Generativity and the Immortal Self
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Introduction

Good morning! Today's topic is generativity. Generativity is defined as "a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation." The term "generativity" was coined in the 1950's and psychologists have been researching generativity ever since. Today we will discuss some of the main research findings about generativity, as well as why generativity matters to us individually and as a congregation.

The main finding is that generativity is good for us. The more that we invest in the generations that follow us, the better our psychological well-being. Generativity is both selfless and selfish – and that is ok. It is selfless because we devote our time, money, and wisdom to the generations that follow us. And it is selfish because we want to be remembered. Our immortal selves live on in the memories of those who survive us. Through this church, we can reach out to younger generations and this church becomes a monument to our immortal selves.

Today's Thought for Contemplation, the poem "A Legacy" by James Lovell, relates to the concept of generativity. The lines of the poem are:

> *I leave to you a curious loom,*
> *That I have wrought my dreams upon;*
> *I beg you lay your hand to it*
> *And weave a pattern when I'm gone.*

A loom is a good metaphor for legacies. A loom is a tool for making practical things, like clothes or blankets. But the loom also offers an opportunity for imagination, expression and creativity. The weaver can use many different materials and colors to produce fabrics that have many textures and patterns. These fabrics can then be used for many purposes. The speaker of the poem talks about how he has used the loom as a tool for achieving his dreams. The speaker is handing down a loom that he hopes someone else will use to achieve their dreams too.

Generativity

At some point in our lives, we start to realize that we have more time behind us that we have in front of us. We tend to think less about what we will accomplish in the future and more about what we will leave behind. We realize that we can care for others rather than just being the recipients of care. In the workplace, we might realize that we have achieved our professional goals. Or we realize that we will never achieve our professional goals. In either case, we might seek opportunities to mentor younger coworkers so that they can achieve their professional goals.

When we are gone, we live on in people's memories. These memories become our immortal selves. Through generativity we can build our immortal selves. The sweet spot for generativity is

middle age or older. As we age, we tend to become more financially independent. We tend to develop an emotional maturity that helps us manage work relationships. We use our emotional maturity to sustain intimate relationships too. As we age, we tend to assume more responsibility for professional societies, government, schools, and churches. It becomes our turn to carry the torch for those who came before us. Perhaps most importantly, we acquire wisdom as we age.

Generativity is not just for older people, though. Teenagers can be generative. They can babysit or coach children's sports or become involved in other youth activities. Sometimes, however, teenagers cannot be as generative as they want to be. If you want to be generative, you need a certain amount of financial resources, social status, and wisdom. Older people are in a much better position to be generative.

Research in psychology has found that generativity is good for us. Generative people are more satisfied with their lives and have greater psychological well-being. We feel good when we help people, and when people appreciate our skills and wisdom. We feel good when we are needed.

Having children is the most obvious example of generativity; however, having children does not in and of itself increase our psychological well-being. There is no difference in psychological well-being between parents and non-parents, or between mothers and fathers. Rather, parents achieve the greatest psychological well-being through generative acts that occur *outside* the nuclear family. Parents achieve greater psychological well-being when they volunteer in local community groups, or mentor younger coworkers, or participate in local government, or fight for social causes.

Generativity applies to grandparents too. Many grandparents play a big role in the lives of their grandchildren. For some grandparents, being a grandparent is a "second chance" at parenting. Grandparents might have unresolved conflicts with their children. As a grandparent, you have a chance to resolve some tensions with your children by building relationships with your grandchildren. Grandparents want to advise their grandchildren, to be their confidantes, and to pass on family traditions to their grandchildren. Grandparents want to be valued as a source of wisdom and emotional support. Children who have stronger ties to their grandparents and family traditions develop an intergenerational identity. They know their position in their family's lineage and they feel connected to something bigger than themselves. Children with an intergenerational identity tend to be more resilient in the face of hardship.

Grandparents want contact with their grandchildren that is social and burden-free, and they love to indulge their grandchildren. However, providing childcare to grandchildren does not lead to greater psychological well-being for the grandparents. Childcare entails greater responsibility and stress.

The Selfless and Selfish Nature of Generativity

At its heart, generativity is both selfless and selfish – and that is ok. People become concerned about the people who survive them, and they want to invest in organizations and institutions that help society function, such as schools, churches, and professional societies. People become

involved in these things out of concern for younger generations, and so that they will be remembered.

Alumni give large donations to their alma maters because they care about their alma maters and they want the next generation to have a good education. Alumni also want their name on a building as a monument to their legacy.

In the workplace, we mentor younger coworkers so that they can succeed professionally. We can help younger coworkers manage interpersonal conflict and make career decisions. We can teach younger coworkers new knowledge and skills. If you think back to someone who was mentor to you at work, you are eternally grateful to them. That is what we want. We want people to be grateful to us for the rest of their lives.

We become politicians because we want to fight for causes that we believe in. We want to have influence over the political process so that we can enact our values in the world. But we might not mind having our names in the history books or having a school named after us.

Having children is perhaps the most selfish act of all. We want to pass along our genes. But the amount of sleep, money, time, and energy that we give our children is a balance that they could never repay, although there are moments when you might think to yourself, "Maybe one day my children will have kids of their own and then they will understand what I went through."

Setting the Stage for Generativity

Generativity is good for us individually and good for society as a whole. Unfortunately, generativity is not like flipping an on/off switch whenever you feel like it. Generativity is hard and it requires two critical elements.

First, the older person must have empathy for the younger person. The older person must be able to put themselves in the younger person's shoes and think back to what the younger person must be going through. Think back to when you had no idea what you were going to do with your life, or when you were stuck in a job that made you miserable, or when you were unhappily single, or when you were worried that maybe you were drinking a little bit too much, or when you were trying to raise your kids without losing your mind. If you could put yourself in that younger person's shoes, what would you have needed most?

Second, the younger person must be open-minded. The younger person must be open to listening to the older person. The younger person must appreciate the older person's lifetime of experience. Technology may change, but the fundamentals of life are still the same. Life is still about managing relationships, learning, and persevering. The younger person must have enough self-awareness to know that he or she is not perfect, and that it is ok to receive help. The younger person must understand that older people can help them.

Empathy from the older person and openness from the younger person are the keys to generativity. Yet these elements do not occur easily in everyday life. We are busy, impatient, and skeptical.

One of the most readily available opportunities for generativity is this church. We are an intergenerational church. Younger generations would be grateful for the collective wisdom in this sanctuary.

There are many questions that younger generations might want to ask older generations. For example:

1. How did you make it through the darkest times of your life?
2. How did you decide to stay single?
3. How did you cope with the loss of someone you love?
4. What was it like to be gay when you were growing up?
5. How did you manage money?
6. How did you handle loneliness?
7. What do you regret?

This church is a monument to the generations of people who came before as. We as a congregation feel an obligation to continue this church's traditions so that future generations can experience the same meaning and fulfillment that we experience. We have a huge amount of collective wisdom in our congregation. Perhaps we have only barely tapped our potential for generativity. What can we do as a congregation to reach out to younger generations? They need the wisdom of this church.

This church is the embodiment of our immortal selves. Like our favorite elementary school teachers, let us care for the generations behind us. Let us care for our immortal selves.