

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2024  
“THE EYES OF THE YOUNG”  
REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN**

**SCRIPTURE:**

**Matthew 18:10-14**

*10 “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. [f] 12 What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? 13 And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. 14 So it is not the will of your[g] Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*

**Sermon: The Eyes of the Young**

I’ve spent a lot of time praying this week about the school shooting that happened in Georgia. When I look at photos on the news of both the shooter and his victims, all I see is babies that had their livelihoods cut short in pain and fear. I’m sure many of us have had this painful reaction to the news.

It’s such a tragedy, and even more tragic that this is increasingly commonplace in our world for kids to wake up one morning and decide to bring a gun to school and blast everyone away, or do this kind of violence to themselves behind the closed doors of their bedroom. Church, we are living in a time of unprecedented crisis. It seems like almost every day, we are confronted by news of another school shooting, another young life lost to violence or suicide, another act of despair from a generation that feels utterly abandoned. Our hearts break, and we ask ourselves, “How did we get here? How did things get so bad?” We murmur these things when we read the news or hear about it in our own communities, and it’s also glaringly obvious that the same demographic that overwhelmingly feels so hopeless is largely absent from our churches.

The reality is, there is a strong correlation between the youth who are committing these horrific acts and the fact that they are also the least likely demographic to belong to a church or any other religious or even secular charitable organization. According to Pew Research data, this generation of young people is increasingly disconnected from spiritual communities. They are growing up without the grounding, the guidance, the sense of belonging that faith and intentional community offers.

We can bemoan this correlation, and it’s easy to feel powerless, isn’t it? To feel as though we are watching from the sidelines as the world unravels before our eyes. But we must remember something important: the whole purpose of Jesus’ mission, and our mission as the Church, is to seek out the lost, to heal the broken, and to bring people out of suffering and hopelessness into new life.

This isn't just a calling—it's a command. Jesus didn't come to sit back and let the lost sheep wander off. He left the ninety-nine to seek out the one who had gone astray. That's our mission, too. We are called to do more than grieve over the tragedies we see unfolding. We are called to act. To go out and find the lost. To be a healing presence in a world that desperately needs it. In our generation, that one who has gone astray are young people ages 12-25, who have grown up in schools behind bulletproof locked doors and silent alarm systems on every teacher's lanyard.

But let's be honest—how do we actually do this? It's one thing to say we're supposed to reach the lost and heal the broken, but practically speaking, how do we accomplish that? After all, we've never not invited young people into our churches. In fact, we've been doing it for years! So why aren't they coming? Why aren't they finding what they need in our sanctuaries?

The truth is, young people today are searching for experiences that make their hearts come alive. They are seeking something that speaks to their souls in a way that traditional church experiences often don't. They're finding it in backpacking across Europe, in attending concerts that electrify their senses, in experiences that make them feel fully alive in the moment. Even in our own program that catered to this lost generation this summer, the evaluations came back saying they felt most alive in our program in the highest intensity situations: that is, they felt more spiritually fed by going to IHS and working with recovering addicts searching for renewal than they did in helping us develop our own programs. Young people have always sought experiences that make them feel alive, from climbing mountains to praying with homeless people experiencing addiction – but this current generation doesn't just seek that, they demand it as a qualifier for what is spiritually fruitful for them.

And the young people aren't finding this dramatic experience in our sanctuaries on Sunday morning. You can argue that the drama isn't what this space is designed for – and in some ways, I whole heartedly agree with you. Sunday morning is meant to be a stable place of spiritual renewal for all people who walk through our doors, not just the young people looking for their adrenaline rush. Yet, this stable place we share together on Sunday mornings should spark an enthusiasm for those experiences the rest of the week that make us and others come alive in the Holy Spirit. We rest and renew in this space so that we are empowered by the courage to go seek the one who is lost, the sick, and suffering when we leave these doors – and I think that lack of connection from Sundays morning to every other day of the week is a primary reason why the young people have stopped coming. And tragically, when they don't find anything to fulfill that deep spiritual longing, some turn to far darker places—places of frustration, despair, and violence. The rising rates of youth suicide and mass shootings reflect a generation that is crying out for something that makes them feel alive.

This is where we, the Church, come in. It's not enough to simply offer invitations to join us on Sunday mornings. We need to be creating spaces where hearts come alive and souls are empowered by the Holy Spirit. Spaces where young people can encounter God in a way that transforms them from the inside out.

This summer, through our internship program, we did just that. We welcomed young people who have grown up in this alarming age of bulletproof doors and silent alarms in their schools. And in those months, we wrapped them in love, gave them a sense of purpose and helped them connect with something deeper than themselves.

But that was just the beginning. This generation is the one lost sheep, and it's our sacred calling to continue reaching out to them. We must go beyond a single program or event. God calls us to put all our heart, soul, and strength into being a healing presence for them—a place where they can find the life-giving experiences they crave.

Young people today are finding glimpses of the Holy Spirit in nature, in art, in fleeting moments of beauty. They find the fleeting wind of the Holy Spirit in sunsets from a mountaintop and concerts that are so loud you can feel your heart thumping along with the music. Yet, we see that these ephemeral experiences only go so far – as this same generation often doesn't find enough spiritual nourishment in those activities and instead turn to violence.

In contrast, we the Church are the hands and feet of Christ. We are called to harvest that power and transform it into something that sustains them. We offer something more powerful than any fleeting moment of beauty—a transformation that comes through a relationship with Jesus Christ. We offer a place to belong, a place to heal, a place to grow. We offer the Holy Spirit, who empowers us and guides us through even the darkest times.

A beautiful sunset is a glimpse of God's glory, but it's not the place we turn to when life falls apart. When our hearts are heavy, when our souls are weary, we turn to our safe communities, our traditions, our faith. And that's what we offer here in the Church: stability, love, and the hope of new life. You're right that this place on Sunday morning is meant to be one of anchored stability. However, the young people are also right that this anchored stability should be the place they turn when the rest of the week they're chasing God's glory through empowering and transformative experiences. They need our stability, but we need their passion and vigor.

Our stability is here. And that is enormously important. Yet, I urge you to also see spirituality through the eyes of the young. In the verses we read from today, Jesus specifically asks us to see Him through the eyes of youth and provide places for them that encourage the mission of setting out to find the one who is lost. In the act of providing experiences for young people to transform through the Holy Spirit the places in our world who are broken, they become healed also. This is the Gospel.

I'm not asking you to do anything more than you're already doing. This is a faithful church that does so much in His honor. What I am asking you to look at it differently. We're not simply asking for young people to come enjoy our spiritually stable place here on Sunday morning; we're asking them to use this stable space as a safe launching pad to heal the broken and suffering in themselves and others. This is our duty not only to the younger generations, but to Jesus who asks us to find the lost through the eyes of the young.

When a young person walks through our door seeking healing or encouragement, or joins our internship program seeking vocational growth, or when you volunteer to nurture our keiki through our Kings Company ministry, be intentional about empowering these young people on the path to healing and victory that He has laid before them. Snacks are great, spiritual counsel and kupuna wisdom is better. You have so much to offer, and it's the very thing that they need. Don't be afraid to use it.

King's Company, the Internship program, following up with visitors on Sunday morning. In these places, find the sparks that make the young people come alive and be their mentors for anchoring that vigor into the everlasting life, peace, and joy in Christ.

So Church, don't give up. Don't forget who you are and what you offer. You are the bearers of the greatest gift this world has ever known—the gift of new life through Christ. And that is precisely what this generation needs most.

Let us go out and find the lost. Let us be a healing presence in a world that is hurting. And let us show this generation that there is hope, that there is life, and that they are deeply loved.

Amen.