

³I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. ⁶For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

Last week we began this series on family, exploring what it means to be family, to live with and love one another both at home and here at Church. I read this week that there is a people in South Africa who have a saying: "Umuntu, Ngamuntu, Ngabantu": a person is a person because of other persons. It says to me that one of the most fundamental aspects of our lives is relationships. Historian Lamin Sanneh writes that instead of the classic Western formula that says "I think, therefore I am"--Cogito ergo sum, this body of people might choose Cognatus ergo sum, "I am related, therefore I am."

We are, each of us, sons and daughters, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, favorite aunts and uncles, beloved ones, friends. So, just how do we do it?

Today in 2 Timothy, we hear about the living faith of Paul's friend, Timothy. Timothy was a young man who worked alongside Paul as he went throughout the Mediterranean, making followers of Jesus Christ. The writing we have in 2 Timothy is what we call a "testament." It's an "expression of conviction," not unlike a creed. What we overhear in this letter is a testament, as if Paul is sharing his last thoughts as he is preparing to die in prison.

The letter begins as nearly all of Paul's letters do: with thanksgiving. This time he is giving thanks for Timothy, and he begins with Timothy's sincere faith. Now, these days much has been said about faith as a right. We hear about how we have a right to exercise faith, a right to pray in public or in school, a right to live openly as a person of one faith or another, but Paul is not talking about Timothy's faith as a right that he is entitled to and that he has seized hold of. Paul talks about Timothy's faith as a gift. "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." It's a faith that has been given, handed down from one to the next, like a big box with a bow on the top. It the kind of gift where you can see the bow and the top shaking and rattling a little because the gift inside is alive and jumping around in there--it wants to get out. A faith

that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you--now that bouncing box is with you, for you to hand on.

I wonder, who gave you the faith? God, of course, gives all faith, but God uses other people to impart that gift. So who offered the gift of helping you to grow, both in life and in faith? Who put up with you and nursed you, both literally and figuratively, offering to you themselves as the only way to transfer these gifts of faith and love. Bishop Will Willimon writes that "None of us created this faith for ourselves, none of us achieved this faith through our constructive thinking about God. All of us are empty-handed receivers." We'd like to think that we are independent, autonomous, we can figure things out for ourselves, we can figure God out for ourselves, but this letter tells us that the Christian faith is not held independently, but only in community--only in family. And Paul makes it clear that this is by design and not by accident; a faith that is handed down, if it is a living faith, then it is a hardy faith, one that has stood the test of time, that has been modeled and tested; it has survived a few fires and more than a few floods. This letter to Timothy is the voice of Paul from prison, where he has been persecuted for his faith. This is not a fair-weather faith that he and Timothy share. Perhaps my image was wrong--perhaps this gift of faith is not the bouncing puppy in the box under the Christmas tree, pure-bred and clean with a little bow around his neck, but rather the 14-year-old mutt that lives in the back yard and keeps trying to come home with you every time you visit. Hardy. Not without a few scars, but as loyal as they come. This living faith, the faith that is given, that is passed on--it's a tenacious faith. So who gave it to you?

Statistically, many of us will say it was our parents. But just as many, and probably more, will point to someone else--another person, perhaps the grandmother who raised you, or another relative who was equally close. And just as often, we find our mothers and fathers in faith are some surprising characters. Paul recalls Timothy's mother and grandmother as these figures who have passed on a living faith that now lives within Timothy; but in the second verse, right at the beginning of the letter, Paul opens the letter by addressing it to Timothy, my beloved child. The truth is, to Timothy, and to many of the earliest Christians, Paul is a father in faith--and it had nothing to do with paternity.

So who was it that poured into you? And who, in turn, are you pouring into?

Kenda Creasy Dean is an author and professor at Princeton Seminary, and she has done extensive research into the spiritual lives of youth in the United States. She shares the conclusions that were reached by the National Study of Youth and Religion that state that the default religious position of most young people today is something called "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." For them, religion is three things: It's moralistic--it helps you be nice; it's

therapeutic--it helps you feel good; and it is Deist--it's about a God who stays out of the way except in emergencies. They asked participants in the study to choose an image to describe God, and the most common images were either the cosmic butler, who stays out of my way until called upon to meet my needs, or the divine therapist whose main goal is to help me feel good about myself.

Now, here's the rub. The study concluded that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not just the default position of American teenagers; it's the default position of American adults, too. While we might wish that our children were just misunderstanding all that we've been teaching them, the truth that researchers found was that this is the very thing we have been teaching them. That Christianity is about being nice, feeling good, and getting what you want from God.

Friends, this is not the living faith that Paul is talking about. Dean reports that step number one for being a supportive congregation for ministry with youth (and I would add children) is that the people walking around a church are actively seeking God, and believing that God makes a difference, that God brings transformation to my life and my neighborhood. If we want to help the young people around us to grow a living, active, hardy faith in the God we encounter in Jesus, the most important thing for us to do is to encounter Jesus! Think back to those who helped you to grow--I'd hedge a bet that they didn't notice you watching them most of the time. My bet is that the people who passed down faith to us gave us seamless combinations of two things--first, a living faith in an active God, and second, a deep interest in you and me.

And friends, this isn't just about youth. I still look to mothers and fathers in faith. I'm still apprenticed to people I trust, who show me what it looks like when you believe God's grace is real and you let it cover the dark places of your life. They show me how to do forgiveness in a way that will hold a marriage together. They show me where to find God when the diagnosis comes. They show me where their faith has faltered, and I learn, along with them, that just because it falters does not mean it's gone. They show me what God can do with a little time--what healing, what growth. I don't know about you, but I need these people in my life; and I figure somebody else needs me to do that for them, too. If you ARE a parent, when your children are young or grown and gone, surely you know the feeling that you are being watched. The feeling that somebody else is receiving much more from you than you are trying to give; and the temptation is to believe that this means we have to be perfect. Friends, let me tell you today, whether you are parenting in the home or faith-parenting in the Church, what your children need to see is not that you are perfect, but that you know something about grace, and that you have the courage to let grace enter into your life, and to pour it out into theirs.

Somebody else needs to see me struggle and see me soar. Somebody else needs to see me go about the messy work of being in relationship with other people, especially with people who are not like me, but whom God has made my family. Somebody else needs to see my faith being questioned, and reshaped by the people I encounter. Somebody else needs to see a real faith in a real God--a relationship built on grace, but one that is ALIVE in me, just as it is in God. Somebody out there, or in here, is in need of a mother, or a father, in faith. And your ability to do that goes far beyond whether or not you have biological or adopted children. I served an internship at a church one summer in Connecticut, and I'll never forget watching this woman--never married, never had children--but she told me when I first arrived, "I LOVE this church! People here let me be a parent to their kids. There are just so many people to love here." Children came running at the sight of her. They knew there was something special about her, and they knew she treasured them.

It doesn't take perfection, friends. It's already happening all around us, in people who take an interest to build friendships across a generation--It's happened for years in Jack and Linda Tollefson, who have taught Confirmation longer than any pastor I know, and in Steve Stone who has taught Youth Sunday School for almost as long. It happens in our friends who offer themselves to shuttle members of our church family to and from worship and Sunday School each week, and who use that opportunity to develop holy friendships with those they meet. It happens in those who lead recovery groups and grief groups, who open the door to let others see how God is working things out in them. Is it happening in you?

Dean writes that "Adults need spiritual apprenticeships as much as their children do--and adults need them first." Perhaps you have been in that situation, that uncomfortable moment when you realize you don't have any idea about the things they are teaching your child in confirmation. You are not alone. It's why, this Lent, we are offering an Adult Confirmation class--for those who want to be baptized themselves, for those who are interested in having their children baptized, for anyone who simply wants to be rerooted, to rediscover the teachings and the practices of Christianity in a place where you won't be judged for the things you don't know and the questions you ask. To be a mother or father in faith, you've got to have a mother or father in faith; you've got to have a place to learn and other people to learn and grow with.

You know, I referred to the words of Bishop Willimon, when he called us "empty-handed receivers." I know sometimes you feel pretty empty-handed--as a person of faith, or as a parent. What do I have to give? But perhaps the truth is that as long as we who are empty-handed are always receiving, then we will always have something to give. God will make sure of that.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.