

## Faith of Our Mothers

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, October 2, 2022.

2 Timothy 1:1-14  
Luke 17:5-10

This morning we join with Christians around the world in celebrating World Communion Sunday. Together, we celebrate the unity that we find at Christ's Table. And we marvel at how the small movement that Jesus started in Galilee some 2,000 years ago has grown into the largest faith community in the world with more than two billion Christians around the globe.

For nearly two millennia, Christians have passed their faith on from one generation to the next. They have taught their children and grandchildren about Jesus and how to follow him. More often than not, I think, it has been women who have taken on this role of nurturing younger generations in the Christian faith -- mothers and grandmothers who have brought their children and grandchildren to church, had them baptized, read them Bible stories, prayed with them, and modeled for them as best they could what it looks like to live a Christian life.

Our reading from Second Timothy lifts up this reality in the life of the apostle Paul's young protégé, Timothy. "I am reminded of your sincere faith," he writes to Timothy, "a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." Theirs was a living faith that was passed on from generation to generation – from Lois to Eunice to Timothy.

I imagine that is true for many of us here this morning – that our mothers and/or grandmothers had a lot to do with our early formation as Christians. In my own case, growing up on the North Shore of Long Island, east of New York City, my family attended the First Presbyterian Church of Glen Cove. Both of my parents sang in the church choir there and both served as ruling

elders. Indeed, my mother was the first woman in that congregation to be ordained as a ruling elder and serve on Session.

It was my mother who insisted that I get up on Sunday mornings and go to church. She made sure that I was awake and out of bed when I really wanted to keep sleeping. She cajoled me into dressing up for church when I wanted to dress down, or better yet remain in my pajamas and stay home altogether. She made sure I had some breakfast. And then she drove me to church so that I wouldn't be late for Sunday School, which was held before the worship service. Sunday School led to my singing in the Children's Choir, then involvement in the Youth Group, and later singing with the Adult Choir. It was thanks to my mother's faith and persistence that I stayed involved in the life of the congregation and grew to embrace the Christian faith.

It almost didn't happen. When I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade I joined the confirmation class, but stopped attending after the first few weeks. Yes, it's true! Your pastor was a confirmation class dropout. At that time in my life, I had many questions of faith. Does God exist, I wondered? How is the resurrection possible? Can miracles be explained in scientific terms? It was a time of real wrestling for me. I was having a hard time reconciling what I was learning at church in confirmation class with what I was learning at school in science class. So, I stopped going to confirmation class, because I thought that I wouldn't be able to be confirmed given that I had so many questions.

My mother eventually persuaded me to meet with my pastor to see if all the questions I had meant I could not be confirmed. After a conversation with my pastor, he told me that confirmation did not mean I had to have all the answers, nor did it mean I had to have a blind faith in a set of Christian doctrines. Rather, for him, confirmation was an affirmation of one's continuing search for the truth. If I was sincere in wanting to continue my search for answers to my faith questions, I could be confirmed on that basis. Were it not for my pastor's openness and generous spirit, I might never have been confirmed and joined the church. I've wrestled

with questions of faith ever since. In part, it was my questions that led me to seminary. Years later, after I entered seminary, I wrote to my former pastor and learned that he had often wondered whether I would eventually become a minister! Sure enough, I did!

I know that many of you, like my mother, did all the right things to help nurture your children and grandchildren in the Christian faith. You brought them to Sunday School and to worship, you read them Bible stories, you prayed with them and for them, you instilled in them Christian values, and you modeled for them Christian discipleship. And I have heard many of you lament that in spite of your best efforts, your children and grandchildren have not stayed active in the church. For any number of reasons, they have not found Jesus' life and witness compelling enough to want to follow him, or they have not found the life and witness of the church important enough to want to be actively involved in a congregation.

But I hope that doesn't mean you've stopped talking with your children and grandchildren about your Christian faith and why you are part of St. Andrew, not to persuade them of anything, but so that they know what it is you value about following Jesus and being part of a Christian community.

You see, the good news that we are created in the image and likeness of God, that we are precious in God's sight, that God loves us unconditionally, and that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, hasn't always gotten through to the general public as loudly and clearly as we might like. That positive message is being drowned out today by the loudest Christian voices in our society, those of conservative, right-wing evangelicals on radio and television, who are more apt to preach a message of law and judgment than they are a message of love and mercy.

Consequently, an awful lot of people, particularly young people, don't see churches as welcoming places. Polling data show that large majorities of people believe in God and have great

admiration for Jesus, but many of these same people have very negative views of the Church. They see the Church as a racist, sexist, anti-gay institution. And they view Christians as judgmental, intolerant, discriminatory, oppressive. To the extent that such negative views are true, they represent the worst that the Church has to offer.

By contrast, we need to represent in our life together the best that the Church has to offer. We need to exhibit God's unconditional love and care for all people. Here at St. Andrew, I believe that we do. But we need to be more vocal about it . . . even within our own families.

One couple in our congregation told me about an experience they had, which I think illustrates just how important it is that we share the substance of our faith with our families. They gave me permission to share their story with you.

This couple went to see their granddaughter perform in a play at her school. Upon entering the auditorium, they received a copy of the printed program, which included a few sentences from each student in the cast and crew describing how they felt about being part of the production. The couple found their seats and began reading the program. Their granddaughter wrote about how happy she was to be in the play and how much she enjoyed the experience. And then they read the last line, which included a surprising revelation from their granddaughter: "I want to announce that I'm gay -- I hope that my family accepts my coming out."

Now, it turned out that this was not news to her friends, her parents, or her siblings. It was, however, news to her grandparents. And while they were not at all troubled by the news, and didn't love her any less, they did wonder why their granddaughter had not confided in them. Why were they the last in the family to know? When they asked her about it, she said that it was because they were Christian. She didn't know if they would be accepting of a gay grandchild, because she believed that all Christians were antigay.

Her grandparents assured her that they loved her no matter what. They let her know that not all Christians are antigay. Indeed, many Christians, themselves included, believe that all people are created by God, in the image and likeness of God, and are loved by God unconditionally, whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity. And they pointed out the rainbow flag that graces the front of our church building, a symbol of welcome to the LGBTQ+ community. The rainbow tells lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons (and their families and friends) that our church is a safe place where they will find love and acceptance.

Most people outside our church's doors don't know us, don't know what we stand for, and don't know that they are welcome. Most of them, even members of our own families, may believe that because we are Christians we must be judgmental, intolerant, discriminatory, and oppressive. And because of what they have heard about so many other churches, they may assume that St. Andrew, too, is racist, sexist, and antigay (regardless of our rainbow flag).

We allow these negative views of what it means to be Christian and what it means to be Church to go unchallenged, if we don't tell people what we believe and show them our beliefs in how we live our lives. If we don't tell our families what it means to us to believe in God, to be followers of Jesus, to be part of a Christian community, how will they ever know?

I would encourage you to sit down with your children and grandchildren, all together or one at a time, and let them know what brings you to St. Andrew Sunday after Sunday. Or if talking with them seems too difficult, consider writing them a letter. What might you say?

That you are grateful for the life you have been able to live, and you feel compelled to give thanks to God for that precious gift. You understand God to be the source of all that is, the source of

life and love, the source of all goodness, wisdom, truth, and beauty.

You might say that you are a follower Jesus, because he is the one human being through whom you see God most clearly. He shows you something of what God is like. He serves as a role model for you, an ethical guide, a moral compass. By his life and teachings, Jesus shows you what it can mean to live life in all its fullness.

You might say that you are part of St. Andrew, because you want to belong to a community where people support and care for one another, a community that continues the work of Jesus in the world—feeding the hungry, helping the poor, working for social justice, spreading the good news of God’s love throughout the world.

You might say that St. Andrew offers you a place to reconnect with God and renew your faith. When you worship with us you find that God feels just a little bit closer. Something about worshiping in this place touches you and helps you experience the love of God more deeply.

Your family members may not change their own beliefs or behaviors as a result of your reaching out to them, but at least they will have heard a more positive, more progressive view of what it means to be a Christian, and they will have a greater appreciation of what you value about your Christian faith and about your church.

If your children and grandchildren are not churchgoers, let me assure you that it’s not your fault. There is a cultural shift going on in our country that is much bigger and more powerful than anything you did or didn’t do individually.

The fact is we are becoming a more secular society. More and more people in the U.S. don’t identify with Christianity or any religious tradition. This rapidly growing segment of our population has become known as the “nones,” spelled n-o-n-e-s, because when they are asked which religion they are, they check

none of the above. Fifty years ago, only 5% of Americans were religiously unaffiliated. Today, that number has grown to 30%. And if present trends continue, the “nones” could constitute a majority of Americans by 2070. At the same time, the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian has declined from 90% fifty years ago to 64% today. And if the trend continues the percentage of U.S. Christians could fall below 50% of the population by 2070.

The rapid rise of the “nones” and the concurrent decline of Christians in the U.S. is one indicator of the massive cultural shift in church history that we are currently living through. Author Phyllis Tickle, who was featured in last Sunday’s Christian Education class, calls it “The Great Emergence.” She writes: “Every five hundred years, the church cleans out its attic and has a giant rummage sale.” The last “rummage sale” was the Protestant Reformation that began in 1517. Before that it was the East-West split in 1054 that led to the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox streams of Christianity.

Given our historical context, it is difficult to predict what U.S. churches will look like in the future. They may look very different than they do today. It’s hard to know what we should hang on to and what we should throw out in this current “rummage sale.” It’s a challenge to imagine what congregations should be doing now to position ourselves to grow and thrive once more.

Still, we need not fear the future. As Second Timothy reminds us: “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” We are to rely on the power of God, “hold to the standard of sound teaching . . . the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus,” and “guard the good treasure entrusted to [us], with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.”

As we do so, let us give thanks for our mothers and grandmothers who nurtured us as Christians and brought us this far by faith. And let us seek God’s wisdom and guidance as we navigate the uncharted waters that lie ahead of us. Amen.