

An Inheritance of Trust
Reading from the Old Testament: Habakkuk 2:1-4
Reading from the New Testament: 2 Timothy 1:1-14

A common refrain heard from people testifying to the influences in their lives is the witness of a grandparent. An accomplished diplomat speaks of the lessons of patience, tenacity, focused attention, and spatial awareness learned from the grandfather who taught her the art of fly-fishing. In the world of football, the Manning family exemplifies a legacy of vocation passed (pun intended) from father to sons to grandson. A framed collection of handwritten recipes recalls the poignancy of a granddaughter standing atop a stool next to the kitchen counter, her fingers and the tip of her nose white with flour as she “assists” her beloved grandmother in a baking project that will birth a basket full of biscuits.

Just as my passion for jazz can be traced back to the nightclub pianist who also happened to be my grandfather, so too, your interests, hobbies, vocation, or beliefs may be a consequence of a bond made with a grandparent. Your love for them, your respect for them, your idealization of their character lived out in your efforts to emulate their way through life.

Last week, while back in Missouri, we ate in this small, creaky white frame pub owned by the parent of a child my sister taught in preschool. Lisa

said the pub had been in the family for 70 years, and is now managed by the third generation. I enjoyed a scrumptious catfish dinner that had been cooked the same way for 70 years by three generations. Can't you hear the grandparent patiently counseling the young grandchild to keep a proper distance from the fryer and to carefully measure the seasonings for the batter until she knows it just by the feel of it in her hand?

Often, through the years, elders, deacons, choir folks, Sunday school teachers, members, and visitors have spoken to me of the influence a grandparent has had upon their own faith journey. What stories they know from the Bible are a consequence of their grandparents reading the stories to them. What they know about prayer, they know from seeing a grandparent pray, from the memory of the words the grandparent used in prayer.

It is more than just rudimentary knowledge that is passed from generation to generation, it is also a character built upon sufferings endured, dreams altered, failures overcome, faithfulness sustained when logic and fear would counsel most mortals to run away. It is promises kept, covenants not forsaken, the glow of goodness always marking their relations with others. Their stories become the story to which you aspire. Theologian John Leith observed that "faith cannot be inherited as lands and houses are. Genetical

inheritances fix much of life, and they may make it easier or more difficult for faith. Yet biological processes cannot transmit the faith. Culture may shape our lives and influence the idiom of our religious expressions and practices.

Faith, however ... Christian faith comes from hearing the Word,” seeing it reflected in the lives of believers and the life of the church. (John Leith, *From*

Generation to Generation) The faithfulness of one observed by another; that’s the Holy Spirit’s playground.

It is true that we live on the shoulders of those who have come before us, their witness being intrinsic to our identity, mission, and purpose. Writing to his apprentice Timothy, Paul says, “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.”

I have long been struck by the poignancy in the memory of a grandmother’s faith having such an influence on a daughter and grandson. We don’t know much about Lois. She is only mentioned here, but here we can see that Paul knew her, and Paul also knew the impact her memory would have on

Timothy, of whom Paul once said, “Timothy’s worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.” Paul was Timothy’s mentor, and like a coach who knows her athlete, Paul understood what would motivate Timothy to be his best self in difficult times.

And these were, apparently, difficult times. Paul is in prison, likely nearing the day of his own crucifixion. The Emperor Nero, in the last years of his reign is amping up the persecution of Christ followers. The arrest, imprisonment, and impending state sponsored execution of the nascent church’s foremost apologist would have to cast a pretty dark show over all the local branches of Jesus, Inc.. So, not only was Timothy busy having to put out the fires that break out regularly in the lives of congregations (*except here, of course!*), he was also having to constantly look over his shoulder, knowing Nero’s gestapo could be throwing him in the back of a panel van at any moment. In addition, the one he looked to for direction, encouragement, support, and even inspiration, was languishing in a cold, damp, dark cell of Rome’s Alcatraz.

There comes a moment when troubles, having piled up like a college kid’s laundry, reach that tipping point where your “stick-to-it” slides over to despair. Perhaps you recall that scene in Matthew’s gospel where John the

Baptist is moldering in Herod's prison, his future the opposite of bright, so there's no want for wearing shades. He gets word to his disciples to go find Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another." Just "fair to middlin" would be a dream compared to John's current status.

It's that tipping point where doubts glom onto questions that can no longer be sloughed off. *Why am I doing this? Why should I get out of bed in the morning? This is impossible? Is it even worth it? I'm toast? It's time for sweatpants and breakfast with Ben and Jerry.* Did you know the term *give-ups* is common slang for sweatpants? *I'm thinking Joe must have quit his job. I saw him outside the 7-Eleven wearing his give-ups and eating a bag of donuts.*

Smiles have become forced. Hygiene takes a vacation. Change your ringtone to some Gilbert O'Sullivan - *In my hour of need, I truly am indeed; Alone again, naturally.* It could be the dating scene; a marathon; a mountain hike that is not what you signed up for; the thought of another round of chemo; the prospect of another day in a toxic work environment; the fear of the next hour on the borderline of abuse; the falling sales figures, stock market, prospects. Once again, your stick-to-it is sliding to despair.

Paul feels that threat in his own situation, people not returning his calls, no one showing up to be a witness or advocate for him in a one-sided justice system. This is not the first time he's felt such a threat; and though Paul may be separated from Timothy, he can just sense that Timothy is sliding into discouragement valley. And there is a point where despair somehow morphs into shame, either through the embarrassment of being associated with failure, or from the words and acts of abuse from the proud all around you - the notion of insult being added to injury.

The Psalmist laments, "We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us." On Good Friday, "they clothed [Jesus] in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him."

Public shaming. We don't have to imagine the mockery and abuse suffered by Christ, we've seen it with our own eyes, in the mob's mockery of the innocent Jews in the streets of Berlin and Warsaw as Nazi antisemitism exploded. We've seen it in the innocents caught at the wrong end of Bull

Connor's firehoses and attack dogs in Birmingham, and from the crowds casting insults, trash, and spittle at Dorothy Counts on the streets here in Charlotte, just because she wanted to go to school. We see it today as refugees are bussed around, dehumanized and displayed as props to be mocked amidst political thuggery.

When sliding from discouragement to despair, bumping into shame, when any bootstraps with which you could pick yourself up are long gone, broken or stolen, what is left to will you to power? When someone's exasperated injunction, *just suck it up*, has lost its efficacy as a summons, what will motivate you and give you the strength, if not to finish, at least to take the next step?

Remember Timothy, remember as I do, the sincere faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. Remember their stories, their trials, their humiliations. Remember their prayers, their trust in the Lord. Remember the strength that was not their own but the fruit of a faith given by God. Remember, Timothy, that it is not a sin to say *I can't*, and that it is a grace to know that God will... Remember, Timothy, resurrection is the act of God picking you up, making you alive, giving you strength, for God is both our refuge and our strength, and in Christ has become our salvation. It is true,

you can't, Timothy, you can't church, you can't Christian, but by the grace of Jesus Christ, we can step forward knowing God will go with us.

Paul encourages Timothy and the church, inviting us to rely on “the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.” Paul confesses, “I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.”

It was Luther who famously said, “If we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing; were not the right [one] on our side, the [one] of God's own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is he.”

You see, it is not a sin to say *I can't*, because there are so many instances in life where that is the simple truth. I can't pursue another marathon. I know this ... because Donna told me so. But that's not the question. In the end, the question is not what we can do; no, the question is always what God can do through us. That's where hope lives. Amen.