

Sermon: The Gift That Is Within You
Text: II Timothy 1:1-7
Date: November 6, 2016
Context: WWPC
All Saints Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

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.

II Timothy 1:5

Growing up, they always told me that God has no grandchildren. By “they” I mean my Sunday school teachers at the Evangelical Free Church that my family attended when I was a child.

And by “no grandchildren” what they meant is that you don’t inherit faith. More specifically in my teachers’ view, you don’t inherit the right to get into heaven. You are either born again by intentionally accepting Jesus into your heart as your savior, or you are doomed for eternity.

For them it really was that simple, and that serious. What’s more, they made it clear to all of us eight year-olds that this decision was entirely up to each one of us, individually.

I’ll confess that to my young mind, this was certainly a powerfully motivating theory, which is perhaps why I was so quick to invite Jesus into my heart, and why *The B-I-B-L-E, Yes That’s the Book for Me*, was my favorite song as a child. Seemed like a type of fire insurance.

The problem is that as theory’s go, this one is not true. At least not according to the passage I just read a moment ago:

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.

It's also not true in the experience of so many of us here today. How many of you would say that the faith that lives in you, first lived in your grandmother, or your mother?

Me too. My mom was the first and best saint I ever met. Perfect? Absolutely not. Faithful? Absolutely so.

In fairness I'm happy to say that my Sunday school teachers were earnest people. Their theology was different than mine is now, certainly, but they were the ones who first introduced me to the great stories of the Bible, a priceless inheritance that is still paying dividends for me.

And today, as we approach the end of our season of Celebration and Gratitude, we want to celebrate and give thanks for our own Sunday school teachers. As Darrell and Mary Fran reminded us earlier, the second goal in our ministry plan is to Enhance Faith Development and Spiritual Nurture.

And we're grateful for everyone who has helped us and will help us achieve that goal. That said, at the end of the day, it was my mom who first taught me what faith looks like in practice.

Yes, as an adult, I made a conscious distinction to claim as my own the faith that was revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ. But she is the one who first gave it to me.

So, yes, mine is the exact same legacy of which Paul speaks in this passage, the same kind so many of you have experienced— *I am reminded of your sincere faith . . . that lived first in your grandmother . . . and your mother . . . and now, I am sure, lives in you.*

And it's why we make space in our own liturgical calendar every year to honor those who have gone before us, in part because in many cases, we're here today because of them.

I was talking to a friend about this service today, and about what it means that it falls on the Sunday before the national election.

In light of how much stress and anxiety so many of us are feeling about what might happen on Tuesday, the question was whether to recalibrate our service and shift the focus of the liturgy.

Maybe the music and the sermon should center less on the saints who've gone before us, and more on something that speaks peace to the anxiety we are feeling, and offers hope in a time of fear and uncertainty.

Clearly this was a legitimate question. But I'm glad to say that Nadia Bolz-Weber helped answer it decisively for me.

In her marvelous but rather salty book, *Accidental Saints*, she tells the story of how her preparations for the Advent season in 2012 were brutally interrupted by the terrible mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Obviously that event shook her deeply, as it did all of us. And it threatened to cast a mournful shadow over the entire Christmas season.

But instead of leaning away from the horror and the suffering, and trying to create a false sense of hope and joy, she leaned into it.

She writes: "Christmas is a story of alienation, political tyranny, homelessness, working-class people, pagans and angels . . . We've lost the plot if we use religion as the place where we escape from difficult realities instead of as the place where those difficult realities are given meaning . . . Church was never meant to be a place for escapism," (this and all subsequent quotes from *Accidental Saints*, pg. 73 and following).

The question for Nadia was what this real-world approach to church looks like in practice. And even more, what does it look like when it is tested? She was about to find out.

The Advent season progressed, and as she was preparing the service of Lessons and Carols, she had an idea.

"We're adding a reading tonight," she declared to her colleague, Alex. The idea was simple but poignant, even a little brave.

In honor of the children who died at Sandy Hook, she wanted to read one of the hardest passages in all of scripture: the so-called Slaughter of the Innocents, a story about how Herod went berserk and had all the Jewish male babies under two killed when he heard that a potential challenger to his throne had been born in Israel.

But this reading was only part of her plan. So Nadia went on to explain the full idea to Alex:

“During the prayers of the people let’s read the names of the twenty-six teachers and children who died. We’ll ring a bell after each.”

“You mean twenty-seven?” [Alex] replied.

“I’m sorry, what’s that?” she asked.

“Adam Lanza. The shooter. He died too.”

The comment stunned Nadia. She immediately recoiled at the thought of including the name of the perpetrator along with the names of his victims. But seeing no obvious way out, she relented.

“Fine,” she said. “But I’m registering my opposition to God’s grace.”

“I’m sure God will be super hurt about it,” Alex replied.

I’ll let Nadia tell the story of what happened next in her own words:

Two days later, when we stood in front of the congregation, Alex solemnly struck a bell for each of the names of the dead teachers and children.

“Charlotte Bacon, six,” [Nadia said, citing young Charlotte’s age]. A bell rang.

“Daniel Barden, seven.” Another bell.

“Olivia Engel, six.” The vibration from each bell felt as though it were shaking my insides.

I couldn’t read the final name right away because it took me a minute to reach deep enough into my theological convictions in order to find the mercy to do so.

If I couldn’t . . . speak the truth that God came to save us, all of us, that God created us in God’s image and that lives we’d rather extinguish are still precious to their maker . . . then I really had no business being a preacher that day. So I dug deep to speak the truth of God.

“And in obedience to your command to love the enemy and to pray for those who persecute us” my voice cracked as if the courage were draining out of it – “Adam Lanza, twenty.”

The final bell rang.

Turns out, that’s what a real-world approach to church looks like in practice. My version of this experience was not nearly so intense, but it happened just the other day.

I was on my way in to the office when a big black pickup came roaring past me. In the back window was a decal of an assault rifle, the new icon of the so-called alt right. Flying from a pole clamped to the bed of the truck was a confederate flag, and let’s be honest – also an icon.

The back window also declared in large block letters the campaign slogan we’ve heard repeated and chanted so often this year. I won’t recount it here except to say it centered around jailing one of the two nominees, only for some additional spice it threw in the b-word just for fun.

I will confess that I wanted to hate that guy. The truth is I did hate that guy for a brief moment. I wanted to smash his stupid window and obliterate that stupid decal and destroy that stupid, hateful slogan. And I wanted to rip that hurtful flag out of its holder and burn it and replace it with the Stars and Stripes of the United States of America.

But you know who would not want me to do that? It’s tempting to say Jesus. But I’m not actually sure that would be true. There were times he was just as human as the rest of us, like when he braided a whip out of cords and, steaming with anger, he drove the money changers from the temple, overturning their tables in the process and scattering their ill-gotten coins to skies.

So if not Jesus, I ask again, you know who would not want me to do that, to vandalize this man’s truck?

My mother. Because she taught me better than that. She taught me, if I may borrow another phrase from the campaign trail this year, that when other people go low, we have to go high.

Because she had the gift of God deep down in her heart of which Paul speaks: the gift of faith that sees a world beyond the one that's given, the gift of joy that persists in the face of hardship, the gift of unconditional love, and together these gifts came out in everything she did: in her singing and in her praying and her devotional life, in the way she treated people, and in the way she loved the unlovely including, during most of my adolescence, me.

This matters because without her influence I could be that guy in that truck. We didn't have confederate flags in South Dakota. We had something else.

We had Indian reservations, where we still keep the Lakota at a safe distance from our schools and our churches and our sons and our daughters, because to this day many people still believe the only good Indian is a dead Indian.

So I could easily be that guy. But I'm here today, in this pulpit, because of what my mom taught me – and let me be clear, my dear, sweet Republican, Evangelical mom – because all of that together showed me what the Christian faith, as Jesus taught it, looks like in practice.

And I'm quite certain that what is true of me is true for more than a few of you, too.

So on this very point, and on the eve of our national election, allow me one last story, about one last saint, and what he taught me. His name was Andy Summers. As many of you know, Andy was the chaplain here at WWC for many years.

He, too, was a man who had this gift of God down deep inside that Paul writes about. I just didn't expect to discover this in quite the way that I did.

In 2008, Andy was diagnosed with acute leukemia and he died just a few weeks thereafter.

I'll never forget the last time I visited him in the hospital when he was still alert and responsive.

When I went into his room he was chatting with a friend, someone who had traveled with him to Fort Benning, GA, to keep vigil with him and protest at the School of Americas – the school where so many Latin American paramilitary leaders were once trained with the support of the American government.

Andy and his friend were talking about “crossing the line” – trespassing on to the grounds and risking arrest. It was a visible act of defiance and resistance, a way to say out loud and in public “You do not do this in my name. What you teach here is not what my country stands for.”

What was so striking about the conversation is that Andy was smiling as he talked about this, which captured his spirit so perfectly: *Yes, fight the fights of life but do not fight them with anger. Fight them instead with joy. Resist evil but do it with singing or by playing the saxophone.*

Combat fear with faith but not necessarily by posting angry rants on Facebook even if you think yours is righteous anger, but by taking prayerful walks in the woods.

Make peace not by firing off smoking hot truth bombs in emails about the campaign to all your friends, but by knocking on your neighbor’s door—your cranky 92 year-old neighbor whose vote is almost certainly going to cancel out yours – and offering to rake his leaves.

That’s what I learned from Andy Summers.

Andy was famous for taking students on peacemaking trips to Guatemala. Indeed, he was preparing to take one such trip when he got his diagnosis. The college scrambled to find a substitute for him, and the group did go.

When Andy died, it was my job to email the leader of the group and share the news of his passing with them.

I got a heartfelt response from the group. It closed with a poem by the Guatemalan poet, theologian and peace activist, Julia Esquivel. As a Guatemalan, Ms. Esquivel lived through more than her share of political unrest and tense elections.

And so I think it’s the perfect capstone to this service, on this All Saints Sunday, with November 8th now just two days away. This is called: *Sowing*

*Because you can’t kill death with death, sow life;
And kill death with life,
You can only harvest the infinite, complete, and perennial . . .
. . . by loving as much as you can*

*For you can only
sow life with life
since life, as love,
is stronger than death.*

For all the saints who have taught us this lesson:

-- the faithful ones who embraced the truth that God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of sound mind . . .

-- the dear ones who had the gift of God deep down inside, and who showed us with their living and even, sometimes, with their dying what faith in Jesus Christ looks like in practice . . .

-- our mothers and our fathers, our wives and husbands, our mentors and our teachers, whom we have lost but whose memory now proves that love is stronger than death . . .

For all these saints and the gifts they gave us, thanks be to God!