

Holy One, Source of Delight and Joy. May your words enliven us now. Amen.

One of my absolute favorite parts of my job is to hang out with teenagers. Hands down. I don't get to do it often, but I love it. Their awkwardness, earnestness, their desire to just have fun - all of that speaks to me. Not to mention the sense of unpredictability; cause seriously you never know what you're going to get with teens. Even the same teens that you know so well can be wildly surprising and unpredictable. In the midst of unfixed attitudes and fluid ideals great creative energy is allowed to just swirl. Where there is pools of Creative Energy the potential for holy vision, divine encounters, and brilliant realizations are always a possibility. Is it any wonder then that I love teenagers. Make no mistake, this stage of life is not always fun, it's certainly not easy... but it is wildly powerful.

The concept of the teenager as we know and experience it today is a relatively new phenomenon, less than 100 years old. And it has taken about that long for people to start to give that demographic their due. Over the past couple of months as Elliott May and I have dug deep into research on youth ministry and adolescents in church one truth has become resoundingly clear. The church needs teenagers. And not just because they are the future of the church. No my friends, the church needs them now. They are the now of the church.

In their book "Delighted: What teenagers are teaching the Church about Joy" A team of researchers from Princeton Theological Seminary joined the very vast interdisciplinary study at Yale for the "God and Human Flourishing" project. In the course of that study and in light of all the relatively recent insights into adolescent development we have learned that adolescents are coming awake and they are looking for purpose, meaning & wholeness. For some reason it has been thought that such questions are the domain of mature adults, when in fact the research and frankly, our own St. C's youth groups attest that nothing could be further from the truth. Teenagers want to know what makes a life good, they want joy, they want passion and unlike adults who've had years of training and maturing, teenagers amygdala have not yet perfected how to regulate these intense emotional firings and longings.

With these intense emotions and feelings, teenagers are looking to feel alive; they are looking for something to believe in and something bigger than themselves to live for. We hear a bit of this youthful longing even in today's Gospel passage.

Today's story is the well know beloved feeding of the five thousand account. Now so far throughout the Gospel of John Jesus has been healing, teaching, arguing with religious leaders and has gotten himself quite a reputation as someone to see. As a result our text begins with this as the 2nd sentence "A large crowd kept following [Jesus] because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." The masses are coming to Jesus. One gets the sense that they just bolted out of their house when they heard Jesus was in town, thinking nothing of provisions. A

completely irrational move. I can't leave my house with anything less than two juice boxes, fruit snacks and crackers for a two hour errand.

Not the case here. Before Jesus and the disciples are the masses with nothing to eat... no one, except a boy has thought ahead to bring provisions for himself. As mentioned, there really wasn't a category for teenager millennia ago, you were a boy till you were a man. Rather than seeing this boy as a young child, this week I got the sense that this boy is a bit older. This older boy sees the adults taking off in the direction of Jesus, and he too wants to see what the fuss is about... but there's also a bit of him that's skeptical. So he doesn't rush out, but takes a moment to think. Like a typical young guy, he knows he's going to get hungry so he packs a meal. This young guy is a thinker; not going to just chase after some dude and risk being hungry as well as potentially disappointed.

This is my experience with young people, every time I get a chance to talk to them about their lives and about God. They're curious, they want to see what the fuss is about, but they're not just going to take the word of the adults. They want to experience something for themselves, they want to see with their own eyes and taste with their senses that the Love of God is real and has the power to overcome all that hurts and alienates them.

Friends, these teenage years, aren't just to be endured, rushed through or overlooked. This is an incredible window of time where the church has a real opportunity to make the case that the Love of God is the most real thing there is. Unfortunately for us and for them, many young people come to church and don't think we have any compelling answers to the questions they're asking. And why is that? Well according to this team from Princeton, one of the main reasons is that they are not *moved* by our faith. The the church appears stuck and nothing is as unappealing to a young person than a stuck church.

Professor Kenda Dean, in the *Delighted* book I mentioned earlier writes:

Teenagers gauge excellence by one primary criterion: 'Did it move me?' ... youth recognize moving experiences as truly authentic. If anything convinces them of the reality of God's presence, it is the reality of being moved. ... The degree to which Jesus 'moves' us as we practice faith is often the degree to which young people think Christianity is valid. .. This is a limited horizon of course. Yet the need to travel beyond the self's boundaries is part of teenagers' standard psychological circuitry. Erik Erikson pointed out the adolescent craving for 'locomotion' that causes young people to seek ways to be moved, physically and existentially. As a result, young people are constantly on the go, they take drugs "to get high," [] they 'lose themselves' in sports or art or music, they are 'swept off their feet' by romance, they 'get a rush' from extreme challenges or lightning paced movies. Adolescents' desire for emotional transport is due

less to wanderlust than to the self's need to break boundaries, to be 'transported' to a place where they may glimpse broader horizons that invite their participation."

Dear ones, it's time we all ask what horizons are we pointing to. Are they exciting? Are they relevant? Do they interest and excite people of all ages, including teenagers? We are so gifted in this parish, we have a bunch of teenagers and they have they brought their own barley loaves and fish... they're ready for the journey, but they're not just going to follow along just because. Standard answers, lifeless faith – none of that will work for them, and it shouldn't work for any of us. Teenagers want to witness a faith that moves people, and frankly, isn't that what we all want? It's time we start paying more attention to the teenagers in our midst and taking their spiritual quest more seriously. We might just find that their longings are exactly what the church longs for. Amen.