A Godly Heritage Dave Bianchin

2 Timothy 1: 1-7 First Presbyterian Church

May 8, 2016 Lake Forest, IL 60045

We have a tendency to think that Biblical characters kind of drop from the skies, fully formed. Even when we see a dynamic conversion on Paul’s part, such as last week, as if all of a sudden he was just a mature Christian believer. But faith doesn’t always happen that way. Certainly faith is the work of the Holy Spirit; it’s something that God does; we cannot come to faith except by God’s work but there’s a strong connection between faith and people. There’s a relational element that God uses consistently to help us come to faith.

 I’ve seen a couple of exceptions to that. One of my friends, by the name of Jeff, had an apostle Paul, Holy Spirit conversion one day and went from being a drug addict to being a wonderful guy. A friend by the name of Rick took a copy of the King James Bible with a font about the size of 3 point, and he read it up on a mountain lookout over the course of a summer and came to faith.

 But when I think of most people coming to faith and myself, I think of people who have given an influence. I think of Rev. John Imbach who was my pastor for 20 years in my home church in southern California. I think of Tom Banks who was our youth director for about a year and continues to be a mentor for me. I think of Will Ackles who I worked with in both college and seminary and who helped me grow, especially into pastoral ministry. My first colleague, Dave Mote, and then my friend Jeff Borgerson and Rick Cole and certainly my wife who’s been a wonderful influence in my faith.

 I know that you have had those influences as well. As a matter of fact, you may be sitting next to that person even this morning, in which case you have my permission to lean over and thank them very much for what they’ve done for you. Paul was a relational guy. He’s always with somebody. If you read about his missionary journeys through the book of Acts, he was never by himself. He always had somebody with him. In our text for today we see his connection not only with Timothy but with Timothy’s entire family – Timothy’s grandmother and his mother. Paul is connected to a family that spans through three generations in life and in faith.

 Just as a brief bit of background, in Acts, chapter 16, the first three verses, it says this, “Paul went out also to Derbe and Lystra where there was a disciple named Timothy, son of a Jewish woman who was a believer but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium and Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him.” There at the beginning of Acts 16, this relationship of ministry begins and finally finds its culmination in the words of Paul to Timothy in 2 Timothy today.

 So between both texts, we find that Paul reminds Timothy of a past, a present and a future. Paul refers to his own ancestry in the faith: his ancestors who served God and who he now serves with a clear conscience. He refers to Timothy’s heritage in his grandmother and his mother. He refers to the present in saying, “I long to see you.” So Paul has looked back. He comes to the present and then he says into the future, “Fan the flame of the gift of God that is within you, for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but a power and love.” And so, all of us, all Christians, live our lives out of this kind of continuum. We come from somewhere, we’ve been with someone and we’re going somewhere. For now, what do we do with the present moments that we have?

 Paul is pointing Timothy constantly to the reality in each day that Timothy has. Timothy, by this time, is a leader, probably the pastor of the church in Ephesus. I would encourage you, as you read through the Bible, especially the Epistles, to look to connect what is written with the narrative story that happens in the book of Acts. Paul doesn’t write to Timothy out of a vacuum. You can see their whole continuum of time together in ministry. Jesus has said to us that we need to live in each day. What is the opportunity for us? What is the opportunity in our families and in our church?

 Timothy’s sincere faith was a family matter. Apparently his grandmother, Lois, was the first one in his family who came to Christ. Then his mother, Eunice, was converted. Paul notes that Timothy’s father was Greek, so Eunice had obviously not practiced the orthodox Jewish faith or she wouldn’t have married a Greek man. But Timothy’s mother and grandmother have seen to it, that Timothy was taught the Scriptures and you can find that towards the end of this letter in chapter 3, verse 15. And Paul eventually returns to Lystra which was a Roman province in what is now modern Turkey.

 Paul’s ministry was huge and yet the ministry of Lois and Eunice was every bit as important. It was a life changer for both Timothy and for Paul. I’d like to look at their effect on Timothy’s life. Paul says first of all that Timothy has a sincere faith which was modeled by his mother and his grandmother. We don’t know how they came to faith. It could have been that they came to faith under Paul’s preaching on his first missionary journey before he sees them again on the second missionary journey. Perhaps they were led to faith by others that Paul had led to faith. We don’t know that. But coming to faith from this Jewish background in a marriage to a man who was Greek couldn’t have been easy. So you have a mixed family in this situation. It’s not one of those situations where it’s so easy to come to faith that people just do it naturally. Lois and Eunice had to make decisions which would have brought tension into their homes and yet they chose to follow Jesus Christ. They had given their hearts to God and Christ.

 And Paul says that their faith is not only real, but it’s noteworthy. He uses the word, “sincere.” The Greek language, in order to give some words meaning, takes the negative and negates that. And the word Paul uses here is hypocrisy. He says that your faith was “not hypocritical.”

 Now if you would have thought of the word hypocrisy when you were living in that time and place, you would have thought of the stage because actors who played parts on the Greek stages would use masks. They would put one mask in front to play one part then they would change masks to play another part. So a hypocrite was one who played a part, who pretended they were someone else. On the stage, that’s just fine but in real life it’s not so good a thing.

 Now we know that the life of a person of faith who has integrated their faith into every aspect of their lives, that’s a beautiful thing to see, isn’t it? Folks who live out their faith with the consistency of their ethics and their morals and their priorities have a loving manner with people – they are quick to forgive. They’re sacrificial in terms of giving for the sake of Christ both in their time and their talents and certainly their treasure. But the other side of it is about a person who talks a good talk about faith but lives a life that doesn’t reflect the love and purposes of Christ.

 You and I have known people like that, perhaps even at times we have been like those who pulled masks out and pretended they were someone else. It’s not so good a thing, is it? People find this sort of thing out and more than anything else, we know in our own hearts we’re not living that way. So there’s an encouragement through the example of Lois and Eunice. They have lived their faith as well as professed their faith.

 Someone said, years ago, that faith is primarily caught rather than taught. There is certainly a teaching element in this. But we see people’s lives and the congruence between what they say and how they live is really important, isn’t it? Let me just say that we’re never going to be perfect and we don’t have God demanding that of us. God says there’s forgiveness when we miss the mark in this way. As much as anything, as much as possible, we want to grow integrated and weaving our faith in our lives seamlessly.

 The second thing that Lois and Eunice do is that they mentor Timothy. It says in chapter 3, verse 15 that they taught Timothy the scriptures. This builds on the reality of their faith; they not only are professing faith and living it out, but they want to teach Timothy, to give him a foundation which he can use to live out his own faith. Now people see us live our faith in consistency, often times especially if they’re young and will think, Wow, I just can’t do that, I could never do that or how do I do that. And as we teach young people the scriptures, God meets them and gives them a foundation and reminds them and helps them to internalize what we and they have learned as well.

 Let me point out that Lois and Eunice would not have bothered to do this if their faith had not been sincere. So I want to make a little shout-out now to our children and youth faith formation teams. How important are they? They are life-changing important. The ways our children are nurtured through the teachers and the pastors and those volunteers who help. It’s important!

 I also want to say how important our adult faith formation is for supporting not only children and youth but for how our faith is nurtured, so that as we move to nurture our children, we have something to say. I don’t have the statistics with me but a pastor at Willow Creek made a comment during the leadership summit, about how many hours in a year our Sunday schools have the opportunity to influence our kids. I don’t know what it was….let’s just say 50. And how many hours parents have with their children to nurture faith. And it was in the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds. And so this is just to say that you and I, in our homes, have opportunities to share our faith and to nurture faith and to hand the baton back and forth between our children and youth faith formation which really helps our kids grow in not only the relationships with others but also with God.

 I’m not going to say this is just for parents – it is also for grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbors. You and I will have opportunities throughout our lives to meet kids who live in our neighborhoods and to say a good word for Christ. We have a partnership, all of us, in the nurture of kids and it is a wonderful opportunity.

 In the text I read in Acts, chapter 16, we see that Paul desires Timothy to go off in the mission field with him. There is no text that gives us any inkling about how Lois and Eunice felt about this. But he goes – Timothy goes away from his family in order to serve God in the mission field with Paul. There seems to be no discussion about it. There are no oppositional comments that are noted. There’s no resistance – it’s an outgrowth of Timothy’s faith that he goes off to serve. In other words, his parents released him to God’s work.

 How important was Timothy in the life of the early church? You’ll find Timothy mentioned 24 times, as I count, in the New Testament and that covers a span of twelve different New Testament books. We find Timothy’s name coming in Ephesus and in Corinth and in Acts, and in Galatia, and in Hebrews. Timothy’s name was all around the early church. His ministry was extremely important. The good influences of his mother, his grandmother, Paul and their willingness to release him to God’s work made a huge difference in those around.

 The larger issue then is, how do we together as all believers, serve Jesus Christ? One of the things that Paul refers to at the end of many of his letters is others who were, what he called, co-workers in the Gospel. The best reference for that is at the end of the book of Romans, chapter 16, and he talks about many people who have benefitted him, men and women, young and old. Some who have challenged him and come to faith. Some who have supported him and accompanied him and helped his work.

 God brings people to faith out of a variety of backgrounds, out of a variety of relationships and certainly out of a variety of circumstances. I don’t know if you’ve thought about this very much but as we make promises in baptism, we promise to help that child come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Then in confirmation they have the opportunity to confirm their own faith. But it goes even beyond the baptismal font and it goes beyond the walls of our congregation. There are people who might be able to respond to us that we might be able to mentor. I don’t mean in a heavy-handed way. There are that people will ask us about our faith and we have the opportunity to say, “Yes, I’m a Christian; can I help you with something?” Sometimes we can lead them in Bible study, we can encourage them in their work. There are lots of things we can do. There are people who can mentor us. If you’re a person who feels like you would like to have someone help you to grow in your faith, we have programs and we also have persons who would be happy to walk alongside you.

 Most interestingly to me are the people who are watching us and we don’t know it. In some way, inadvertently, we either mentor them or influence them in some way – sometimes well, sometimes not. So we have opportunities to be able, in the broad scope of where we live, where we walk and where we work, to put in a good word for Jesus Christ. We don’t always know who this is going to be.

 In 1973, about a hundred years ago, I was a young Christian in a college dorm Caldwell , Idaho. Kim Wardwell and I decided we would do a Bible study in my dorm room. There were two guys who showed up besides Kim and me and one of them dropped out almost immediately. The other one, Mark, continued to meet with us through the course of that semester and then that was kind of the end of it – Mark decided he didn’t want to do that anymore.

 Mark was the son of Presbyterian missionaries who, when he was about 8 years old, had been killed in a car accident while they were home on furlough. Mark was pretty bitter and I don’t blame him. He was pretty bitter about what had happened in his life. Mark continued to be a friend – it was a small school and I graduated in 1975, Mark was a year behind me. I didn’t think that much more about him; it had been a good friendship, cordial.

 Then in the summer of 1977 when I was sitting at the table of a family in Seattle where I was a seminary intern and the phone rang and Ginny went to the phone and picked it up. She said, “Sure” and she looked at me and said, “It’s for you.” I picked up the phone and it was Mark. He said, “I wanted you to know that I live up in the northeast now. I’ve been going to graduate school here and a number of people have had a wonderful influence on me and I’ve come to faith in Christ. You were part of that journey,” he said, “and I’m not sure you knew that. I just wanted to thank you.” And I thanked him for calling; I was deeply moved by it. I hung up the phone and we have not had a conversation since. We never know, in our conversations, in our encounters with people, when the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, the actions of our lives might be able to influence someone in a positive way.

 We’ve talked about Paul and we’ve talked about Timothy. There’s another Biblical character by the name of Barnabas. Barnabas went with Paul on one of his missionary journeys. Someone said years ago, that every Christian needs three people in their lives. We need a Paul who can mentor us. We need a Barnabas who is a peer who hat we can minister with. And we need a Timothy who we can mentor and minister to.

 I think there’s some real wisdom in that because it reminds us that we are always growing in our faith; that we can have an influence in partnership with those around us and we can also pass the faith on…the godly heritage that we’ve been given…to those who are around us. For Paul said, “We live, not in a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and self-control.” Proverbs 22: 6 says “Train children in the right way and when they are old they will not stray.” And that’s our opportunity, and that’s our joy. How we do that – whether perfectly or imperfectly – God is with us in this. God gives us the opportunity to influence others for Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.