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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/2/2016, The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 27
2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon this morning begins with praise of a grandmother. Her name is Lois. We read of her in this morning's Epistle Lesson. St. Paul is writing to his younger colleague Timothy and speaks of Timothy's grandmother:

⁵I 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. (2 Timothy 1:5, RSV)

When my wife, Carol, was a young woman coming here to New York City from her Midwestern college for a year of study, her grandmother, Margaret, prayed for her every day. For many of us, we were helped along in Christian faith and life by our grandparents — either our biological grandparents or grandparents-in-the-faith who rather took us in under their wings.

At this past summer's NALC Convocation one of the inspiring presentations was by a youth worker named Gary Pecuch. He and his, Laurie, are seasoned youth workers at St. John's Lutheran Church in Grove City, Ohio. Gary and Laurie have been working at youth ministry for a long time, and in their presentations, they shared with us something of what they had learned. Immanuel's lay representative, Andrea Persaud, and Carol and I especially enjoyed this particular presentation.

They told the story of Laurie as a teenager — how Laurie was shy in her junior high school years. But there was a grown-up in the congregation, named, Robert, who always made it his business to greet Laurie. He would walk across the sanctuary to her pew and say to her, "Good morning, Laurie. It's good to see you. I'm glad you're here."¹ At first, when Robert greeted her, Laurie would lower her head, mumble a few words of greeting, and turn away to avoid further conversation. But Robert never failed to greet her, and bit by bit, she began to look forward to his greetings. Robert became her grandfather in the Lord. As they grew older, they became dear to one another. What Robert had done in his steady practice of greeting Laurie was to say to her, "I care about you." And Laurie came to think of her congregation that way. A congregation is made up people who care about you. A congregation is

¹ Gary and Laurie Pecuch, *Faith Webbing* (Xulon Press, 2013), page 1.

made up of people like Lois and Eunice in our Epistle Lesson — people of sincere faith, who help pass on that faith to the next generations.

I cherish the memory of my mother and father, my grandmother and grandfather. I do not consider the Christian thoughts and ways of elderly Christians to be unimportant. I reckon that they too read their Bibles and tried to walk with Christ. I imagine that they had some wisdom we would do well to ponder. Let us care about the convictions of our ancestors in the faith. Let us try to stay in unity with them. Let us yearn even to somehow be in unity with St. Paul and all the apostles. Let's try to fit humbly within the vast Communion of Saints. We do not need to be newfangled Christians. We do not need to be a new breed of Christian. I do not want St. Timothy's grandmother, Lois, for example, to look on at me from heaven and grieve that I have strayed away from the ancient faith of the church.

Let me go on a bit about Timothy's grandmother, Lois. We know little about her from the Bible, except that St. Paul reports that she had a "sincere faith." But how she arrived at that faith, and what it cost her to be true to that faith, we do not know. So let's simply think about her in human terms.

Compared to Timothy, she is old — a grandmother. This means that she has experienced much of life. But what she has known of life has not led her to give up on her Christian faith. Life has brought its fair share of joys and heartaches to her, no doubt, but she has not relinquished her faith in Jesus. St. Paul himself speaks of her sincere faith.

She must have become a Christian in the early days of the church, when faith in Jesus was still new on earth and those who followed Christ were a definite minority. She bore whatever sense of strangeness was involved in that. She had learned of Jesus, had come to love him, and chose to live for him, however odd that made her in the eyes of her friends. Who knows the burdens she bore in order to remain true to Christ? Her family might have disowned her. Smart people could out-argue her. Mean people could humiliate her. People of high morality could claim that they did not need Jesus, and so why does she? And all she could answer is that she had heard about Jesus and her heart went out to him. She had walked with him through many a year and had not regretted a thing.

So Lois had come to Christ in the early days of the church and had continued in her faith – in her sincere faith - whatever life had brought her. Now, St. Paul asks Timothy to be strengthened by her example:

⁵I 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. (2 Timothy 1:5, RSV)

Why do you suppose St. Paul speaks of Lois and Eunice? Why does St. Paul remind Timothy of the faith of his mother and grandmother? There are hints

in our text that suggest that Paul senses about Timothy that his courage is faltering. The apostle speaks of a “spirit of timidity.” Timothy is not to be timid. The young church cannot afford that. St. Paul is getting older. He is entrusting his apostolic authority to young Timothy. He does not want the young man to squander that authority through fear. So he calls Timothy to “rekindle” something within him. The image is of a fire that once burned bright, but has dimmed. Perhaps it will go out. St. Paul does not want that for Timothy and so he urges him to burn again:

⁶Hence I remind you to *rekindle* the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.

I do not blame Timothy if he should be afraid. Jesus himself was frightened in the Garden of Gethsemane. If Jesus could be frightened, so could young Timothy as he pondered the path before him.

And in a way, St. Paul does not make it easy for the young man. Later in this same letter, the apostle speaks as if he knows that his own time is running out. The tradition teaches that St. Paul died the death of a martyr. There is a moving passage in this letter to Timothy which suggests that Paul knows his end is near. I bet you will recognize the words. St. Paul writes this to Timothy:

⁶For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: (2 Timothy 4:6-7, KJV)

It is as if St. Paul is saying to Timothy: If you are afraid, then you do well, for you have reason to be afraid. Our Lord was but speaking the truth when he called upon us to take our cross and follow him. *Your* fears might indeed come true. *My* fears are coming true. I am not long for this world. I have tried to stand up for Christ, but I sense that my end is near. It might be so for you too, Timothy. Even so, I urge you to burn again for Christ. Rekindle within you the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Do not let fear douse your love, your power, your ministry, your life in Christ.

I am fascinated by Paul’s word “rekindle.” Like blowing on the embers of a dying campfire. Put some kindling in place. Gently breathe on it. The embers might catch fire again. If you can lay on some logs, the campfire might burn again. And if the weather is wintry and bitter, that rekindled fire might save a life.



In this morning's Gospel Lesson, Jesus reassures his disciples that even a little bit of faith is sufficient for the tasks before us. The disciples have asked for an increase of faith. They have been following and listening to Jesus for a good while. Now they put it all together and speak of faith. Jesus has spoken of the millstone – how it would be better to have a millstone hung round the neck and to be cast into the depths of the sea than that we should lead a little one into sin (Luke 17:2). He has spoken of the necessity of forgiveness:

“...if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; ⁴and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘I repent,’ you *must* forgive him.” (Luke 17:3-4, RSV)

The disciples have pondered these sayings of our Lord, and it drives them to cry out for some more faith:

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5, RSV)

This, in turn, leads Jesus to speak of the sufficiency of faith – even a little bit of faith:

⁶And the Lord said, “If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, ‘Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” (Luke 17:6, RSV)

Well, judging by St. Paul's letter to Timothy, the old apostle feels that his young colleague does indeed have faith at least the size of a grain of mustard seed. Now, he must let it grow. He must “rekindle” his faith. He must let it burn again, because the church and the world need him to be hot for the Lord.

You all have faith in Jesus. I am quite sure you do. Your presence here in the liturgy is evidence of your faith. You might think your faith is small, but even if it be so small it is hard to see, like some tiny mustard seed, still your faith can lead you into good adventures in the name of Jesus. Faith is like leaven. It wants to grow, to permeate your life, to saturate your soul, if you will give it a chance. And even if it should remain small and hard for you to perceive in yourself, fear not, your faith is sufficient for the day. You need not fall away from Jesus. Or better, you are free to go ahead and live for him today. In face of temptation, in face of the doctor, in face even of death, you are free to trust in Jesus. Your faith is big enough for that. And that is a

wonderful thing. That will prove a blessing for your neighbors, for the church, for the cause of Christ, for your yourself, in the name of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever.