

“Generation to Generation”
Deuteronomy 6:1-9; II Timothy 1:1-7
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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

Eighteen months ago, the Session of Morningside Presbyterian Church went on a retreat at Calvin Center. We talked at length on that occasion about the third component of Christ’s Great Commission. The first two are, “Go therefore into all the world and make disciples” and “Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” The third is, “Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

The Elders talked and prayed and planned a new chapter in the teaching ministry of Morningside Church. They were convinced, as massive amounts of research show, that the most important factor in promoting growth and maturity in faith is Christian Education, done well. (1) It was a watershed moment in the expertise of Mardee Rightmyer and Chris Henry. We used the gifts and skills of wonderful volunteer teachers for classes and programs that address learning and nurture needs of people of all ages. This February, Melinda Sandkam came on board, and under her excellent direction, we have come to a new place in the teaching and learning life of our congregation. Jesus said, “Teach – teach them to observe all I have commanded you.”

Think about someone in your own life who, somewhere along the way, taught you something about faith: a grandmother, a father, a friend, a youth advisor, who let you ask your questions without embarrassment, a preacher who opened a whole new world of possibility to you. When I asked myself that question on Friday, the first person who came to mind was the nice lady whose name I do not know, who, some years ago now, sat at a table full of 4-year-old wiggle worms, I being one of them. I can see her right now with her knees close to her chin, saying, “Boys and girls, this morning we are going to sing our favorite song. And together we would sing as she had taught us, “Jesus wants me for a sunbeam, to shine for him each day...” When you think about it, that’s not a bad thing to remember any day of your life, is it?

The faith that lives in you and that lives in me, whether it is just a tiny little mustard seed or whether it is a mighty oak, did not originate with you. You didn’t invent it, and you cannot take any credit for it. Faith comes to us through the workings of the Spirit of the living God and through other human beings, through their works and through their deeds. When we see a person endure something very daunting with special grace; when someone takes the time to be kind, to tell us Jesus loves us by his or her mere presence; when someone demonstrates the spirit of respect that we all ought to bring to the worship

of God, when people give and do not count the cost; when people don't preach at us but demonstrate by the way they treat you that we are a beloved child of God: this is the ministry of teaching. Jesus said, "Teach them. You, my followers, are to teach others to observe all that I have commanded you."

I know that Andrew Young has been in the news for a lot of negative reasons lately, but I have known Ambassador Young for a long time, and he and I have worked together on a number of things that have demonstrated his compassion for fellow human beings of all races and religions and backgrounds. I remember his telling me once about his mother as he was growing up in New Orleans, and how their house was a place known where hungry people could always come. He said, "We didn't always have a lot ourselves, but if someone came to my mother's door, that person was never, ever turned away. I remember she served a man a green bean sandwich one day on the back porch, because green beans were all that we had."

This is what I mean about being Lois and Eunice to one another, generation to generation. The Apostle Paul writes to his young colleague, Timothy, whom he called his "beloved child," even though there was no biological connection. "I am reminded of your faith, a living faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and then in your mother Eunice, and I know now lives in you."

What is so interesting about to me is that the letter was written sometime in the early 60's, not 1960's but the original 60's, which means that 30 years or so had gone by since Jesus' death, and there are already three generations – Lois, Eunice, Timothy - already three generations of people with a living faith who had obeyed the commandment to teach. This is the power of the resurrected faith that lives in human hearts and is passed along, heart to heart, soul to soul, generation after generation. As the wonderful saying goes, one hungry beggar tells another hungry beggar where the bread is. And, if we do not make sure that the generation that comes after us knows, then who will tell them?

One of the reasons I have always loved the Bible is that I think of it as the breadbox, passed along for thousands of years, full of heavenly food, full of great news and wisdom that corrects and hope that inspires. The good news is ours, not only to receive, but to share. Sharing is the moral obligation of faith.

Some years ago, I had the privilege of spending time with an outstanding Biblical scholar, Dr. James Sanders. He is one of the most brilliant people I ever met. One evening, over dinner, I asked him about his family, and he told me in great detail about every relative he had ever had. I said, "They must be proud of you."

He said, "Oh they are. You know, I am the only one who graduated from high school." Because he was a gracious man, he did not go on to say, "or college, or to get two or three other graduate degrees..." One of Dr. Sanders' many books is entitled *God Has a Story Too*. Here is how its dedication page reads: To my sisters, Agnes and Iris and Nell, women who told me the tomb was empty. And to Ruth and Joe Brown who told me that my head need not be empty." (2)

As you have already noted in your bulletin insert, I am beginning a six-week sermon series on “The Family of God”. I would sum up what I am going to say between now and October in these three sentences: We human beings need each other. We need each other in the fabric of belonging that is the human family and the family of faith. We need each other generation to generation.

There are many people whose families of origin are not sources of grace and love, but the truth is, we are all a part of a family. If the one we inherited doesn’t work for us, then we have a God-given responsibility to weave new relationships into our lives in order to be connected in the way God intends. This is the great human challenge. I believe the family is a God-given institution, whatever its shape or form. It is in the family that we learn, in a way that we cannot learn anywhere else, how to be human.

This morning, before we come to the table to receive the gift of the body and bread of our brother Jesus, I want to say three brief words about the teaching and learning heritage that has been passed along to us in the Presbyterian family, and how important it is in our world today for us to re-claim the responsibility of teaching and learning. Our tradition has been characterized by what John Calvin calls “a teachable spirit,” that recognizes that human sin and finitude are real. Because they are real, we must rely on something other than our own goodness and our own wisdom. It is God who “enlightens, corrects, informs and shapes the human mind and human character.” And believe it or not, the church, a very flawed group of fallible people, has been ordained by God as the primary instrument of the transmission of divine grace. (3)

Of course, the realm of God’s grace is operative well beyond the confines of the church, but the church is the only institution on earth entrusted with the gospel of grace to teach and to preach. It is not because we are so good, but because God, for reasons known only to God, has decided that the church is to be the means by which the world hears the message that Jesus came to earth to teach: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God . . . Return no one evil for evil . . . Judge not, lest ye be judged.” Not many places these days do you hear that kind of thing.

It’s our job, our responsibility, to pass along and to live by these odd ideas, generation to generation. God has given us the responsibility of teaching and the capacity of having our own minds changed, which is to say, the capacity to learn. Few have expressed this capacity in more beautiful terms than T.H. White in his book, *The Once and Future King*:

“‘The best thing for being sad,’ replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, ‘is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.’”

In our Presbyterian tradition, learning is always understood as truth in order to goodness, knowledge guided by values. Education is not about truth only in the abstract, but also in the concrete. “Teach them,” Jesus said, “to **obey** everything I have commanded you.” When teaching is done well, learning takes place. And when it takes place in the Church of Jesus Christ, a vibrant, integrated transforming faith takes root in a human heart and begins to grow. (4)

The second brief point is that we are all teachers, whether we signed up to help out in the education program or not. People watch us; children and young people watch older people. They watch whether or not we close our eyes during the prayers. They notice whether we say prayers at home. They notice whether we give or don’t give.

The community around us learns what Christianity is about by whether or not there is a correspondence between what we say here at 11:00 on Sunday morning and the way we live the rest of the week. Are we asking the important questions of our times? Do we really care about the next generation of children in our community and in our city and in our world? I can think of nothing more pressing five years after 9/11 than to answer that question with a resounding “Yes!” Do we care about those who will inherit the world that we will leave to them?

In 2001, we were united in grief and a sense of common humanity. I remember a young mom in my church at the time, who was about eight-and-a-half months’ pregnant. I found her in our fellowship hall standing in line with her screaming two-year-old, waiting to give blood. “You need to go home,” I said. “There are plenty of people here.”

“No,” she said, “I need to help; that’s what I need to do.” We need to help now. We need to help our nation reclaim its heart and soul. In honor of the nearly 3,000 who lost their lives, we have to do all that we can to reduce hatred and enhance life and to bear witness to the things that make for life. We have to make sure that there is another generation of Americans coming along that understands the great democratic principles on which this nation was founded. Those principles include the right to security and safety, but they also include liberty and justice for all.

We are a part of God’s human family, and when we break bread together this morning, in the name of Christ, in our terribly broken world, we must remember that our brokenness is not God’s will and we must pray that through God’s grace, we will move to a higher ground as human society.

I have probably told you before a story from my own childhood. I hope I have, because then, it will sound familiar to you. I had an aunt who had been married once briefly and unhappily and did not have any biological children, but a host of children for whom she cared. She was the director of Christian Education at our church and lived with us for awhile, at our house, and then in her own apartment after that. One week, my parents were out of town, and my aunt, whom I called Squeaky, invited me to come and stay at her place. On Saturday morning, we went to the church to make sure everything was

going to be ready for Sunday morning. She went to her office and sat at her desk for awhile, and gave me permission to explore the church. I was a little itchy; I was still a wiggle-worm, even though I was about eight years-old. I loved the thought of wandering around the church. I was tired of being at Squeaky's house, where you ate vegetable soup and had to go to bed early. I loved exploring the large, mysterious place that was our church. I found the sanctuary; I went in and stood behind the pulpit. I poked around in the room where Mr. Porter rehearsed the choir every Wednesday evening. Finally, I came to a door that was closed. Of course it had to be opened. I tried the knob. It turned. I entered and encountered a heavenly sight: mountains of snowy white bread cubes piled high on silver plates, towers of silver trays filled with teeny glasses brimming with grape juice. All of a sudden I was overcome with the feeling of being famished. I had to have just one cube of bread. I took a piece and ate it, and it was, of course, not enough. I ate another, and then another, and then I was grabbing communion bread by the fistfuls. You know what will happen if you eat fistfuls of bread; you get thirsty, so I drank one thimbleful of grape juice and then another. And so it went until I looked up and saw my Aunt Squeaky, standing at the door. There I was with my purple mustache. "I am sorry," I said.

"I accept your apology," she said. "Let's wash the cups and cut more bread." It was the most grace-filled moment of my life so far.

I never say the Words of Institution for the Lord's Table without remembering that the purpose of Christ's sacrifice was to forgive us and to make us whole. That's the story we have to tell here at the church for the sake of our broken world. Generation to generation, we tell the story until God's family gathers at last with all the saints at table in the kingdom of heaven. In the name of the Creator and the Sustainer and the Redeemer. Amen.

(1) Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, "What Makes Faith Mature?" *The Christian Century*, May 9, 1990.

(2) Thomas G. Long, *Testimony*, Jossey-Bass, 2004, p. 112.

(3) Richard Robert Osmer, *A Teachable Spirit: The Teaching Office in the Church*.

(4) Roehlkepartain.