The students who participated in the study were by and large students who had spent their entire life in Christian homes, going to church since they were little. No wonder they left. They had spent their entire lives in church but were never allowed to be part of the church. Not only were the Eli’s and Samuel’s not working together, they weren’t even talking. But Eli and Samuel needed each other.

Now, I’ve had an opportunity to work with these statistics in several different settings and one thing that commonly come up is that this feeling of being unwelcome is a false perception on the part of the students. Right? Of course we are welcoming, it says so right on our bulletin, “you are welcome here!” In my first paid ministry position, I was a Director of Children’s Ministry and at this church, the children were never invited in the sanctuary except for once a month when we paraded them around so that everyone was reassured that we had some kids. And I hated this so I started pushing for having the children participate in the beginning of the worship service. After pushing this for a while, I had a frustrated senior pastor come up to me and say, “Leslie, we’ve tried letting kids be in the service, but kids are noisy and disruptive. Adults don’t want to be have to be bothered by kids when they are trying to worship.” That is an attitude that says, “We do not believe that you are capable of hearing God’s voice and you are not welcome here!” And if we are doing this to people under 18, it stands to reason that we are doing it to people over 18.
Here is the good news, because not everyone left. Some people stayed. Of the students who stayed in church after high school, most of them had been involved in the life of the greater church body. They had mentors and adults inside the church who were not necessarily leaders in youth group and they were consistently granted servant leadership positions in various areas of the church NOT just volunteer opportunities. The answer here is not just getting people to participate as volunteers in your ministry, it’s not just allowing them to voice suggestions. The answer is asking them to make decisions and then encouraging them whether they succeed or fail. It’s listening to their outlandish ideas that you are sure are way too big, they are definitely not going to work, and you have no idea how we’re going to fund. You encourage them to do it anyway and then support them in achieving that dream. The last thing to remember is that this doesn’t just apply to kids. It is easy to think that way, right? We hear young and we tend to automatically assume children and teens. But the teens that started the studies I just told you about are no longer teens, that was 10 years ago. The youngest people in those studies are my age and I’m well out of grad school. Most of them have spouses and children and many of them still feel unwelcome in the church, even if they happen to be there.

I get a unique opportunity sometimes to straddle the fence of church groups. I’m on staff so I often have the privilege of hearing older voices but still young enough to be part of the younger crowd. And I often hear complaints of both side. On one side is the complaint that people today don’t want to commit, they don’t want to step up. On the other side, I often hear that it is not that people don’t want to get involved, they just don’t want to get involved with the only thing being offered and they don’t feel like they can have any space to do something new.

Some of you have been at this church since before I was born and will continue to serve well after I leave. Thank you. Thank you for being an example to our families, thank you for being an example to our students. Thank you for being the hands and feet of Jesus in this community. You deserve to be recognized and we need you, you are Eli’s of our church. Without you, the Samuel’s wouldn’t learn what God’s voice sounds like. But here is the flip side. We need you to listen to the Samuel’s, even when it’s hard, even when it’s different, even when we’ve never done it that way before. Because if you want to continue to listen to God, you have to start listening to them, believing that they are able to hear God’s voice. We need you to make space for the dreamers, we need you to actively invite them to lead, and we need you to trust that God is bigger than any foolish idea they may come up with to try. We need you to do this because you won’t be around forever, but the Church will.

Some of you are younger or have been coming to Faith for less time than me. You are in your 40’s, 30’s, 20’s, 12. God is speaking and you are listening and you are ready to bulldoze down the past and blast full speed ahead with the new. Please, have compassion. Most of your ideas are brilliant. Some of your ideas are not. And that is okay. Even the apostles had some stupid ideas and God did amazing things through them. You still need Eli, because you still have stuff to learn and God hasn’t stopped speaking to Eli either.

And in chapter 3, Samuel was young but here is the beginning of chapter 8, “So all the Israelite elders got together and went to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “Listen. You are old now…” It takes about 5 chapters for Samuel to go from the Golden Boy to the Out of Touch Old Lady. So have some compassion because before you know it, you are going to be talking about the good old days and complaining about the youths with their, I’m afraid to know what kind of technology comes next. But I want to encourage you to not stop trying. To not wait until you are asked, but to step forward. Voice your opinion, join a committee, start a project, because we want your voice and we desperately need your passion.
Some of you may look at me and place me firmly in the younger generation category and you wouldn’t be wrong. You may also then assume that change is easy for me. This past summer, I had insomnia the night before I left for a missions’ trip to Belize. Several months prior this, I had listened to a sermon on frogs, and I cried because I knew that God was not going to let me stay in Southern California, which is what I had been praying for. I was terrified. I was scared of leaving, scared of starting over somewhere new, scared of being alone. And I was scared because I knew I was leaving but I didn’t know where I was going yet. So, when I couldn’t sleep that night in June, I started browsing ministry jobs and at 1:30am I sent my resume to a church in a weird sounding town in WA, that I would later find out didn’t even realize that job posting was still active. Several weeks later I had a phone interview with the pastor there and after I hung up the phone with her I cried again. This time it was with my roommates for an hour or so because I just knew I had found out where I was going. I have never been so depressed that an interview went so well! Here I am and I am glad! Not because I don’t miss California, but because God is doing a new thing regardless of how scary it was to step out in faith! And it didn’t come suddenly, I had been praying for a full time ministry job for a year and a half before I accepted the position here. Before that, I was working part time in ministry and part time at a university. The frog sermon came five months before I packed all my stuff and drove two states away. So even good change can take time, and that should be both frustrating and comforting.

This morning for our responsive reading we recited a prayer that is traced back to the 16th century and it has been one of my reoccurring prayers this past year because it continually reminds me that my dreams are small but God’s dreams are big. Disturb us Lord, make us profoundly uncomfortable, when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little. When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore. Disturb us Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery. Where losing sight of land and safety, we shall find stars. We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes, and to push into the future, in strength, courage, hope, and love. What would it look like for us to trust that big dreams are possible? What would it look like for us to recognize that God is the giver of big, impossible dreams? What could our church accomplish in our community and the world if our Eli’s and our Samuel’s worked together to be the hands and feet of Jesus to those around us.

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