Rekindling the Gift: Passing it On

Preached at Wollaston Congregational Church

On October 2nd, 2016

Focus scripture: 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Last Sunday hands were laid on me. First my parents, my mom and dad, placed their hands on mine. My husband, my children laid their hands on my shoulders. Clergy friends who have walked with me on the journey from seminary to ordination; members of this church who called me to be your pastor; members of my home church who’ve known me many years; long-time friends, who have supported me; representatives from the churches I have served along the way.

They laid hands on me, or they laid hands on the people who laid their hands on me, or they laid hands on the people who laid hands on the people who laid hands on me. I was in the middle, my knees on a kneeler which had a railing for me to hold on so I didn’t sink down or topple over. I feared I would be claustrophobic, but instead the experience was both spacious and light, and yet weighty, very weighty. The hands on my head, hands and shoulders were gentle, and yet they transmitted all the blessings and responsibilities of the ministry to which I have been called.

When I was first called to this church, and my ordination was planned,

my mom wrote to me “Grandma would have been thrilled.”

At first I was surprised. I had not given much thought to what my grandparents, now long gone, would have thought. But, it’s true, Grandma would have been thrilled. She was a constant in my early life. We attended the small Methodist chapel where she and my grandfather were pillars. We sat together in their regular pew, she helped me find the hymns in the hymnal, she was there when I sang with the children’s choir, read scripture, and played Mary in the nativity.

I spent hours with her at home, learning to knit and to sew, practicing piano, playing scrabble, trying orgami, and reading stories. She shared with me her perspectives on faith and society. She was quiet, and very hard of hearing in later life. And she’d had no formal education beyond the age of 14, yet she was one of the best read people I have ever known.

When it came to going to church, Grandma was ready to go early, always in a formal hat and coat. The hat was not removed, and nor the coat usually, as our church was not well heated. She attended twice on Sundays: morning and evening, though as her hearing deteriorated she never could hear the sermon, readings or prayers. But she knew the value of being there anyway.

My grandmother was ahead of her time and an innovator of sorts. When I began a Christian mothers group at my home church in Sherborn, I learned that my grandmother had instituted the same kind of group in her day. She cared about giving mothers a place to come to be in fellowship and share their concerns.

One Christmas Eve, after the time when we had moved into a larger home with Grandma, we prepared to go to church. By this time, my mom was in charge of Grandma, taking her to all her appointments, meetings and visits. There was little Grandma could do to surprise my mom. But we were all astonished when Grandma got out of her pew to give the Christmas Eve message! She had prepared it in private. She preached on the importance of a “happy Christmas” rather than a “merry Christmas”. I’ll never forget that message!

So you see, the faith that lives in me, first lived in my grandmother.

And you can imagine that when I read the passage from the letter “from Paul to Timothy”, two things leapt out at me. Timothy had been ordained to ministry when Paul laid hands on him. And in his early faith life he had been supported by his mother and his grandmother, Eunice and Lois.

Paul reminds Timothy of this, because it seems that Timothy’s resolve is waning. As we read this epistle, most probably actually written much later than the time of Paul, we are to imagine that Paul is nearing the end of life. He is sending his blessing to his “beloved child” in ministry, Timothy, the one he has raised up since youth. He remembers the precious moment when he laid hands on Timothy. He remembers the tears they shed when they parted. This is his last chance to charge Timothy with passing on the faith, before Paul departs from this world.

There is a reason for this, of course. Paul is not just reminiscing for old times’ sake. It seems that Timothy’s faith and resolve are wavering. The church he is leading is going through a rocky time. There is an element in the church that is spreading rumors, and giving false teachings. There are controversies and quarrels. But, Paul, who is writing this letter from prison, reminds Timothy that being a faithful Christian involves suffering as well as joy.

Paul impresses upon Timothy that he must not be ashamed to testify to his faith. That is, Timothy is to talk about what faith in Jesus Christ means to him.

I find it interesting that he uses this word “ashamed.” It seems to me that it is more likely 21st century Christians will be ashamed, than the early Christians:

* ashamed of the violence perpetrated over the centuries by Christians on Jews, Muslims and on one another.
* ashamed of the practices of some missionaries, who kidnapped children from native families in order to “Christianize” them.
* ashamed of enslavement of the African people in the name of Christianity.

In one church I was connected with recently, I spoke with two women, who told me that they couldn’t bring themselves to say they were Christian. When asked, they would reply “I am a person of faith.” They simply tried to show their faith in their actions. They explained that the reason for this is that Christians just don’t have the best reputation in our culture today.

When hearing the word Christian many people think of mean-spirited individuals and groups who persecute LGBT people, or deny women control over their own bodies, or demean people of other faiths. Or they think of the infighting within many churches, or the ill feeling between different groups of Christians. Or they think of people who huddle in their churches, piously praying and singing, but ignore the suffering of the world.

I reminded these women that if they told people that they were Christian, they would demonstrate what a Christian *could* look like. Better still, if they could also testify to what faith in Christ, and membership of their church means to them.

Friends, we cannot be ashamed to admit we are follow Christ, and we cannot be afraid to invite people to church. It is our responsibility to testify to the difference that faith in Jesus Christ makes in our lives, and why we find the love of Jesus in the community of the church.

But, how can we do this, in a world that seems uninterested? The key, I think is in those intergenerational relationships, between grandparents (or those who are like grandparents) and children. It seems that many members of the in-between generations are lost, right now, to hyper-busyness and distraction. Grandparents have long been the ones to provide undivided attention, and a healthy sense of slowness and space. Small children are naturally drawn to elders who have the time to focus on them.

For many years, my family attended a weekend fall retreat with my home church, at the Craigville Conference Center on Cape Cod. This retreat typically attracted young families, but each year a couple, of the grandparents generation, came along too. They did not have any of their own children in the church, but they provided a steady constant for the children who attended the retreat, Marilyn taught curious little ones to knit and crochet, while Bob was always on the lookout for the child who was the odd one out or shy. He would then find a way to bring that child out of their shell.

Even if we may not have children or grandchildren of our own, we can play a part in intergenerational relationships. Is there a family in your neighborhood who needs a helping hand, with childcare and respite for the parents? Would that family be willing to allow you to bring that child to church?

As we reflect on the value of intergenerational relationships … I wonder … who, in your life, was the grandmother or mother, who passed on the faith to you? It could have been a parent or grandparent, it could have been someone else. Let’s pause for a moment and think about that … who were our parents and grandparents in the faith, and give thanks for them?

And now let’s think … who are we called to be parent and grandparent to, or even aunts and uncles or big brothers and big sisters?

Whether we nurture little children, or simply ones who are young in faith if not in years, we are being as Lois and Eunice were to Timothy. The ones we nurture could well be the leaders of the future.

Timothy received gifts, through the laying on of hands of Paul, and through Lois and Eunice’s gift of faith to him as a child and young adult. I received the rites and responsibilities of ministry in the United Church of Christ, when hands were laid on me last week.

If you have been confirmed into membership in the church, you have hands laid upon you. If you have not … talk to me about church membership! I would be delighted to arrange the laying on of hands.

But now we need to re-kindle those gifts, to let them come alive. This is no time to be ashamed of our faith, no time to be ashamed of Jesus Christ. Because it is in our community of faith in Jesus that we find the things of spirit-filled, purposeful life. These are the relationships that will sustain us in faith and in life.

May it be so …

Amen