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12/19/21, Year C, Luke 1:39-45 "Blessing the Next Generation"

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott describes a time in her life when she was at the end of her rope. She struggled financially at that point in her writing career. She was also single and pregnant. She describes the support she received from the ladies in her church.

She wrote, "Sam was welcomed and prayed for at St. Andrew seven months before he was born. When I announced during worship that I was pregnant, people cheered. All these old people, raised in Bible-thumping homes in the Deep South, clapped. Even the women whose grown-up boys had been or were doing time in jails or prisons rejoiced for me. And then almost immediately they set about providing for us. They brought clothes, they brought me casseroles to keep in the freezer, they brought me assurance that this baby was going to be part of the family. And they began slipping me money."

Lamott went on to describe how a number of the older black women, who got by on small Social Security cheques, would sidle up to her during worship and stealthily stuff bills in her pocket -- tens and twenties. One of the most consistent donors was a very old woman named Mary Williams. She always brought plastic Baggies full of dimes, secured tightly with little twist ties. Lamott wrote, "When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on."

It's those kinds of stories that indicate, to me, the kind of places church's ought to be. Some might have preached to Anne Lamont about traditional family values, passed judgment on her, or shamed her for the decisions she made. Those older women just took her in. They supported her. They gave her hope.

This morning, I want to talk about the role supporting and blessing the next generation plays in the life of faith. I want to do that by looking at the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary. I won't say that Mary was at the end of her rope, but she found herself in a precarious situation. The angel Gabriel announced she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and bear a son.

Now, at that time, girls were usually married at about 12 ½ years old. So, we assume Mary was quite young. Secondly, according to the ancient laws in the book of Leviticus, the penalty for being found pregnant by someone other than one's fiancé was death.

What is not written in the text, but is clearly all over it is a culture of shame. Joseph would face the shame of having a fiancé who turned up pregnant prior to the marriage, by someone other than him. Mary's parents would be devastated and humiliated by the whole situation. Even though Mary accepted God's plan for her, she may have felt shame. Surely, she would have thought about how Joseph, or her family, or her neighbors might gossip at her expense.

I believe shame is a widespread problem that we don't like to talk about. Young women deal with the shame of not feeling smart enough, or attractive enough, or thin enough. I'm

convinced the shame that boys deal with is a crisis in our country. Boys are often told, “Don’t cry. Don’t show any weakness. Man up!”

Joe Uhrmann writes and talks about this kind of thing all over the world. He says the three most destructive words you can say to a boy are: “Be a Man.” He explains that by not allowing boys to be secure in their masculinity, they feel the need to prove it. Young men end up posturing and showing how tough they are, rather than having the closeness and connection they really want.

When we feel shamed and humiliated, that’s when we link respect to violence. It’s not girls who shoot up schools, synagogues, and churches. Erhmann says there are three ways that young men deal with the pain of not feeling masculine enough and not having close relationships. One way is to treat women horribly. The second way is to self-medicate with alcohol and drugs. The third way is with violence. Erhmann defines “violence” as unprocessed grief.

Mary was visited by an angel and told she would give birth to God’s son, but she didn’t go to Joseph, her fiancé, with the news. It might not have been safe. It might not have been safe for her to go to her own parents. Where would Mary go to find support and acceptance and love?

I’m guessing Elizabeth and Mary had a special relationship. Is there someone in your life you can tell anything? Do you have someone with whom you can share surprising or embarrassing things about yourself and not have to worry about their response, whether they’ll still like you or accept you? It’s a gift to have someone like that. I think Elizabeth was a safe person with whom Mary could share anything.

That might explain why Mary made the arduous trek through the Judean hill country to share the news with Elizabeth rather than going to her fiancé or to her parents. In fact, Elizabeth dealt with her own shame most of her life on account of being childless. In those days, the cultural expectation was that a woman would provide children.

Elizabeth had her own reasons for not receiving Mary with grace and compassion. Elizabeth miraculously became pregnant after she had already given up on that dream. Did you ever have a goal or dream for your life that was never realized? You get to a place where you resign yourself to the fact that it won’t. You move on.

Elizabeth also could’ve been competitive. Mary was a young woman about to give birth to the Savior of the world. Elizabeth’s pregnancy came late. Her child would simply set the table for what would come after. Elizabeth had reasons for not receiving Mary with warmth and grace.

There’s an interpretation of the Bible that identifies Elizabeth and Mary as cousins. Luke doesn’t actually say that. He leaves it vague, describing Elizabeth and Mary simply as “relatives.” What we know is that there was a big age difference between the two. This was an intergenerational relationship.

I view Elizabeth as a bit of an unsung hero. When Mary arrived at her door, Elizabeth broke with the cultural expectations regarding unwed mothers. She did not reject or judge Mary. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out, “Blessed are you among women, and

blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Elizabeth blessed Mary repeatedly, expressing gratitude that Mary would even grace her with her presence. In fact, even the baby inside her leaped for joy.

One of the things the Bible makes clear is that God’s timetable is not like ours. God makes plans that take generations to come to fruition. That means it’s vitally important for one generation to bless and not to judge, to support and not to oppose, to affirm and not to shame, the next generation. God relies on one generation supporting the next.

And the beauty of this story is that Elizabeth realized that everything that was happening to Mary would be a blessing to her. She affirmed Mary was carrying God’s child. That says to me, we don’t have to be jealous or resentful of someone else’s good fortune. We ought to celebrate it. Someone else’s good fortune is often a good thing for everybody.

Have you given serious thought to how you are blessing the next generation? Is there some gift or talent you could offer even just one younger person? With this pandemic, there are a lot of single parents out there that are struggling right now. There are a lot of children and youth that could use assurance and affirmation that they are loved and valued and connected.

I believe I was in second grade when a member of the church, Mr. Tryon, asked my parents if he could take me fishing. I have a vivid memory of being on a pier in Newport, Rhode Island. I got a bite on my line and I panicked. I yanked up on that pole as hard as I possibly could. The fish came out of the water, swung over my head, and hit a nearby woman right in the head. She wasn’t hurt. We all got a good laugh. But I’ll never forget that a member of the church cared enough about me to take me fishing.

I’m grateful for the adults here at this church, who assist Pastor Dan with the youth group. To ensure the safety and well-being of everybody, we need to have two adults present at every youth gathering. My hope is that Pastor Dan will never have to cancel a youth group meeting, because he couldn’t find a second adult. Not everyone is called to youth ministry, but it’s easy to be a supportive presence at a youth meeting.

I’m guessing that if we took a poll and I asked you how you feel about the direction our world is going, many of you would express some concerns. Some might wonder how this next generation is going to handle the pressures and challenges ahead of them. I’m here to say that you and I can assist them with those challenges in important ways. We can live more sustainably. We can dismantle the culture of shame. We can prevent violence.

In fact, God relies on it. God relied on Elizabeth to make her home a safe place for Mary to land. God relied on those church women to support a struggling Anne Lamott. God has blessed each of us in order to bless the next generation.

--Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Anchor, 1999).