

# Faith-Full Generations

*Text: Psalm 78:5-7; II Timothy 1:5*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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*... which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God ... Psalm 78:5-7*

*I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. II Timothy 1:5*

Well, there's a new Miss America, I think. I was busy last night and didn't check in but it was supposed to happen. And if that was supposed to happen, then it must be a new church year and time to get church school started. It's time for that annual sermon on engaging in the life of the community of faith. It's time for that annual pep rally.

One of the things that I don't want to do, ever, is to make the pulpit a place for a pep rally and the sermon a promotional piece. It's too important a time, an encounter, to let it become simply a time for banner waving. As I was reflecting on this morning in our life, I know that we are at that point again when the "menu" is before you. The smorgasbord is being spread. But, rather than slipping into the temptation, into which the Church so often slips, of becoming an institution characterized by the tyranny of "the ought, the must and the should" – It is so easy to talk about all of the wonderful things that are out there, to say that you "ought to do this, you really should do that, and you simply must do something else," I wonder if long-time Christian people generally bend their backs just a little bit as they enter the sanctuary, waiting for one more burden to be laid on them – this morning let me put a little different twist on this day and say, "I celebrate you. I am grateful for you as a congregation. I'm thankful that you show up."

Didn't the now famous Woody Allen say that 90% of success in life is just showing up? Well, I'm glad that you show up. And you keep coming back. And in the diversity and the multiplicity of the offerings of the life of this community you will be there – some of you here, some of you there, as this community moves

into full gear and I am thankful for you. You are a marvelous congregation, and I say that in all sincerity. I don't really need to cajole you, to coerce you, to persuade you. I can celebrate you! I think that is a thing that has characterized Christ Community, and at least in part is what has made this an alternative to church as usual. You show up. You find that which strikes fire in your soul and meets the need of your heart, and together we are a community of faith. I'm really grateful for that. A community of faith. A community. There's a connectedness here. Brothers and sisters. Pilgrims in passage. Together. We're not alone. We're not in isolation. We move together toward a shared vision and hope. We support one another, and as we move together we are able to draw strength and encouragement from one another. We are a community. I'm very grateful to be a part of this community, this community of faith, a common faith, a shared confidence that God is, that God is good, that God is gracious. We keep coming back here together to have that reinforced in our lives, to let it wash over us once again. We live together in that faith, in the God who will never abandon us. I celebrate you.

A person who lives a long distance from here and is on our mailing list called me last night and congratulated me. He had opened his mail and saw "Joining God's Agenda," and he said, "Dick you are doing a wonderful job." And I had to say, "I have surrounded myself with some wonderful people." There is a level of creativity and commitment here that is second to none. Colette said to me this week (in the intensity of getting ready for this morning, you'd have to be around here to sense that intensity, the hours day in and day out getting ready for today), "I am surrounded by strong individuals and there is not a follower among them."

You know what it is to be a leader when you don't have any followers, but a whole host of leaders? Have you ever tried to lead leaders? Well, it's challenging, and it's *exhilarating*. That's what *you* are. You are a gifted, creative, committed, talented group of people, and I am grateful for this community and for the privilege that is mine to be in a position of leadership in the midst of you who are so bright and engaged and involved, and strong in your own right. It is a wonderful thing.

In the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, which is one of the great churches of the land (I've gone there of late when I have been in New York City because of an outstanding preacher, Dr. Morris Boyd, who has been there about five years), I became aware in the last year of some tension that was growing between Dr. Boyd and the leadership of the congregation through my friend, Ernie Campbell, who was close to the situation and had gotten some inside sense of what was going on there. Unfortunately, in the spring of this year, Dr. Boyd resigned. Last Sunday the Interim Pastor was there for the first time in this fine congregation. The announcement was made in the bulletin that there was a copy of the Mission Statement that had just been prepared for those who would like to avail themselves of it. So following the service I made my way to the reception desk and asked for one as though I was interested as a member of that congregation. But really I wanted to take it home, because for the last couple of years we've

been working on a mission statement, and I thought it would be good to see what this fine congregation has come up with. Quite a document. I thought I'd read it to you this morning! (Laughter as he holds up that document!) But at least this might be important to hear. There will probably never be agreement about the circumstances that led to Dr. Boyd's resignation and early departure, but all agree that this was a wrenching experience for the entire congregation, "leaving deep wounds and division which cry out for the reconciling presence of Christ our Lord."

And then a paragraph about the different priorities and envisions of action in the congregation, "as the church turns to the task of seeking a new pastor, it must do so with the sobriety and grace of a congregation that has learned that the bonds of trust and mutual connectedness are fragile. That words spoken carelessly or in anger cannot be withdrawn, but can be forgiven. That the certainty in the rightness of one's own position does not exclude mutual respect. That love and commitment are acts of will rather than fleeting emotions. The congregation must now have the strength to see through its anger and conflict as it recognizes that people of good will can differ yet join together in a common ministry." That's quite a candid statement.

I apologize to the Session of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church for hanging out their dirty laundry in public. It is a great church, and it has a great tradition. It has just experienced some very painful brokenness. Their statement says to me, number one, I'm very lucky. Number two: let's never take this community and our relationship with each other for granted. You are a marvelous congregation. Gifted. Creative. Full of leadership. I am constantly amazed when someone else emerges out of the woodwork, of whom I was not aware, bringing tremendous gifts to the community and to our life together. It is a delight. I celebrate you. Today I delight in you. I give thanks for you. And we must never presume upon you or take you for granted. Because as the report says, those bonds of connectedness are fragile and they need always to be nurtured as we live together in this community of faith.

But, what are we all about? Well, we are all about "telling a story with a meaning." That's the translation of Psalm 78, verse 2. That's the New English Translation. In the version that I read a moment ago it says, "I will speak in a parable." The Hebrew word speaks of parable or proverb, but the New English Translation I love. The Psalmist says, "I will tell a story with a meaning," and that's really what we are about. We keep telling the story and listening for the nuances of its meaning, meanings that continue to deepen and to take on new color as we move through the pilgrimage of life. We are about "telling a story with a meaning." That's what we are engaged in right now. Part of a living tradition of faith that stretches back into Israel, finds centrality in Jesus Christ and has moved on through two thousand years of Christian history. We are a people, a community of faith, who live out of that story, out of that faith vision. And we keep telling that story.

I keep connecting what I do on Sunday morning with this storybook. Our children left us, but they have left us in order to hear stories, Bible stories, stories that have a meaning. A meaning that says God is, that God has created all things, that God is good and full of grace, that God will never abandon them because God is unconditional love. That's what we need constantly to be telling. We tell the stories because they have a meaning and the meaning bespeaks Grace and Love in all of the respective stories of this story of God's love and grace. In order that as a community of God's people we may baptize our children here with confidence, and that we may bury our dead here with confidence because there has been laid in the fabric of our lives a deep fundamental trust.

Fundamental trust. That's a kind of a catchword, a slogan, the jargon which the leaders of child and human development have coined to express a posture of life. Not trust in this and that and another thing, but just trust. And we know from child development studies that the most critical thing we can do for the infant is to secure the infant in trust. To surround the infant with the warmth and stability and security that translates in their early days as the foundation on which they can rest. We know from concrete studies that it is so critical that a child learns to trust. Not, again, in terms of trusting that this is true and that is true, and that is true, but *being able to trust*. There are people and they are human tragedies who have never been able to trust, to let go, to take their hands off the controls, to entrust themselves to another. One nurtured in a safe environment learns to trust, and it is fundamental trust that we are seeking to instill in our children, our adolescents.

The Psalmist understood clearly that this was Israel's way. This is why the Jewish people are still a people four thousand years later, because they have continued to tell the story that had a meaning, the meaning of which was God, the creator of all, is good. That reality can be trusted. God will never abandon God's children. And so the Psalmist in Psalm 78 recites the history of God's people, because it is in their concrete history that Israel experienced God with them, for them. He says in the 5th verse, "God established a decree in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel which he commanded our ancestry to teach their children that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children so that they should set their hope in God."

Isn't that a marvelous text? Isn't that what we are about? Isn't that why we go through all of the effort to nurture our children? That, finally, with us they may set their hope in God. But it isn't always the children. You keep coming back too. You've heard so many sermons I couldn't think up a new one for you. And I've been here so long I couldn't possibly have a new thought. But we don't come here to get more information. We don't come here in order to know more things.

One of the finest books on preaching that I know of, by a Dutch scholar, speaks about fundamental trust. He points out that preaching really is that weekly occasion in which the people come to be renewed in their fundamental trust. Just

to have it wash over us again. You don't come here really week after week to gain some new insight, some new piece of knowledge. You come here again to be together in the presence of God, and in hymns and prayers and liturgy, and anthems and sound of the organ, and the Word of preaching. Simply to know again in your depths God is. God is good. God is full of grace, and God will never abandon God's children. God will finally bring us home. Why, my goodness folks, if in your depths that is your confidence, then there is nothing you cannot negotiate in the passages of life.

We in the church often know too many things. We get too excited about matters of doctrine or theological correctness. That's not what it's all about. We know too much. We know far more than we ought to bother our heads about. What it's about is Trust - in God - the baptismal font - the Lord's Table - the candle lighted for our final passage. We are kept in the grip of love by the gracious God who will bring us home.

That's what happened to Timothy. Paul writes to his child in the faith, longing to see him, and then encourages Timothy, reminding him that he stands in the third generation of faith-full living: the faith of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Paul says, "the faith that lives in you too, Timothy, I am sure." It wasn't exactly an ideal situation: Lois and Eunice; I wonder where Timothy's father was? Maybe he was dead. Maybe he abandoned them. One thing sure, he was alive when Timothy was born because Timothy, the child of a Jewish mother and a Jewish grandmother, was never circumcised. I'll bet Lois and Eunice had some words. I'll bet Lois was really upset with Eunice for falling in love with a Gentile. I'll bet they really scrapped. I'll bet you could have cut the tension with a fork. But somehow or other they got together, grandmother and mother. Poor Timothy didn't have a chance. They nurtured him in the faith to the point at which, when Paul came telling the Good News of God in Jesus Christ, Timothy was ready to take on the mantle of ministry himself. Paul says to him, "Timothy, my son, you have not been baptized with the spirit of timidity and fear, but of power and love and self-discipline." And that's really what I would pray for all of you.

So often religion appeals to the weakness in us. I would hope at Christ Community we might always appeal to your strength, to the center of your being. To call you in your strength, in your giftedness, in your creativity to serve God with all your heart, to follow your bliss, to do that which strikes fire in your soul - to be alive. There's no party line at Christ Community. Once we have laid that foundation of fundamental trust that God is - that God is Good - that God is full of Grace - that God will never abandon us -that God will bring us home...once we've affirmed that and constantly renew that, well, you're on your own. You're not sheep. You have not a spirit of timidity and fear, but a spirit of love and self-discipline.

I don't ever want to hear you say, "Well, at Christ Community we don't believe that, or at Christ Community we believe that. Christ Community has no party

line. I call you to maturity. To be able to stand on your own two feet. To be able to say, "This I believe." To stand in your own concrete truth, mature in faith.

I am not going to urge you to grow. What's alive grows! And our pilgrimage takes us through so many different experiences - sometimes it's on the mountaintop and sometimes it's in the darkness of the deepest valley but, in it all, where we are rooted and grounded in the good and gracious God, we will be able to negotiate the passages. Not alone, but finally being able to say, "This is who I am. This is what I believe, and my belief is being translated into my life."

And we are here to help you to come to that kind of wholeness and maturity and strength and power and love so that finally, whether you are on the left end of the spectrum or the right end of the spectrum, or whether you waffle in the middle somewhere, it doesn't matter. Whether you dot your i's and cross your t's, or whether you spice life with a little heresy, I don't care. All I want you to be able to do finally is to be able to say with a Paul, "I know in whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day." To say with sobriety and grace, and with power and strength. To be able to say, "I know, I am persuaded, I am alright." That's what we are all about. I celebrate you. You are a great community of people. I thank God for you.