“Passing the Baton”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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2 Timothy 1:1-7
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The video and the song remind me of the wise words of a friend: “Parenthood is the hardest job you’ll ever love.” On May 5th, we celebrated our oldest son’s “gotcha day,” the day we got Nate and brought him home. I was so happy and smiled so much that my face hurt. The other picture was taken the next Sunday, which was my first Mother’s Day eleven years ago. And these are pictures of our younger son Ian and our completed family soon after we adopted him. I am grateful to be a mother.

And on this Mother’s Day, we do celebrate mothers and family. But our passage for this morning speaks to us not only about families but about a variety of relationships that matter. So, I invite you now to listen to God’s word to you:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. 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. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. 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. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

When I was in high school, I was on the track team even though I didn’t like running and wasn’t very fast. I was a mediocre middle distance runner and a part of the relay teams. That’s the way it sometimes works in a small school. So, not only did we condition in various ways, we also spent a lot of time practicing passing the baton because that is where the most time is lost in a relay race. And if you drop the baton, the race is over. The race is lost. You simply cannot underestimate the significance of passing the baton.
Friends, you and I are engaged in a race. It’s a life-long journey of faith as individuals in “Becoming Like Christ Together for the World.” But it’s more than that. It is also a relay race, and we are meant to pass the baton to others. We cannot underestimate the significance of nurturing relationships that matter—those that enable us to pass the kingdom baton from one generation to the next. It’s not very complicated. It’s what Pastor Pete says at the conclusion of every funeral he leads. There are only three things that really matter: faith, family, friends.

The Apostle Paul writes to Timothy saying, “I am reminded of your sincere faith….For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Timothy 1:5-6).

Our number one priority in life is meant to be our faith: Nothing is more important than someone’s relationship with God. In this passage, Paul reminds Timothy of his faith in God and the gift he had been given for his life and calling. Paul urges Timothy to rekindle or “fan into flame” the fire burning within him. A fire that is not given fuel will eventually burn out. Many fires of faith burn out because of lack of attention and lack of intention.

We all need fuel for the fire of our faith, and practices like scripture, prayer, silence and solitude, Sabbath, retreats, and so on help to keep that fire burning. Understand that spiritual disciplines are not the fire. Our faith is a gift of God’s grace. The Holy Spirit is present and working in our lives. Spiritual disciplines are simply ways we attend to the fire and intentionally do what we can to feed the fire’s flames. Simply put, spiritual disciplines are the means of participating with God so that our faith continues to burn brightly.

So, it’s time again for true confessions. As many of you know, I will be going on sabbatical in just a few weeks, and I have a lot to do to wind some things up before I leave. So, in the last two weeks, I have caught myself saying over and over again “I’m too busy to take three days to serve on the Great Banquet weekend. I have too much to do to take a Sabbath. I don’t have time for devotions; I need to get to work.” But as I resisted the temptation to do more work and chose instead to do these
disciplines, I experienced the fire of God’s unconditional love, grace, and power strengthening me for my life and ministry.

I share my experience simply to say we never get past needing to remind ourselves that, “Nothing is more important than someone’s relationship with God,” and we always need to be intentional about fanning into flame the gift of God within us. Do you really believe that? Do you live like that is true? If so, to what spiritual practice is God calling you to rekindle the fire or fan the flame of faith within?

Another relationship that matters is the family. In verse 5 Paul writes, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice...” Timothy’s grandmother and mother were both converts from Judaism and are described as devout women. Calvin makes the delightful comment that Timothy “was reared in his infancy in such a way that he could suck in godliness along with his mother’s milk.”

No one has more potential to influence a child’s relationship with God than a parent. Most parents want what is best for their children, and we expend much time and energy trying to ensure they have every opportunity. But we can become so distracted in muchness and manyness that we forget or at least neglect what is most important in life. We can delegate lessons in piano, math, and baseball to teachers, tutors, and coaches, but we cannot delegate the responsibility of making disciples of our children. Families are the primary vehicle for making disciples, and parents are the primary disciple-makers.

Here are three suggestions I believe are key to making disciples of our children—how to practice passing the baton.

1) Cultivate your own faith knowing that the best thing you can bring to your children is your own transforming self. We’ve already covered this, but just realize you can’t help your children live the good life—the abundant life in Christ—unless you walk the talk and live it yourself.
2) If you are married, cultivate your marriage. After your own relationship with God, there is no better gift you can give your children than a vital, healthy marriage. I confess I find this really hard to do in the midst of the demands of work and family responsibilities, but I know it’s true from reading, research, and my own personal experience. Make time for your marriage.

3) Cultivate life together as a family that includes sharing meals together, spending time with God by reading the word and praying together, serving in ministry together, even being in a small group together. There are so many things individuals are involved in, but we need to ensure that we as families are spending quality and quantity time together.

Who has time for that? Remember how I said I practiced passing the baton over and over again. Sometimes it felt like a real time-sucker. Cultivating healthy family patterns for life and faith can feel the same way. But remember: No one has more potential to influence a child’s relationship with God than a parent. What you do and how you do it and the frequency with which you do it matters in shaping a soul and passing the baton of faith to the next generation.

Parents are not the only ones who are needed to pass the kingdom baton to the next generation. There is an old African proverb that says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Actually, it has always been God’s idea that children grow up in the context of a loving family and a larger community of faith—the church.

I’m not sure we can fully appreciate the role that Paul played in Timothy’s faith journey. Did you catch the introduction at the beginning of the passage? Paul writes, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my beloved child:” Timothy is Paul’s beloved son in the Lord.

Friends, everyone needs to be connected to a caring leader or mentor. Every one of us needs a wise, more mature mentor in our lives, especially when we are young in years or young in faith. You may recall that even
the great Saint Paul himself had a mentor in Barnabas, who was the first person to take a risk on Paul—that fanatical, persecuting Pharisee who turned to Jesus.

Research studies have proven that one of the most significant factors in the faith development of youth is a relationship with another adult who is not a parent. Young people need other adult voices beside their parents. This is normal and healthy. If they don’t have that, they will rely too heavily on peer relationships for the wisdom, guidance, and direction that needs to come from adults.

The last few weeks, I have been teaching on the stages of faith in Growing Your Soul groups, and I was reminded again of the life-changing impact two women had on my life during my college years. They passed the baton to me as God used them to mentor, disciple, and equip me for life and ministry. Even now as pastor, I talk regularly with a spiritual director who is further along in the journey; this relationship helps me to attend to what God is doing in my life now.

But the flip side of the coin is also important when it comes to needing friends. Everyone is called to “become like Christ” by leading or mentor-ing others. This is an important dynamic that is meant to happen in the body of believers. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:2: “What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.”

Paul, who was mentored by Barnabas, went on to mentor—not only Timothy, but Titus, and Silas, and others, as well. And in this passage he calls Timothy to pass the baton to faithful people who will be able to teach others also. Paul provides this picture of spiritual reproduction and multiplication.

This is often where the baton gets dropped because so many of us do not think of ourselves as leaders. Perhaps it is because we have a culturally-shaped idea of what that looks like. But there are many different kinds of leaders based not on roles and responsibilities, but based on the maturity that comes with grace, truth, and time and the wisdom that comes only with life experience.
In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer writes: “Leadership” is a concept we often resist. It seems immodest, even self-aggrandizing, to think of ourselves as leaders. But if it is true that we are made for community, then leadership is everyone’s vocation, and it can be an evasion to insist that it is not. When we live in the close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone follows and everyone leads.”

Like a relay race, the pass is the critical event in the church. Everyone needs to be connected to a caring leader or mentor. And everyone is called to lead and mentor others. As Pete has often said, the church is only one generation away from extinction. Friends, the gospel baton has been passed to us; we are responsible for passing the faith on to a next generation.

As many of you know, Family Ministry is one of our strategic goals, and because we are in the midst of so much staff transition, we have designed a new family ministry structure to be led by the Director of Family Ministry. That search committee is already under way. But listen to me now. This goal does not mean that we as a church care only about family units with children or students at home. It is about two entities (parents and the church) partnering to make a greater impact to reach the next generation. At a baptism, we make promises as members of the congregation to be a part of nurturing those being baptized, whether they are children, youth, or adults. Not just as parents but together as Christ’s body, we are called to pass the baton to the next generation.

I want to talk briefly about what it looks like to pass this baton on in our Faith Community: as we are “Becoming Like Christ *Together* for the World.” Some years ago, I heard Rick Osborne, a professor from Princeton, speak. He talked about how important it is to find and cultivate not only relationships of faith in God, family, and friends but a deeper experience of community within the larger church that helps us to experience and live our faith in Christ.

Again, Paul is our model here. Paul’s home base was Antioch. This is the place where his own faith was nurtured and developed, and it was a place where he was known and accepted. After his missionary journeys,
this is where he would return. Within this community, Paul had a small group of peers, a kind of leadership team that worked, prayed, and discerned God’s will with one another. It was in the context of this group that God directed the community to set aside Barnabas and Paul for their missionary work (Acts 13:1-3).

But Paul also had mission fields—for example, Macedonia. You may recall from Acts how Paul wanted to go to Ephesus but the Holy Spirit prevented him. He had a vision of a man begging him to come to Macedonia (Acts 16:9, 10). When Paul sailed for Macedonia, he was heading for unfamiliar territory.

We are called to share the journey of “becoming like Christ together” with others. Like Paul, we too need an Antioch, a home base. Certainly we need to be attached to a local congregation, but we also need a small group of peers where we are known in-depth, loved unconditionally, and supported as needed through the ups and downs of life. If we don’t have this kind of group, then we are really missing out on the kind of relationships that matter and the experience of community that God intends for us to have. Many of us have several of these kinds of groups. In fact, because of our individualistic and independent culture, we can become addicted to groups because of our deep need and hunger for relationships.

But it may be that God is calling us to a different kind of context where we can fulfill the other aspect of our mission: serving together for the world. Again, like Paul, we need to find a Macedonia or a mission field, because what is really needed in our own personal walk is to move to a place of service where we find ourselves moving outside of our comfort zone. We all need a Macedonia, the place where we suspect God wants us to go—further than any place we’ve have been before. For most of us, it’s probably not an actual place far away, but relationships and opportunities close at hand help us to take the next step of growth for ourselves and help bring someone else along and so pass the baton.

- It could mean investing in relationships with children, youth, or young adults in our congregation or investing in relationships with children of friends.
- Or God might be calling you to opportunities outside the church as
you serve as a coach or scout leader or alongside one of our mission partners or another organization.

- All of us can practice the art of neighboring as we love those in our neighborhood as we talked about earlier this year.

The truth is that some of us feel more comfortable in growth groups while others feel more comfortable serving in ministry contexts. But the truth is we need both. There is an inward and an outward aspect of our journey with Christ, and we need a balanced spirituality.

Our mission is “Becoming Like Christ Together for the World.” Today, I am challenging you to think about relationships that matter because they serve as a link between the two aspects of our mission. We are to “become like Christ together.” And we are to serve together for the world. As I said before, we cannot underestimate the significance of relationships that matter that enable us to pass the baton to the next generation.

So what? How do you apply this sermon? Do you have a spiritual growth plan that incorporates relationships with faith, family, and friends?

- What are the personal practices that are fanning the flame in your relationship with God?
- What are the practices that you intentionally do together in your family that enable you to make disciples of your children?
- Do you have a mentor or a small group, an Antioch community? What are the relationships that help you to grow in God where you are known, loved, and supported? If not, how might you find such a group?
- What is your mission field or Macedonian community or a people you are mentoring or discipling? To whom are you passing the kingdom baton?

We are in a transition time as we begin to wind up a school year and program year here at church and head into summer. I am asking myself these questions in relationship to the coming year. And I want urge you to do the same—because we are involved in a relay race. You have the baton, and God is calling you to pass it on.