

**March 27th 3rd Sunday in Lent**

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

**2 Timothy 1:1-14**

**The Rev Melissa DeRosia**

I remember her vividly. Sixth pew from the front, on the right side of the sanctuary. She sat by herself, in the same pew every Sunday. I can still see her silvery white hair and bright smile that she would share with me when as a child I would peak over my place in the third pew on the left side of the sanctuary.

I would smile back and steal a glance at her lapel to see if she wore the button she had fastened to her jackets every time I saw her. Each Sunday the color and style of the jacket changed, but the button stayed the same. There was a picture of a dove and the words "Peace takes courage."

As worship continued I heard her voice during the Prayers of the People. She gave voice to the escalating violence in the Middle East and spoke against the ways our government trained Latin American combat soldiers and provided weapons to them to wage war against their own people.

In the fellowship hall after church I heard her asking others to join her at peace rallies or marches.

She was the first to step forward to serve as an elder on session, lead liturgy on a Sunday morning, participate on a committee, or teach Vacation Bible School.

Many disagreed with her politics, but few could argue with the sincere faith that she lived.

Though I only knew her from our brief interactions on a Sunday morning, she came to my ordination service. Afterward she gave me this great big hug and whispered in my ear, "Since you were a child, I've been praying for you."

This woman was my Eunice.

Who is yours?

Think about who was or is for you a Eunice or Lois. What was this person's name?

Picture what they look like.

While the author of this letter to Timothy recalls Timothy's mother and grandmother as those people, there might be a particular woman or man not related to you that you feel lives the Christian faith.

I'm not talking just about the faith of ideas, of learning Bible stories, creeds or denominational polity. While important, there is more to what the author is getting at than whether or not someone has the books of the Bible memorized, can quote John Calvin, cite the 70<sup>th</sup> question from the Heidelberg Catechism... or for that matter know what the Heidelberg Catechism is...

The faith that the author of this letter and prayer to the young pastor Timothy emphasizes was a faith of action, of flesh and blood. It was the extraordinary beauty and power of the glory of God living and shining in ordinary people.

Stanely Hauerwas and William Willimon write that the "The manner in which most of us become Christian is by looking over someone else's shoulder, emulating some admired older Christian, saying yes to and taking up a way of life that was made real and

accessible through the witness of someone else.” (Resident Aliens-Stanley Hauerwas & William Willimon)

So how has faith been made real to you? “You” as individuals but also “you” in plural, which us “northerners” still don’t have a good word for. Southerner’s of course have “ya’ll” and “you’se guys” well... we’ll let the Canadians keep that. But I digress...

How has the community of Gates Presbyterian Church journeyed together by living the faith God has blessed us with and passed it a long through the generations.

For centuries, people received their faith from their parents—they didn’t have much choice—you became a Roman Catholic, a Greek Orthodox, a Protestant, a Jew, a Muslim—because you were brought up in that tradition.

But that’s not so much the case now. How many of you are here today because your parents were Presbyterian? Going through bulletins and newsletters of this church that date back to the early 1900’s there are a few last names that I recognize and would be safe in guessing that the subsequent generations remain here, but for the majority of this congregation the Eunice and the Lois aren’t biologically related to us.

In many ways, our times are more like those of the early church, in which Christianity competed with many different religions and traditions, than they are like the religious landscape of 100 years ago.

Demographics in congregations have shifted, mainline denominations struggle to reach out to our culture in a relevant way, the Christian church as whole has lost its position of power in American society. We may not see the differences we are making in the lives of subsequent generations. It is easy to become cynical, to idealize a moment in time when the world seemed “better” when people appeared “stronger” when religion was something we were proud of or shamed others for. It seems easier these days to pass

along our cynicism about the future or younger generations than it is to pass along love and practices of authentic relationship with one another and with God.

How easily we forget that for two thousand years parents have told their children, and children of their children, about the love of God in Christ Jesus. For two thousand years the Gospel has been handed down from generation to generation to generation by saints and sinners who dared to tell and live the old, old story of Jesus and God's love. The faith we hold is the faith we received from generations before us, faith shaped by those generations and continually reshaped in us, faith now entrusted to our care and nurture to strengthen and guide our lives and the lives of generations to come through prayer and practice.

That is not to say that the Christian faith is static or unchanging. The Word of the Lord is not frozen in time; it was inspired at its writing and continues to be inspired in its reading and study across the years. The discoveries of science, the lessons of history, the light of reason, the guidance of tradition, and our own experiences of God inform our reading of Scripture and its interpretation. Our God is a dynamic God who continues to work in us and through us today. We experience God not only in reliving the stories of the Bible, but also in living day to day.

In his book entitled, "Reclaiming the Bible, Words for the Nineties," Robert McAfee Brown and his wife, Sydney Thompson, recount a story from a trip they took to the Philippines that included a two hour worship service in a language they did not understand. At all.

In fact, there was only one word in the entire service they could recognize. It was the Tagalog (Tu-GAH-log) word for holy. "Banal."

And Robert Brown thought, at first, that “it made no sense. The holy and the banal should be opposites—two different things.” Because in English the use of this word means “common.”

What they came to realize was something very different. They tell the story:

“There, the holy—the manifestation of God—was found right there in the midst of the banal, the ordinary, the obvious. The holy was present in people taking risks, groups working for justice, providing help for AIDS victims, women engaged in ministry to prostitutes..., congregational interventions to the government for the wrongly imprisoned. It was in the midst of the stuff of everyday life, the banal...

And our struggle is now to make the connections that seemed so obvious...

*(Robert McAfee Brown, Reclaiming the Bible: Words for the Nineties. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994. Pages 94-95.)*

Connecting the wonder of the spiritual experience to the very down-to-earth realities of our journey of faith through prayer and practice here at Gates Presbyterian Church.

Not only the gifts of time, energy, and resources that we give to the mission and ministry of the church but offering who we are and the faith we live. To be the Eunice, to be the Lois and pass on to future generations a sincere faith that comes from the Holy Spirit living in us.

We gather here today in a particularly connected way. As friends and generations of a family of faith called to be Gates Presbyterian Church.

We gather with the communion of saints, all those who have gone before us, loved and known, unknown and loved by God, all the same. For Timothy, it is Lois and Eunice. For me it is the lady with the “Peace Takes Courage” button...

Your names.

Our names.

Those who have come before.

And those who are still to come.

We will continue to live and share the faith we have through the practice of authentic relationship with one another and with God. We continue to pray with our lives on this journey as Christian community in the world today. Thanks be to God.