

RELATIONSHIPS

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Lloyd O’Haver died on April 1 of this year at the age of 93. You probably don’t recognize that name; Lloyd and his wife Mary were my parent’s neighbors for 40 years, in the house on the other side of the back fence. Lloyd wasn’t a famous man, but he had seen something of life. Lloyd was a WWII army veteran with a Purple Heart and the limp to prove it. And like both of my parents, Lloyd and Mary were teachers, parents, and grandparents.

Lloyd was a generation older than my father. Both were gardeners, and you could measure the passing of time by looking at their backyards. Lloyd was retired when I was just a boy, had cultivated the entire backyard—rows and rows of vegetables and flowers. My father, who was working two jobs and had two school-aged children, had a lot of grass and a small vegetable garden in the corner of the yard. Over the course of my lifetime, I watched Lloyd’s garden shrink a few rows each year as his mobility lessened, and my dad’s garden grew correspondingly larger as my brother and I grew older and eventually went off to college. As my dad found more time to spend working in the yard, Lloyd would stand or sit at the back fence and the two of them would talk, I assume, about a little of everything. The torch was being passed from one generation of gardeners, teachers, and parents, to the next.

We’re lucky when we have a person like this in our lives—someone of a different generation whose insights give us another way of looking at things; whose mere presence reminds us to seize the day, and that none of us will be here forever. In the presence of younger friends, older people have a chance to humbly share their wisdom; and in return younger friends learn a great deal from their elders as they do what they can to keep them active and engaged. Many times family members serve this purpose, but there’s a different kind of relationship that comes from friends who are older or younger. I’m blessed to have relationships like this in my life, and almost all of them are people I met in church. Our faith communities have the quality, increasingly rare in our culture, of connecting us to people who are not of our generation, and connecting us in ways that matter.

The Bible tells plenty of stories about this—we read one of them this morning. Eli is a priest in the temple, a great sage known for his faith and wisdom, and old enough that, physically speaking, he’s slowing down a little, but his spirit is still strong. The Bible is full of

little double entendres that explain things like this. Eli's story begins: "At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room..." It continues, "the lamp of God had not yet gone out (that's the eternal flame in the temple, and the spirit of Eli), and [the boy] Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was." (1 Samuel 3:2-3) Samuel is a young boy apprenticed to Eli in the temple. In the story that follows, he hears a voice in the night calling his name: "Samuel! Samuel!" Three times in a row it happens; and little Samuel, thinking that it is his master Eli calling, goes to the room of the old priest saying to him, "Here I am!" The first two times it happens, Eli just thinks the boy is hearing voices and sends him back to bed, but when Samuel appears a third time, Eli figures it out, and he says to the boy, "Go lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

This is the story of God's call to Samuel, who would grow to be one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament, known even more widely than the priest Eli. But in order to hear his call, he needs to listen to the wisdom of the old sage. And Eli, whose lamp is beginning to grow dim, must have wondered, who will come after me? In Samuel, Eli finds the promise that his life's work will not be in vain—Samuel will carry on when he is gone.

This month at Knox we're giving special focus to something we're calling "Living Legacies." We're celebrating the relationships that exist in our church across the generations, and the resources that exist here in our community for the many stages of life. We'll be doing everything from celebrating intergenerational mentorships between our eighth grade confirmands and older adults, to providing resources for end-of-life decision making within your families.

This topic isn't just for people who are in their 80s or 90s. In fact, much of it is for the rest of us. Most older adults know what their intentions are. It's children in their 40s and 50s who often don't know what mom and dad want; and when parents get sick and children have to make decisions, they need guidance from mom and dad about what is expected of them. Furthermore, if you are married or have children, even if you're only 30 years old, you need to have a plan in case something happens to you. We're an extended family here at Knox, so although these might not be fun conversations, we want to remind you that they need to happen and we're here to help. Available in several locations around the church starting today there are information packets to help you remember the questions that need to be asked, and that suggest ways to make the conversation easier.

Some of these conversations are logistical, and that's ok, but others are rooted in deep questions of faithful living, and wisdom that helps us face the challenges of the day. So many places in our faith community you'll find people sharing faith with older and younger friends. One of the most obvious places to find it is at our youth musical. Last

night as I walked around the room, I talked with a father whose children haven't been in the musical in years, but he still goes every year because the young people in the musical who are about to graduate high school were once in his Sunday School class, and he couldn't wait to applaud them. I also ran into a participant in our current new members' class; she's returned to Knox after decades away and found the children's choir director of her childhood at last night's musical. They sat there and reconnected, talking about the songs they had sung together. These are the casual moments that create connection across the generations; they create opportunities for people to fashion a faith that will sustain them through the seasons of life.

I have plenty of opportunities as I make my way around our city to talk about Knox Church. People ask me questions about that old stone church at the corner of Observatory and Michigan. What are we about? What do Presbyterians believe? I could certainly reply by answering questions about John Calvin and the Protestant Reformation, or the similarities between Presbyterian governance and representative democracy, or the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the freedom of the human conscience. But what matters, most of the time, are relationships like the ones I witnessed at the musical last night. Teachers and students sharing memories; a church community working to accomplish something together; high school students singing together, while learning a story from the Bible. The story of this year's youth musical was the Joseph narrative from Genesis. It's a story about the passing of God's promise from one generation to the next. It's a promise that survives through misunderstanding, brokenness and betrayal in a family; faithfulness found in the midst of that struggle, and how God moves through the lives of the generations to teach a family forgiveness and give them a future with hope.

That's what we believe in here at Knox. That's how we're trying to live together. Thanks be to God.

Amen.