

trying to follow in the way of Jesus. The flame of faith summons us into that identity. And our experiences and relationships, just like the ones the little girl describes, fan the flame of our love for God.

At the end of every funeral and memorial service, there is a Commendation. That is the time when we commend our loved one into eternal life with God. It is the culmination of their baptized life. And a strong affirmation of our shared trust in God's work in each individual's life. The words of the Commendation are one answer, perhaps the truest answer, to the girl's question - who will I be? In that moment, we affirm that the person is a lamb of God's own fold, a sheep of God's own flock, and a sinner of God's own redeeming. In essence, a disciple. One whose faith was lit inside them by the Spirit. One whose faith was fanned into flames by ancestors and a community built on love.

I wonder if Timothy asked, in his prayers, the same question the little girl did: who will I be, Lord? If he did, Paul's words helped him to answer that, above all, he was a disciple, in whom the flame of faith burned bright. As Paul wrote, "I know the one in whom I have put my trust." That One gifts each of us with faith and invites us to be fully ourselves, as we put our full selves into faithful discipleship.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



October 2, 2022

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

"Fanning the Flames of Faith"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Our church family has suffered the deaths of so many faithful folks over the past couple of months. If you knew one or more of those folks, I suspect you have felt the heaviness of that loss. If you didn't know them, you may still have felt some sorrow in our life together, and the realization of just how many funerals our congregation has been hosting. In the passage we read today, Paul's second letter to the younger Timothy, it seems that Paul himself was nearing death. In the first letter, he focused on the church and advice for getting ministry right. In this, his second letter, he was more reflective, more vulnerable, more personal in what he said to Timothy. Which I think is how so many people feel as they approach the end of life. History believes that Paul was likely in prison in Rome when he wrote this letter. Execution awaited him, so things were very bleak. Yet even as he considered suffering and even death, he saw that, too, through the lens of his faith in Christ.

As I have sat down with each family who has lost a loved one, part of our planning for the funeral or memorial service is sharing about the person's family and faith. For most people, those two things rank of highest importance in their life. There are always other stories of hobbies and events, work and travel that made that person's life unique, memorable, special. But when it comes down to it, it's their family who've surrounded them and their faith that sustained them that mattered most. Often, those two are linked closely together. Many, though not all, of us learn our faith from our parents, or maybe a grandparent, who taught us what it means that Jesus loves us, and how we can share that love.

Paul reflected to Timothy about the way faith is passed down through families. I love how Paul didn't just state that fact. He lifted up the names of Timothy's own mother and grandmother—Eunice and Lois. That line reminds us that this really was a personal letter to a specific person, not a theological diatribe. These women do not appear to have been like other women whose names are remembered in the New Testament: like

1 Ken Evers-Hood, "2 Timothy 1:1-14, Proper 22, Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture" *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019), 366.

2 Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, *Who Will I Be, Lord?* (Random House, 2009).

Lydia, who supported a church financially, or like Phoebe, who served as a deacon. Eunice and Lois were ‘just’ faithful women whose parenting, grandparenting, and the life they created for their family shaped Timothy’s faith. Maybe their nurture even helped him hear God’s call to serve.

Whether you’re a cradle Presbyterian or just coming back to Christian faith later in life, I bet members of your family, or others close to you, have nurtured faith in you, too. My parents were some of those for me. My mom’s insistence that our family light the Advent wreath at the dining room table each Sunday in December, asking me to read a Bible passage out loud and then singing a carol together. My dad, sitting beside me in the front pew each week, urging me to be reverent, which meant being attentive to God, but also, not too loud. Him silently raising his eyebrows, when I would insist on squishing the small piece of wonder bread into a dense little cube during communion. There was also one my pastors, who loved teaching the gospel through the movie *The Lion King*. My confirmation mentor’s zeal for mission and her complete obviousness to the fact that some people were just too busy or not comfortable going on a march for the issue of the day. Those are just some of the people who shared their faith with me, each in their own wonderful and imperfect way. I know you have memories of people who gifted you with faith, or hopefully even people who are still doing that today.

But even when family or friends are pillars of faith and even when they work hard to pass that faith down the generations, those people are not the origin of faith in our lives. Presbyterians affirm that faith itself is a gift from the Holy Spirit. It’s not created in us by others and it’s not just something we ourselves decide or choose. Sometimes we assume that we ourselves have cultivated our belief in God. That our study, our growth, our coming to church is responsible for our trust. Those things play a part, for sure. But there is always some element that we did not earn ourselves. As Paul says, “he who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.” The Spirit lights a small flame within us, without any effort on our part.

The daughter of one of the saints we laid to rest in September shared a wonderful story about her mother that illustrated how God is the one that first lights that tiny flame within us. When she was a little girl her family did not attend church. But for some reason, she wanted to go. So she asked her parents if they minded if she went to church on her own. Her parents said it was ok, so she started going to worship and Sunday school all by herself. I suspect the saints at that church saw a young girl attending services and

worked hard to fan the flame of faith that the Spirit had lit inside her. With the help of God and those saints, her vibrant faith took root.

Commentator Ken Evers-Hood writes of this passage, “Paul does not imagine himself or Timothy as fearless individuals, heroically choosing the faith as an expression of their free will. Rather, the faith summons them.”¹ The flame of faith burns within us. It shapes us and urges us to live into the people God made us to be. And the people around us help it grow.

Paul urged Timothy to *rekindle* the gift of God that was already in him. I wonder if Paul gave this encouragement because Timothy’s faith had faltered and the fire needed to be started again? Maybe. But a different translation of Paul’s words urges Timothy to *fan the flame* of his faith. That image paints a different picture. Fanning the flame reminds us that the Spirit had lit a small flame of faith at the center of Timothy’s life, which may have fluttered, but was still glowing. His relatives tended the fire within him as he grew. His job was not to light the fire again; but simply to give the flame oxygen—through the people who surrounded him and the way he opened himself to what God was doing. The call for Timothy was to fan the flame of his faith, so that it could grow into a warm and holy fire.

In the book we shared with the kids, *Who will I be, Lord?*, the little girl reflects on how the members of her family are unique and faithful in their own way.² Her dad is a car man and when a customer can’t afford his work, Papa says, “Pay me when you can.” She reports that almost everyone in town owes her Papa money. Some say that’s bad business. Her mama says some people ought to mind their own business! Her Papa’s generosity and work ethic have surely rubbed off on the little girl. Her cousin is a jazzman, and she loves to dance to his beat. He plans to be famous someday, but right now, he isn’t, so he flips burgers at Dizzy’s Diner. Until after work, when he sits at the keyboard and plays and plays and plays. Surely his dreaming, passionate spirit is shaping how the girl wants to live in the world. Her mama is a mama—but not just to her. On Friday’s, she drives a lady who’s almost blind to the beauty parlor; another day she visits a man at the nursing home. She helps her sister with handiwork around the house and comes home to cook the family’s favorite dinner. That care for others is surely shaping the girl’s understanding of what it means to serve your neighbor.

Like the girl in the story, we may not fully know who God is calling us to be. There may never be a point where we finally feel that we have arrived and become just who God intended. That’s ok. I would offer that God does not have one single, perfect end goal that we are trying to figure out and strive toward. Rather, we are all seeking one common identity, that of disciple—someone who learns, serves, loves, messes up and tries again,