

Family Faith—Family Meal

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Whitefish UMC

World Communion Sunday, October 3, 2010

- † “Lois.” “Eunice.” “Timothy.” “Paul.” These are old-fashioned names that don’t make the top twenty-five list of most popular babies’ names these days. Madison, Emily, Sophie, Emma, and Chloe do make the list for girls. For boys, it’s Ethan, Jacob, Christopher, Noah, Aiden, and Caden.
- † But when it comes to the important names of our faith story, Lois, Eunice, Timothy, and Paul rise to the top twenty-five to be sure. In today’s passage from 2 Timothy, we learn that Paul’s protégé received his spiritual grounding from his mother and grandmother, Lois and Eunice.
- † We don’t hear anything about Timothy’s biological father, but when we read between the lines, we notice that Paul probably functioned as a beloved father-figure for the young preacher.
- † For centuries, people received their faith from their parents—they didn’t have much choice—you became a Roman Catholic, a Greek Orthodox, a Protestant, a Jew, a Muslim—because you were brought up in that tradition.
- † But that’s not so much the case now. How many of you are here today because your parents were United Methodists? In many ways, our times are more like those of the early church, in which Christianity competed with many different religions and traditions, than they are like the religious landscape of 100 years ago.

- † Neither Tom nor I grew up United Methodist, but here we are this day. I am grateful for some of the Roman Catholic roots I inherited from my father, even though my sisters and I didn't go to church with him. Growing up, my father always observed what were called "holy days," days on the calendar that reminded him of an important event or teaching.
- † My Catholic friends memorized the names and dates of these holy days—names with strange words like "Feast of the Assumption of Mary" and "Feast of the Immaculate Conception." I didn't know what these names meant for a long time, but they brought a beautiful rhythm and texture to my father's life.
- † As an aside, did you know that tomorrow is the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals? It's a day when many Catholic or Episcopal (and even United Methodist) churches celebrate a blessing of the animals, which we did a few years ago. Maybe we can do it again next year—I hope so.
- † As I grew up, I never heard my father talk about World Communion Sunday, which we celebrate as a contemporary feast day in our tradition. But we celebrated in our UCC church, which belonged to the World Council of Churches. The celebration began in 1936 in the Presbyterian church and spread to many other mainline denominations in 1940.
- † Think about the times that the first celebrations marked—the beginning of Hitler's takeover of Europe and the Great Depression—perilous times, indeed, and not that different from ours. My parents were just coming of age in those days, and it must have been a fearful period in history.
- † So Paul's words to Timothy must have had special resonance, as they do for us in these anxious days. Kate Huey says: "There are several lines in this reading that are familiar and particularly inspiring, including verse 7, "for

God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

- † “Every once in awhile,” she continues, “that King James version of a passage seems to stick in our minds, and since this is one of my favorite verses in all of Scripture, I remember it that way in my head: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." I think there are few more powerful verses from the Bible for people, for example, who are struggling with anxiety and depression. It reassures us that we need not be afraid of anything or anyone, and I found it helpful as a pastor and friend whenever I walked with someone struggling with fear and discouragement.
- † The later verse (12a) is even more powerful as a source of reassurance and provides a reason for this fearlessness: "But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him." Marcus Borg has written beautifully in *The Heart of Christianity* about faith as *trust* rather than as right *belief* in our heads. It's a heart thing, and Paul's whole letter here seems to be a heart thing, too. If he's portrayed as writing at the end of his life, then his ministry will end soon in execution.
- † We might think such a thing had a kind of glory attached to it that made Paul and the other apostles heroes, much as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, has been in our own time. But there was no public funeral and no honor bestowed on martyrs at the time. That would come much later. At the time, all this dying and being executed (including and especially Jesus' death) was an embarrassment for many. Perhaps they wanted a more *respectable* religion, a more pleasant and comforting one. They really

wished the Christian life weren't so messy, with all that suffering and struggle.”

- † She goes on to say: “Perhaps Timothy himself was wrestling with such issues and showing signs of wear and tear in his ministry. He might have been tempted to listen to voices that led him in other directions, or to conform to the culture around him in ways that would let the precious gift of his faith, handed down from his mother and grandmother, be extinguished.
- † No, Paul says, instead, ‘rekindle the gift,’ another beautiful line from this passage and one that is especially significant to us today....” For in part, that’s why we celebrate this day—World Communion Sunday—to rekindle the gift and pass on our faith in a multicultural, religiously diverse world where no one assumes that just because your parents were Christians, you will be, too.
- † In fact, being a Christian can earn you just as much scorn today as it did in Timothy’s day, albeit of a different kind. Critics of the faith in the first century scoffed at the notion of a Savior on a cross. If it was true that Christ had conquered death, why was this Christian mentor now suffering? What kind of conqueror would leave his followers in prison? Timothy probably had to face these difficult questions, and we do, too.
- † Think of the latest crop of neo-atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, who ascribe only foolishness and delusional thinking to believers in the Gospel. More importantly, they attribute most of the world’s problems to religion—Christian or otherwise. Certainly it is easy to lose heart when faced with such scorn.
- † What is left to us, then? Do we circle the wagons and hold more tightly to our traditions and make it us against the world? You may have read that Christopher Hitchens has been diagnosed with terminal esophageal cancer. I

read an article in *Vanity Fair* by Hitchens, in which he gleefully described the fundamentalist Christians who were gloating over his diagnosis—thus proving his point.

- † His website was apparently full of vitriolic comments about God’s vengeance taken upon him for his blasphemy. Yet something more poignant emerged from his recent article—his acknowledgement of the number of Christians and Jews who were praying for his healing. In fact, September 20th was “Pray for Christopher Hitchens Day” on the *Vanity Fair* website.
- † Ironically, Hitchens said he felt most humbled by the prayers, but said he was afraid of disappointing his believer friends if he didn’t get well. He expressed especially tender gratitude for Francis Collins, the controversial head of the National Institutes of Health, who had become his friend through correspondence and appearing on panels debating the validity of religion and science.
- † Collins, the head of the Human Genome Project and courageous advocate for stem cell research, as well as a devout and evangelical Christian, has taken heat from atheists and Christians for his beliefs. His book *The Language of God* impressed Hitchens, although he didn’t concur with its conclusions.
- † But Collins faithfully visits him, comforts him, and prays for him, despite his busy schedule. I can’t help but wonder if he keeps today’s lesson from 2 Timothy close at hand and in his heart. I suspect he does.
- † In the face of opposition, in the face of trials and doubts and tribulations, it is easy to lose sight of God’s gifts. So the most important thing is to stir up the gifts of grace and mercy and love. For claims that religion is primarily a force of darkness in the world have trouble contending with the countless examples of Christian love and mercy.

- † For what transforms hearts and minds and lives in not an argument, but an encounter. Our call is not to win all the arguments but to forgive as we have been forgiven, and to love as we have been loved. To do that, we must stir up the gift of grace.
- † We do that by feasting on God’s Word and God’s faithfulness. Today is one day in which that comes in a special invitation to the table of Jesus Christ. We don’t do it by circling with wagons and leaving certain people out, but by inviting them in—no matter where they’ve been before.
- † J. Peter Holmes tells the story of a young cancer patient, 39, newly married, newly published, and now facing sure death. He and his wife grieved deeply the shared life that would not be. “Then one morning,” wrote the young man, “we found ourselves going to church. *Found ourselves*. That’s exactly what it felt like...so that we were casting aside the Sunday paper and moving toward the door with barely a word between us; and as if, once inside the church, we were discovering where and who we were meant to be.”
- † “Longs walks talking of God, deep sadness that told them of God’s own grief. In the face of death, the young man found no trite and obvious glories, but rather the quiet scrapings that assured him of a Presence on the other side of a wall.”
- † Jesus calls us, invites us into his Presence, and invites us to take heart, to receive the gift and pass it on. For we remember....

Sources:

J. Peter Holmes, Feasting on the Word, 2010.

Kate Huey, “Weekly Seeds,” <http://ucc.org>