

WGUMC October 6, 2019 “Tears and Treasures”
2 Timothy 1:1-14

This fall, several of our moms and dads sent kids off to college and cried when they left. You never know what that will feel like until you do it. All those years of staying up with a sick child, helping them with homework, cleaning up their messes, taking them to soccer, sitting on the sofa watching movies together—suddenly it all changes. You unload the last box into their dorm room and drive away. Maybe you keep it together until you get home, but then there’s the empty bedroom.

Now, it’s not all sadness for us parents. There is also pride and joy. Not just pride in them, but pride in ourselves that we did it. We made it. There’s also excitement about the future that is ahead of them, the promise of life that is before them. And maybe someday they’ll know that the promise comes from Jesus.

That is the promise that begins the second letter to Timothy in the New Testament. “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the *promise of life* that is in Christ Jesus.” It is

the promise that we all started out with. Whether we acknowledge it or not, God gave each of us a very great gift, the promise of life, and we have spent most of our lives pursuing it.

We worked hard to get the career, get the spouse, get the house, get the kids, but that's not the promise. We discover that we don't want just a career; we want a vocation. We want work that's worthwhile. And we don't want just any person for a partner; we want a soulmate. We don't want to sell our souls here in Silicon Valley for just a house; we want someplace that feels like home. And we don't want a family just so there are more people to get into fights with; we want love, kindness, and forgiveness. We want acceptance and a sense of belonging. But all of that still does not fulfill the promise. We want something more, and some of us call it God. St. Augustine once said, "Our heart is restless until it rests in thee."

In our reading today, we have a letter addressed to a church leader by the name of Timothy. And we can tell from the tone of the

letter that his heart is restless. He has dedicated his life to Jesus, but he is having to fight the good fight, and he isn't sure whether he can finish the race. Just when he needs it most, he gets a letter from his pastor, encouraging him to keep the faith.

Now the author of this pastoral epistle is not the Apostle Paul. The vocabulary is very different, the style and themes are different from the uncontested letters of Paul. So, most scholars believe that this letter was written in the early 2nd century, years after Paul and the other apostles had died. But Timothy's pastor, whoever he was, writes in the name of Paul, because he doesn't want Timothy to forget the faith of this father in the faith and, notably, his mothers.

He says, "I am reminded of your sincere faith" because he wants to remind Timothy of the faith that lived first in Timothy's grandmother Lois and then in his mother Eunice. And he wants to make sure that this faith is still living in Timothy.

A lot of us would probably say that our faith came from our mothers or grandmothers. I'll never forget doing my uncle's funeral.

Uncle Donald was ten years younger than my dad and had been a closet alcoholic for most of his adult life. When it came time in the service to share memories, my relatives stood up and paid tribute not so much to Uncle Donald but to his mother, my grandmother. Cousin after cousin rose to talk about Elva Irelan and what a pious Christian woman she was and what a legacy of faith she left behind.

We think about our foremothers and fathers in the faith and treasure those memories. Then the tears come. But Timothy's pastor didn't mention his grandmother and mother just to send his down memory lane. The pastor had a reason and a purpose: "For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands...." His pastor, perhaps the one who baptized him and the one who confirmed his calling, doesn't tell Timothy that he has to go and get something. He reminds him that he has already received it. Timothy already has everything he needs. He is already everything God created him to be. Timothy only has to remember it and rekindle the gift.

When we lay hands on people, in baptism or in confirmation or in ordination, we are not giving them something that they don't already have. God has already given everyone in the world the promise of life. As Timothy's pastor says, "this grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

So when we lay hands on people, we are just calling down the Holy Spirit to stir up in us and reveal to us the gift that is already there. It's amazing to me how good we are at denying the grace we have been given. I guess we figure that if we don't have it, then we can't be held to account for it. But the embers are inside of us, hot and glowing, no matter how many buckets of cold water we pour on them or how many shovels full of dirt we dump on them. All they need is a spark from the Holy Spirit to burst into flames.

I spent an afternoon with Dale and Kristen Hosack, some family and good friends. We sat around the dining room table remembering Lynne. I remember hearing of Lynne the week I arrived in 2011. At the Tuesday Prayer and Study group, I learned that a very capable and vivacious woman had had a severe stroke and was moving into long-term rehab. In the years after, she made a remarkable comeback, only to be diagnosed with breast cancer. She was fighting it, but his summer when she started having all kinds of problems with her balance and the shunt that was draining fluid from her brain, things went downhill fast from there. Dale spent the last several months at her side in the hospital, all day, every single day. I asked Dale, how they kept the faith through all these many dangers, toils and snares? Dale said simply, we have always believed in the power of prayer.

As the letter to Timothy tells us, God did not give Dale or Lynne or any of us a spirit of cowardice. God gave us a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Even though our prayers for

a miracle cure for Lynne went unanswered, our faith was not undone. To believe in the promise of life even in the face of a slowly approaching death, to believe in the power of prayer even when our loved one goes into hospice care: this is one of the ways we suffer for the gospel and surrender ourselves, relying solely on the power of God. And don't think for a minute that others aren't taking notes.

As someone who has been at many deathbeds and pastored many souls who were going through a divorce or just getting a diagnosis or living with depression, I can tell you that this is a faith not to be ashamed of but to be treasured. You can't put a price on it. You can't buy it; you can't borrow it. What the demons of darkness in this world don't want you to know is that you already have it, buried deep inside you. You just have to strike a match and it will flame forth.

In the last analysis, this is all that matters, for any of us as individuals and for us as a family of faith. When our kids pack up for college, they leave behind a lot of things that they once treasured

but no longer need. The most important things they are taking with them, and they don't take up any room in the car.

We parents are left with the books and toys of their childhood and we will probably hang on to them, saving them for the grandchildren. As we box them up and put them in the garage or up in the attic, we will shed a tear or two. But the greatest gift we ever gave them was a front-row seat for our faith. And now is not the time to put that treasure in storage. We have to guard that good treasure so that we can keep passing it on to them.

Even if your children left the nest many years ago or you didn't have children, the people close to you still need to see the faith that is living in you. It is the only gift of lasting value that you have to give them. The same is true of our church. It isn't the buildings that we have worked so hard to renovate or the lift we have waited so long to replace that we are passing on to our children. It is the faith and hope and love of our fathers and mothers, our sisters and brothers.

Willow Glen Methodist Episcopal Church was started as a Sunday School back in the 1860's. So, holding onto sound teaching and passing on the faith to the next generation is in the DNA of this congregation. Many of the fathers and mothers that we knew and looked up to are gone now, but they have left us an incredible legacy of love. And they would be the first to say that we guard this treasure best by giving it away.

I don't know what opportunities we will have in the next year to pass on the faith that has been given to us, but I believe in the promise of life, and I trust in the Holy Spirit that is living in us not only to rekindle the gift but to empower us to be the givers. The questions for us in this next year will be: will our kids remember the gift of their faith when they come home from college? Will our young adults still want the promise of life that is in them because of Christ Jesus? And are we prepared to shed our tears and share our treasures to make sure that they do? Whatever we decide to do, I pray that we will one day be able to say, we have fought the good

fight, we have finished the race, we have kept the faith, and we have passed on the gift. [2 Timothy 4:7]