

FAMILY OF FAITH

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 13, 2018
based on II Timothy 1:5-10***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Fulfill Your Destiny.” We considered last week how our destiny is connected to our identity—that who we are gives shape to what our destiny is to be—and we noted in this regard the key Biblical message that we are children of God. Indeed the New Testament quite often uses the language of family to describe our identity and our connection with God. We have been “adopted,” [God destined us for adoption as children Eph. 1:5] the Scripture says, we call God “father,” [We call “Abba”—Father Romans 8:15] we are God’s children and heirs [In Christ we have an inheritance Eph. 1:11]. So we are part of the family of God. At the same time, the Bible places significance on the human family, with all sorts of stories of families going back to the families of Moses and Abraham and Noah. The importance of family, and its role in shaping our destiny, will be our focus on this Mother’s Day Sunday. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

One of the inspiring stories in the Bible about the power of family is the story of Timothy. Timothy was a boy when Paul first started preaching. He would eventually become an assistant to Paul, and finally became a leading preacher on his own in the early church. He was the recipient of the letter from Paul from which we heard during our Scripture reading this morning. But it is how Timothy came to faith that is really quite interesting.

It began with his mother and his grandmother. We heard a reference to that in that passage from Paul’s second letter to Timothy, where Paul said, “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.” [II Timothy 1:5]

When Timothy was a boy, his mother and his grandmother came to Christian faith, as a result of Paul’s first missionary journey to Lystra, the town where they lived. In the years that followed, Eunice, Timothy’s mother, and Lois, his grandmother, raised Timothy in Christian faith, sharing with him the gospel, taking him to church, and giving him an example of Christian living. Over a span of four to five years, Timothy grew to become a youth who was quite strong in Christian faith and who was making a real witness in his community. Paul then came through Lystra again, on his second missionary journey, and we find this account in the book of Acts:

“Paul went on to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer [Eunice], but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and in Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him.” [Acts 16:1-3a]

Here we find that Timothy had grown so much in Christian faith and leadership that he was making a real impression on the surrounding Christian community, and Paul

identified him as someone that he wanted to be a part of his missionary team. Timothy then did accompany Paul as a young assistant, and we find multiple references to him in the book of Acts and in various letters of Paul. In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, for example, Paul writes to the church at Thessalonika:

“We sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith.” [I Thessalonians 3:2]

Here Timothy has become a “co-worker” with Paul; he is going off on missions to strengthen the faith of others. Finally Timothy would become the pastor of the important Christian community at Ephesus, and he would be the recipient of letters from Paul that are now a part of the New Testament.

It all started with his mother and grandmother, who raised him in Christian faith when he was young.

Many people in history have been blessed to have a story like Timothy's. John Chrysostom, for example, one of the key leaders of the early church in the fourth century, said that the primary influence that brought him to faith and that inspired him to Christian living was his mother, Anthusa. John Wesley, founder of our Methodist movement, is widely considered to have received his primary spiritual influence not so much from his father, who was an Anglican clergyman, but from his mother, Susanna, who had nineteen children (pretty incredible), and who diligently raised her children in faith. Or consider someone with an entirely different vocation—Henry Heinz, the ketchup king. At the beginning of his will, Henry Heinz made the following statement:

“Looking forward to the time when my earthly career will end, I desire to set forth at the very beginning of this will, as the most important item in it, a confession of my faith in Jesus Christ as my Savior. I also desire to bear witness to the fact that throughout my life, in which there were unusual joys and sorrows, I have been wonderfully sustained by my faith in God through Jesus Christ. This legacy was left me by my consecrated mother [her name was Anna], a woman of strong faith, and to it I attribute any success I have attained.”

In the case of Eunice, Timothy's mother, her efforts to share Christian faith with Timothy led to pretty much straight line growth in Christian discipleship, as he quickly emerged as a leader in the early church. But things don't always go so smoothly. Consider, for example, Monica, who was the mother of a kid named Augustine in the fourth century. She was a devout Christian and sought to raise him in faith, but he was a rebellious child, and as he became a young adult he pursued a dissolute lifestyle. He rejected Christianity outright and became estranged from his mother for many years, until the Spirit of God spoke to him, and he came finally to Christian faith. He subsequently became St. Augustine, perhaps the greatest theologian in the history of the church. In his book, the Confessions, he wrote about the impact of his mother. You never know when the seeds of faith that God plants through parents will take hold and grow.

Like Eunice and Anthusa, Monica was on her own when it came to sharing faith.

Anthusa, the mother of John Chrysostom, was a single mom; she was widowed at the age of twenty and never remarried—she raised John and his sister on her own. Eunice, the mother of Timothy, was “single on Sunday”—she had a husband, but he was apparently an unbeliever and was not involved in the spiritual development of Timothy. Monica had been married off at a young age to a Roman pagan, Patricius, who was both immoral and ill-tempered. Monica was really on her own when it came to sharing faith, especially because her mother-in-law, the mother of Patricius, also lived in the household, and she was as ill-tempered as Patricius was. Did I mention Monica is now called St. Monica? She just kept on in a gentle faith; and in the end both Patricius and his mother became Christians.

Such cases are very encouraging for Christians today, for they tell us that God can work powerfully through all sorts of family structures and all sorts of challenges to enable new generations to grow as children of God. Although the ideal for children certainly is for two parents to be involved in raising them in faith, God can work in profound ways through a single devoted parent, and God can also work powerfully through grandparents. For Timothy, it is clear that his grandmother, Lois, also played a key role in his faith development. So we see the value of extended family. The story of the Bible and the story of the church is in many ways the story of God working through families to enable people to fulfill their intended destiny as people of God.

But the family through which God works is by no means limited to the biological family. Every family that I have mentioned this morning was strongly connected to the larger spiritual family of the church. In this sense, mothers like Monica were not really single on Sunday; for they were a part of a community of believers, the whole family of God. United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon once said that when it comes to spiritual development, we don't believe in single parent families, and for that matter, we don't believe in dual parent families either. Enabling young people to grow in faith is way too big a task for one or two people. That's where the church comes in. The whole congregation becomes that great spiritual family within which successive generations experience the grace of Christ. This is why we put major emphasis in our church on children's and youth ministry; and we all become a part of that, whether we have children ourselves or not, as we support the mission of the church. We will celebrate that ministry in a special way this morning as our Children's Choir will present its spring musical at the 10:30 hour.

In our Scripture passage, Paul said Timothy, “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” (II Timothy 1:13-14) This is a wonderful expression of the way in which faith is passed down from generation to generation through the church, and how the Holy Spirit then strengthens us all. Paul, at the time of this letter, was under house arrest in Rome, near the end of his earthly journey, and he refers to how Timothy had heard “sound teaching” from him, and how he now was to guard it and carry it on. This of course was written from one pastor to another, but the

principle applies to all of us. We all have had a “good treasure entrusted to us,” as Paul puts it, as we have experienced the truth and grace of Christ; and we now are called to care for that treasure as we ourselves participate in the ministries of the church today.

The way in which we can all share in ministry for Christ will be illustrated in a unique fashion in the musical that our children will be doing today. The musical is an original creation, written and directed by our Children’s Choir Director, Chelsea Young. The first character listed in the cast, played by Jackson Lantz, is a guy named Dr. Palmer. They did ask me some months ago if it would be O.K. if they wrote me as a character into this play. They did not subsequently tell me, however, what my character says or does, so this could be interesting. But there is something wonderfully symbolic about a fifth grader playing the part of the rather older church minister. It is a marvelous illustration of how faith is passed on from generation to generation and how we each serve as “ministers” as we take part in the purposes of God.

So fulfilling one’s destiny is not a solitary venture. We fulfill our destiny as we take our place in the family of God, and we share in how together, with God’s help, we can live out God’s purposes in our time.