

Sermon for Lectionary 27C – Preached at Emmanuel, Norwood MA
Sunday, October 2, 2022 (Pentecost 17)
Text: 2 Timothy 1:1-14

I.N.J.

We're pretty cool. We live in the beginning of the 21st century. We have apps; that's the only reason why we also have iPhones – so we can use our apps. We have Elon Musk, who wants to save humanity by colonizing Mars starting about ten years from now. Surgeons use robots to operate on us, Google is working on cars that drive themselves, we can microwave our popcorn and radiate our tumors. Yes, it's pretty cool to live in the 21st century.

But let's be clear about one thing. Nobody – I mean nobody – gets here without a grandmother. Grandma may be a surgeon who uses robots to operate on people or your grandma may be a person who doesn't know the difference between an iPad and pad thai. Maybe you never met your grandmother, or maybe you never liked your grandmother. It doesn't matter how hip or likeable Grandma is. None of us would be here without her. And without Grandma a lot of us would not have faith. You see, sometimes the Holy Spirit looks an awful lot like an old woman.

How is faith passed from one generation to another? That's a key question for the apostle Paul in the second letter to Timothy. At the time he writes, Paul is an old man with a lot of miles on him. He's confined as a prisoner, maybe somewhere in Rome. He writes to encourage his younger colleague, Timothy, whom Paul loves like his own son. Paul was his mentor in ministry, but it was Timothy's grandmother and mother who taught him to trust Jesus. Later in the letter, Paul reminds Timothy that it was his grandma Lois and his mom Eunice who taught him the faith and introduced him to the Scriptures.

How is faith passed from one generation to another? Three points: first, the Holy Spirit often uses families as faith incubators. Our faith gets a chance to take root in our lives when our parents make their own faith a priority in their lives. Such parents often had parents who did the same thing. The families that work best as faith incubators are the ones where parents understand that Sunday School and Confirmation exist to help them, not to do the work for them. The Sunday liturgy, Sunday School and Confirmation work best as auxiliaries to what parents are doing at home to help their children grow in faith. If we want our kids to have faith, we need to help them by talking about faith, teaching the faith, and modeling faith in our own lives. We need to pray with and for our kids. And like Eunice and Lois were for Timothy, we parents need to be the primary teachers of Scripture for our kids. That means reading Scripture ourselves, and then making sure that our kids become acquainted with the most important stories in the Bible. Sunday School certainly supplements what parents do, but it can't replace parents as teachers of

faith. Of course, that doesn't mean that our kids will end up embracing faith in their own lives. They're people, too, after all.

Second, the Holy Spirit has an easier time working in our kids when we don't make our kids' faith a measure of our own success as parents. Kids are not walking report cards on us. And the sooner we parents figure that out, the better off our kids will be. God has entrusted our kids to us as a gift. In the deepest possible sense, our kids do not belong to us. They are not a possession. We are stewards of their lives and hopefully, companions along the way. And one of the things we get to do for them as stewards is turn our homes into faith incubators the Holy Spirit can use.

And third, it's probably not harder now to pass faith on to children than it was in the past. We often think that it is, and sometimes I think that it is. But it isn't harder now, it's just different now. The challenges we face are different than the challenges parents faced a hundred years ago. Busy lives are perhaps the biggest challenge. Along with that, grandparents often live too far away to help out on a steady basis.

Another challenge: many of our children will one day marry someone who is not a Christian. My daughter is married to a wonderful young man who is a Jew who sometimes thinks of himself as an atheist, he sometimes thinks of himself as agnostic. My son is married to a wonderful young woman whose parents came from China and Vietnam, and she has been shaped by the blend of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism that her parents brought with them. The simple fact is that interfaith marriages involving Christians are more common now than they have been in centuries. We sometimes think this is a brand-new reality not faced by previous generations. But in fact this was a very common experience for Christians for at least the first 500 years. That's how it was for Paul's young protégé, Timothy. According to Acts 16, Timothy's mother Eunice was a Jewish Christian married to a Gentile man who was not a Christian. Timothy grew up in a cross cultural, interreligious home. His grandmother and mother shared their faith with him, shared the Scriptures with him, helped him participate in Christian community and worship, and the Holy Spirit did the rest.

Busy lives, nuclear families, interfaith families: sure, these realities can challenge how we go about sharing our faith with our kids. But I suspect that the biggest challenge may well be that we have mostly bought into the prevailing idea in our culture that you shouldn't talk about your faith, period. Except maybe in church, with other church types. It may well be that, for many reasons, a growing intolerance for religion is creeping into American life. Sometimes we can encounter such intolerance in our own families. This intolerance may be one more reason why we have less and less experience engaging in conversation with others about our faith in Christ Jesus.

We do well to remember Paul's encouragement for Timothy, when the young man faced the kind of suffering that intolerance can inflict: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." (2 Tim. 1:7) Truth be told, we are sometimes afraid to talk with others about how our faith makes us tick, how our faith helps us find meaning in our lives and in our world, how our trust in Christ fuels a sense of hope within us. In the face of our fears, Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit seeks to empower us with God's own love so that we can share the good news of Christ's love. Paul reminds us that we can rely on the Holy Spirit to find the self-discipline we need in difficult conversations. But we will only experience that power when we dare to share our faith in loving conversation.

How is faith passed from one generation to another? In very human ways, through very human means. That's how the Holy Spirit likes to work: using us, our best efforts, our lousiest efforts, to incubate faith in our kids and their kids. Which is pretty good news. We can pass on the good treasure of faith entrusted to us to our children because the Holy Spirit living in us has promised to be our help, our light, and our wisdom.

O Lord, increase our faith. In Christ's name. Amen.