

Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 20-25
September 20, 2015

2 Timothy 1:1-7; 1 Timothy 4:11-16
Christian Education Rally Day
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

“GOOD STEWARDS OF GOD’S GRACE”
A LIVING FAITH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court Stephen Breyer was interviewed on Wednesday’s edition of The Diane Rehm Show. A listener named Berkley in Scranton, Pennsylvania e-mailed these questions for Justice Breyer: “What are your thoughts on members of the court serving as public intellectuals? Do you think it’s harmful in demystifying what has been seen as the most secluded branch of government, or do you think it helps the American people better understand our judicial process?”

Justice Breyer gave an interesting answer when he said, “I agree with the questioner that it’s terribly important for us, and for lawyers and for others, to explain to people what it is that the court does. And I’ll talk to high school students, we all talk to many, many groups, and we’re continuously trying to explain what the court does. And still it’s something of a mystery to people, which it shouldn’t be. So how do we do that?”

“The risk is if you don’t do it with care, you’ll be seen as the Constitution according to Breyer, or the Constitution according to O’Connor, or the Constitution according to somebody else. That’s not the job. Judges wear black robes because in fact they’re speaking with the anonymity of the law, and what people want to understand and the work of the court ultimately, we’re interpreting the Constitution period.

“We’re not individualists, and we shouldn’t be individualists. The job doesn’t call for that. But it does call for explanation. So how do we reconcile those two things? One way, we hope, talk to people when you have the chance, occasionally maybe write a book, ***occasionally try to talk to that audience of the next generation and the generation after that.***”¹

Justice Breyer’s comment made me think about the Old Testament verses Dr. Joell read a few minutes ago, “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. . . . When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.’” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, 20-21)

On Tuesday I had the privilege and honor of attending the Fall Convocation and Commissioning service at the Campbell University School of Divinity in Buies Creek.

Rev. Lauren Deer invited me to attend, along with Wallace Police Chief Tray Giddeons. Lauren has begun a three-year program of study for her Doctor of Ministry degree and has asked me to be her supervisor/mentor.

Near the end of the wonderful worship service, the Dean and Associate Dean of the Divinity School presented the incoming Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry students with Celtic cross pins. As each student's name was called, his or her hometown and home church were named. The people who were there in support of the student were asked to stand. As I watched many different groups of people stand, I wondered about the roles they had played in the lives of the students. Were they parents? Pastors? Sunday School teachers? Youth group advisors? Trusted friends? Spiritual guides? Members of churches? Deacons and elders? Who had recited the stories about God and his power and might and grace and love and mercy in Jesus Christ to these students? With whom will these incoming students share the Good News in the days, months, and years to come?

Today's sermon on this Christian Education Rally Day is the second in a series of seven sermons on Stewardship, under the over-arching theme of "Good Stewards of God's Grace." It is tempting and dangerous to think of "stewardship" only in terms of dollars and cents or the budget bottom line. Certainly how we use our money and other material resources is an important part of our Christian stewardship. And, yes, that will be in the sermon mix in a few weeks.

However, Christian stewardship involves all of life. Today we highlight our Christian Education program and install and commission our Christian Education leaders for the coming year. We celebrate the abundance of spiritual gifts God has blessed our church with through the men and women who will stand before you in a few minutes. They will dedicate themselves to be Christ's faithful disciples, to show Christ's love, and to serve God's people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. In return, you will be asked to confirm God's call in their lives in the service of Jesus Christ and to support and encourage them in their ministry of Christian education.

Again, Moses encouraged God's people to share with their children and with one another the great foundational truth of their faith and life together as a community: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them."

Lois and Eunice took Moses' words to heart. They kept those words in their hearts. They recited them to their grandson and son, Timothy. They talked to the audience of the next generation and told him, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand." We might say Lois and Eunice "traditioned" the faith for Timothy. And, in his two letters to Timothy, the apostle Paul recognizes and gives thanks for Timothy's "traditioned" faith when he writes, "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." (2 Timothy 1:5)

But Paul is not content to let Timothy rest or rely only on the faith of his grandmother and mother. Instead, he goes on to encourage Timothy with these words, “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.” (2 Timothy 1:6-7)

Last Sunday morning, by the lake at Camp Kirkwood, I held eight-month-old Lane Philip Rouse in my arms and baptized him “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Lane Philip was baptized in the hope that one day he will claim God’s covenant promises for himself and make his own profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Before I put the water on Lane Philip’s head, his mom and dad answered some questions and took some vows to set before him an example of the new life in Christ and to bring him up in the knowledge and love of God. Then Lane Philip’s grandmother, Georgia, asked the gathered congregation to commit to guide and nurture Lane Philip by word and deed, with love and prayer, to encourage him to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his church. All of this is part of our Christian stewardship of life, of the gifts God has freely given us in Jesus Christ and through God’s Holy Spirit.

Today we will install and commission men and women who have heeded God’s call in their hearts and God’s claim on their lives to tell the story to the next generation. The session carefully and prayerfully makes opportunities available for all of us to “tradition” the faith to the next generation. Joell, Mary Laine, Andrea, Danielle, Lydia, Tracey, and Nell will commit themselves to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in Sunday School classes from nursery through 12th grade. Jenna is committing herself to work with other adults in our congregation as she directs a weekly Youth Ministry for our 6th - 12th graders. Many adults are here on Wednesday nights, ready and willing and eager to share God’s love and the gospel with kindergartners through 5th graders in our LOGOS program.

Parents, I encourage you to share your children with these dedicated leaders on Sunday mornings and evenings and Wednesday nights. This is an important part of your Christian stewardship as you seek to be good stewards of God’s gift of your children in your family and in our church family. It has often been said that the Christian church is just one generation away from extinction. That has always been true! Timothy wasn’t a first-generation Christian. He learned his faith from his grandmother and mother. Then again, Timothy wasn’t a last-generation Christian. He rekindled the gift of God as he shared the gospel with others. As someone has pointed out, when you tend a fire, you don’t poke it one time and sit back. If you do, the flame will die out and the fire will go cold. No, when you tend a fire, you are constantly poking, prodding, rearranging the wood and coals, and adding more logs to the fire. That way you get more warmth and light. So it is with our tending the fire which is God’s gifts of the gospel and new life in Christ.

Today’s Christian Education Rally Day is not just about or only for our children and youth. You’ll notice the list of Christian Education Leaders includes the names of

teachers of three adult Sunday School classes. I encourage you and invite you to get involved in one of these classes on Sunday mornings. There is also the Wednesday morning Bible study, the Tuesday morning SonRise worship service, and Presbyterian Men and Presbyterian Women Bible studies monthly. Just as Paul wasn't willing to let Timothy rely on his grandmother's and mother's faith — or even the faith he received as a child — we can't be willing to rest on something we learned long ago. As our final hymn puts it, "I love to tell the story, for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it, like the rest."

If we're going to take seriously and fulfill the vows we make when a child is baptized in our church — "to encourage him or her to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his church" — we all need to tend the fire of faith and the gift God has given us. If we are going to "tradition" the faith to the next generation, we need to continue to grow in our own faith and learn how the living word continues to speak to us throughout our lives.

Not too long ago, I added a quote to my quote journal from a theologian named Jaroslave Pelikan. Here is the quote: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." This week I read some more about Pelikan's comment and found there was another sentence that speaks to our Christian stewardship of God's Word: "Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide."² Another person has put it this way: "The past is made alive and powerful for the present so that it can shape the future."

In other words, Paul reminded Timothy to remember his roots and his grounding in the faith. He also urged Timothy to be diligent in kindling that faith and the gift God had given him. Last Sunday, I asked folks to think about particular people in this congregation and the spiritual gifts they have and faithfully use in this church and community and for the glory of God. This morning I ask you to think about the people who "traditioned the faith" for you — grandparents, parents, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, pastors, circle leaders, friends, mentors. Thank God for these faithful people!

We serve a living God who has given us his living Word so we can have a living faith. But there is always the danger of having the "dead faith of the living." One day some Sadducees tried to trap Jesus by posing a hypothetical situation about the resurrection from the dead. Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. . . And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living." (Matthew 22:29, 31-32)

In a commentary on Paul's letter to Timothy about "traditioning" the faith, one writer applies Paul's encouraging advice to us in the church today: "If we are going to recover the Christian tradition in the contemporary world, we cannot proceed timidly, but must stir up this flame, this gift of God, this spirit of power constrained by love and guided by a sound mind."³

Friends, like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, let us stoke the fire of faith in our own lives so we can tradition the faith to the next generation.

NOTES

¹Stephen Breyer, “The Court and the World: American Law and the New Global Realities,” on The Diane Rehm Show, Wednesday, September 16, 2015 at www.thedianerehmshow.org.

²Jaroslave Pelikan published a book in 1984 called *The Vindication of Tradition*. The quote comes from a 1989 interview in *U.S. News & World Report*.

³Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 33.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have created us as human beings who mature from infancy, through childhood and adolescence into adulthood. Today we celebrate that growth as we remember our role as learners, seekers, and teachers of the faith. Bless our times of study that we may grow in faith. Bless our times of fellowship that we may truly live as brothers and sisters. Bless our times of prayer and worship that we may be enriched in our spirits; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.