Second Reformed Church, Pella
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Deuteronomy 6:1-9/ 2 Timothy 1:1-7
Eunice and Lois: Mothers, Teachers, and Mentors

There is an old saying that God has no grandchildren. Only children. What do you think that means? The saying is trying to convey that each of us needs to connect directly with God. Each person, every generation, needs to establish their own relationship with God. You can’t rest on your parents’ laurels or just say “Well my parents were Christians.”

In the passage from 2 Timothy, Paul is writing to his friend and beloved companion, Timothy. Timothy was a young man, maybe even a teen-ager, who became Paul's faithful assistant on his later missionary journeys through Asia Minor and Greece. Reading the book of Acts, we learn that Timothy was the son of a Jewish Christian mother and a Gentile father. When Paul arrived in the city of Derbe, he met Timothy and saw in him an eagerness to help preach the gospel, so for several years they became travelling companions, enduring all kinds of adventures and dangers together.

Now, years later from prison, Paul writes an endearing letter to Timothy, a letter full of advice and admonition. "I thank God when day and night I constantly remember you in my prayers..." Paul begins, and "I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy." The relationship sounds almost parental. Since Timothy's father was a gentile and we know nothing about him, it is possible that in the household of faith at least, Paul was a kind of father figure to Timothy.

Then Paul continues, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that first lived in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and now, I am persuaded, lives in you also...." Faith which dwelt first in Grandmother Lois, then in mother Eunice, and now in Timothy. Is faith something that can be handed down from one generation to the next—like blue eyes or a tall build? No! But Christian faith can be nurtured in the bosom of a Christian family.

Paul met Timothy as young man of faith. He had attended the synagogue with his mother, he had learned and been trained in the Jewish faith, and he had heard about Jesus of Nazareth whom people claimed was the long-awaited Messiah. Most of
all, though, Timothy had observed that his mother and grandmother were women of genuine faith and character. Perhaps, they had sung to him, or prayed with him. Told him stories. And guided by his mother and grandmother's openness, he himself had come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.

If Timothy’s story is in any way an example for us, then we should note that if we want to pass faith down to our children, it must first be something that dwells, that is solidly anchored in us. You can't give something away, unless you have it yourself! If we as parents want our children to have faith, if we as a church want our children to have faith, then we must have that faith ourselves. We can't pass down something or expect it to be important to them, unless it is important to us first.

How often has Timothy’s story line been repeated to me? How many people have said, “I went to church every Sunday with my Grandma. She was a godly lady. It was she who read the Bible to me, who taught me to pray. We would sit at her piano and sing hymns together.” Somehow grandmothers or mothers often seem to play the role of faith-nurturer. And we should be grateful for all those grandmothers and mothers.

But, if you don't have something, you can't give it away! That does not mean that we have to have the answers to all of our children's faith questions, or that we never fail. But it does mean that we should be authentic in our desire to be faithful, open about our journeys, open about our doubts and questions, and open also about our unfailing commitment.

• Don't expect your children to value peacemaking, if they watch you constantly fighting with neighbors.
• Don't expect children to learn generosity if you do not model giving in your daily lives.
• Don't think that they will spontaneously learn to pray, if you yourself never pray,
• Don’t think your children will learn to be encouragers if they watch you constantly tear other people down.

If you want to pass faith on to your children, you must first have it yourself. That goes not only for parents and grandparents, but for teachers and youth leaders as well. If I grow frustrated when the lesson doesn’t seem to fly, when attendance
seems spotty, when the kids can’t remember if Samuel is in the Old or New Testament, I should remember that *I myself* am the real lesson of the class! Who am I, how do I relate to my students, what kind of time and love do I invest in them, what faith shines in me? That is the greatest lesson I can share.

The passage we heard from Deuteronomy is likely familiar to you. It certainly is one that is familiar to every Jewish family. It contains the Shema, a kind of basic creed, something like the Apostle's creed that every Jewish child learns. When Jesus was asked by a lawyer which was the greatest commandment, he answered with the Shema that he had been taught in his Catechism class. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

While the Shema is a great statement of Israel’s faith, notice as well how the passage emphasizes transmitting this faith on to children. “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

In other words, if we want to pass faith to our children, not only must faith be firmly anchored in us, it must be something we regularly speak about, participate in, and discuss. It has to be woven into the everyday fabric of our lives. The Israelites were to speak of God's laws when they were at home, when they walked along the road, when they went to bed and when they woke up. A child does not learn to speak English unless she has heard the language spoken frequently at home. Our children will not be Christians, unless they hear Christ spoken of frequently in our homes.

If Moses were speaking to us he might say, “talk about God in the mini-van, at the soccer game, around the dinner table. Have every member of the family attend Sunday school. Discuss how your Christian faith impacts that school assignment, the way we celebrate holidays, or the way we vote.” It is to become a regular part of all of our conversations.

In this society, we get the message that “religion is a private matter you never discuss; sort of like money, sex, and politics.” We are told to “let our children
choose for themselves,” but the Shema says “Impress it on your children. Talk about it when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

So, here are two very practical things we can all do, to pass faith on to all our children and grandchildren, all the children here. **First, make sure that our faith is firmly anchored in our own lives. Nurture that faith, practice it. And then be sure that we talk about it openly and frequently.**

There is one thing, however, that we cannot do. We cannot produce faith in our children. That is the work of the Holy Spirit alone. God produces faith, not us. If we believe that our work alone is responsible for how our children respond to the gospel, then we are bound to be frustrated, and anxious.

It is humbling and somehow freeing indeed to think that we as parents, as teachers, as Christians, cannot produce faith in children or friends. We cannot badger them into believing. We cannot control what ultimately happens. We must simply do our part faithfully and authentically and let the Spirit of God do the rest. If we truly trust this, it seems to me, we will be freed from guilt, from anxiety, from any sense of failure. God will not abandon our children, just as God has not abandoned us. The steadfast love of the Lord is from generation to generation.

So I charge you parents and grandparents this morning. I charge you teachers, I charge you Consistory members, and church members, if you want to pass down faith, the faith of this congregation to the next generation, then your part is simply to make sure that you yourselves have what you are trying to pass down to the children. You want them to have a strong and vibrant faith; well do you? You want them to pray, do you pray with them? You want them to know Jesus Christ; do you ever talk about him? Make sure that your faith is genuine—not perfect, not without questions, just authentic. And then make sure that you speak of it warmly and openly. If you have done that, the rest is up to God! And God will produce faith in our children yet! Amen.