

Sermon: What We Bring Forward

Year C, Proper 22

[Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10](#)

Offered October 6, 2019 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

“*Increase our faith!*” Jesus’ disciples say (Luke 17:5). And aren’t there days when we all want to say that. When we know in our hearts that we don’t have enough faith to commute and go to the grocery and balance our check book and take the kid to soccer. When we know that we can’t fight another round with the medical insurance people or the credit card company. When the news is full of people who don’t seem to live in a world that is even remotely connected with one where the leaves need to be raked and the beer needs to be avoided and ends need to meet.

Oh, increase our faith. Tell us how. Give us the secret formula, the ten tips and tricks, the latest celebrity approach to quick and easy faith production. Let us in on the secret writings of Nostradamus or the Dead Sea Scrolls or Oprah’s book club. Just give us a recipe to follow.

This isn’t something new to us. The first people who were on Team Jesus asked it. Surely Timothy asked it too. The letter of Second Timothy is one of the most personal in the New Testament. It’s driven by personal relationships.¹ Timothy is reminded that *God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline* (2 Timothy 1:7). But he doesn’t get the 7 Habits of Habits of Highly Effective Christians.

Indeed, Paul isn’t worried about Timothy’s faith. He says, “*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.*” (2 Timothy 1:5) Which is kind of strange, if Paul is reminding him that we aren’t called to cowardice but to power, love and self-discipline. It seems like boosting Timothy’s faith might be helpful.

Paul is making the argument that Timothy’s faith comes from his family. Paul definitely mentions Timothy’s grandmother, Lois, and mother, Eunice. But did you notice that Paul also mentioned his family? *I am grateful to God--whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did--when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.* (2 Timothy 1:3). And he calls Timothy *my beloved child* (2 Timothy 1:2). So the idea of family is more than biology. By the time this letter is written, Christianity has been going on long enough that at least three generations of adults have been Christians. Christians have already developed this idea that, yes, of course, there is the mother and grandmother kind of family. But there is also a church family. Biological kinship can be extended, deepened, entwined with an extended kinship.²

Those family relationships, both in Timothy’s biological family and his church family, have patiently gathered wisdom to pass along.³ They have built a shared narrative, a time-tested story which relies on remembering and being remembered.⁴ It’s not only the Biblical stories and the

¹ Lewes R. Donelson, “Proper 22, Exegetical Perspective, 2 Timothy 1:1-14” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 135.

² Stephen C Barton, “Finding Happiness in Family Life: Biblical Reflections.” *Ex Auditu* 28 (2012), 10.

³ Barton, 11.

⁴ Barton, 11.

stories of Christ Jesus. Paul remembers Timothy's tears (2 Timothy 1:4), his sincere faith, his mother and grandmother, the time Paul laid his hands on Timothy in Christian rite (2 Timothy 1:6). In the Christian family, we remember and are remembered.

The Christian family is also where we take action because of our faith. Paul implies that Timothy's faith is more than a list of things he holds in his head when he speaks of Lois and Eunice, because Paul describes Timothy as having a *sincere* faith that *lives in* him. Later on, in chapter 3 of the letter, Paul says *continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus* (2 Timothy 3:14-15).⁵ Our Christian families teach us to remember and be remembered, to do things because of our faith.

Paul is writing to Timothy to emphasize that it is not just his faith he needs to worry about, but his faithfulness. Timothy has faith. Timothy needs to focus on what he's going to do with it. Timothy needs to live out his faith in his biological and church families, in the world at large. Timothy needs to live out what it means to remember and be remembered. You can see Jesus doing the same thing in the passage from Luke, *If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.* (Luke 17:6). If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could do (fill in the blank). Having faith means doing something about it.

One thing we have as part of the Brookline Community Church family is our constitution, which lays out how we plan to live out our faith. As part of the Open and Affirming process, the team that is planning how we will explore what it means to be welcoming to all, looked at our constitution. When it was amended in 2003, more than 16 years ago, we put an article about inclusiveness, which says:

The Brookline Community Church of Brookline is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. Therefore, all persons, without regard to race, color, national origin, status, sexual orientation, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, to participate in its programs, and, when they take the appropriate vows, to be admitted into its membership.

If the goal of the Open and Affirming process was to change the text of the constitution, we might seriously be considering patting ourselves on the back and declaring victory. But the Open and Affirming process helps the church explore how we live what is in our constitution. The inclusive language in the constitution is a starting point for our ONA process. The journey of ONA will let us explore how we want to communicate our value of inclusiveness to the community.

It may be as we talk together, as we remember our history, as we explore what all the many individual members of this family mean when they say "welcome" or "one Body in Christ", that we find we need to change what is in our constitution to bring it into better alignment with what we mean. We may choose to say that everyone is "eligible to attend worship" but not to participate in all the Christian rites and sacraments that we offer. We may choose to delete the article about inclusiveness all together, perhaps replacing it with something else.

⁵ Barton, 11.

During those conversations, which will take place over time, we will be talking about both our faith and our faithfulness, what we believe and how we live that out. We'll be exploring how our faith and our faithfulness are related to the faith and faithfulness of other members of our Christian family. And we'll be exploring about how they are related to the faith and faithfulness of other members of our Christian family who have gone before us.

I showed you my Nini's handwork during the Children's Message. I get a bit of a chuckle out of thinking that however many decades later, we're still going to try to raise money at a church Christmas Faire from her handwork. So sure, I am one of those people who has a grandmother and a mother in the church. But I may not bring everything I got from her into the future. Some of it needs to be left where it is and only the love carried forward.

Our Open and Affirming process is one where we will, as individuals and as a church family, reflect on our faith and how we live it out, today and in the future. We will remember what we learned from before, before 2003, 2003, yesterday. We will remember the family members, church family and biological family members who brought our faith to this point. And we'll talk together about how to faithfully live our lives in light of what they taught us and what we've learned as we have gone along in life. We'll be exploring both our faith and our faithfulness. Along the way, our faith may increase, our faithfulness certainly will.