

World Communion Sunday, Oct. 2, 2016
Worship with Teaneck Presbyterian Church
“May I hold that Faith with You?”
Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Wouldn't it be grand if our churches got encouraging letters from someone named Paul, that were full of wisdom and inspiration for how our churches could move forward as the Body of Christ? I hope it would not get caught between catalogues for church supplies and advertisements for group tickets at whatever is playing at the Meadowlands.

I did not get a letter from Paul when I came to the Presbyterian Church in Leonia. But, I was happy to have a phone conversation with Rev. Dr. Gloria Tate, who was listed as a reference on the church's Ministry Information Form. She was the first person I spoke to about the church, and-- well, she didn't scare me away! In fact, in my conversation with her then and in visits since, I found her perspective to be reliable and her wisdom to be trustworthy. I am glad to have her as a colleague and honored to share a pulpit with her.

2 Timothy is an epistle, or letter, which Paul-- or someone who was of the tradition of the missional churches Paul founded -- writes to Timothy and gives advice on how to teach Paul's theology without being steered off the path by other teachers who had taken a different direction with Christian teachings. To remind Timothy who he is and where he came from, Paul points him back toward the women who had first modeled the faith to him: his grandmother Lois, and his mother Eunice. This sound teaching is a “good treasure,” Paul writes, which should be guarded “in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

As we consider our faith as an inheritance, let us first consider that we all have valued inheritances, chosen treasures left to us by our ancestors, that

tell us something about who we are. And, we may have different ideas about what we should do with them. Alice Walker, an African-American writer from my home state of Georgia, speaks of an inheritance in her short story "Everyday Use." The story is told from the mother's perspective. Her daughter Dee comes for a visit. Dee was named for her mother and her grandmother but announces that she has changed her name to the Swahili name Wangero to avoid any name that may have been given by a slave owner years ago. Dee-- or Wangero-- is trying to convince her mother that she should give *her--* and not her sister Maggie-- the treasured quilts her mother has made, using the scraps from her mother's, grandmother's, and great-grandmother's clothes. The mother narrates:

"The truth is," I said, "I promised to give them quilts to Maggie,"

Dee (Wangero) gasped like a bee had stung her.

"Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!" she said. "She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use."

"I reckon she would," I said. "God knows I been saving 'em for long enough with nobody using 'em. I hope she will!" I didn't want to bring up how I had offered Dee (Wangero) a quilt when she went away to college. Then she had told they were old~fashioned, out of style.

"But they're priceless!" she was saying now, furiously; for she has a temper. "Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they'd be in rags. Less than that!"

"She can always make some more," I said. "Maggie knows how to quilt."

Dee (Wangero) looked at me with hatred. "You just will not understand. The point is these quilts, these quilts!"

"Well," I said, stumped. "What would you do with them?"

"Hang them," she said. As if that was the only thing you could do with quilts.

The mother ended up giving the quilts to Maggie, her other daughter, who seemed to live her heritage rather than to hang it as a museum piece.

The question Paul addresses in his letter to Timothy is this: how will the community live out the heritage left by Paul, and ultimately, by Jesus? They were torn by two different kinds of teachers-- one group of teachers who would follow in the ways of Paul, as does the writer of the letter, and one group of false teachers who would lead the church astray. The writer is probably referring to more Gnostic interpretations of the resurrection, which saw the resurrection as more of a spiritual event of union with God that has already happened, and not as a bodily event. We know something about the Gnostic Christians through the discovery of the Gnostic Gospels, found at Nag Hamadi in Egypt in 1945. According to Elaine Pagels, who is the top scholar on the Gnostic Gospels, these Christians followed a Greek philosophic tradition that "regards the human spirit as residing 'in' a body-- as if the actual person were some sort of disembodied being who uses the body as an instrument, but does not identify with it."¹ So Gnostic Christians saw more of a spiritual Jesus than a bodily Jesus, and a more spiritual resurrection than a physical resurrection.

To counter the philosophies swimming around Timothy and his church in Ephesus, Paul is trying to tell him that **bodies do matter**. Just as the mama in Alice Walker's story found preference for her quilts' use by a daughter who would wrap it around her and her loved one's bodies in everyday use, Paul wants Timothy and his church to put the bodily experience of Jesus to everyday use.

¹ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Vintage Books International, 1989 p .27

Paul's use of remembrance brings back this sense of connection to bodies. First, he says he **remembers** Timothy in his prayers. Then, he says he **recalls** Timothy's tears. Paul is **reminded** of Timothy's faith, and connects that back to the lived bodies of Lois and Eunice. Finally, he asks that Timothy **rekindle** the gift of God that is within him, through the laying on of hands-- another physical blessing that invites the Holy Spirit's presence into the body.

Remember

Recall

Remind

Rekindle

I am serving in an interim capacity at the Presbyterian Church in Leonia. Part of that work is to **remember, recall, remind and rekindle**. We spent some time on our retreat last month remembering and recalling stories of the church's past that helped to shape who they are today. This work will be revisited as we look to where God may be calling us into the future. It is important to **recall** where you came from as you consider where you might be going and how you might **rekindle** discipleship to Jesus Christ.

Lamin Sanneh, who is from Gambia and now serves as Yale Professor of Missions and World Christianity, tells a story about a holy man who was given a turkey as a gift, because it was known turkey is his favorite food. The holy man threw a feast! The next day, some visitors came and heard about the feast, so they were served the leftovers. Friends of those visitors came the next day, and they also hoped to eat from the holy man's feast; they had a soup from the last bites of the turkey parts no one else had wanted. Still, the next day, even more visitors came, hoping to be fed. The teacher emerged, and to the visitors' chagrin he was carrying a bowl of hot boiled water. "He emulated their formality by assuring them that in the bowl

was the hot water from the soup from the leftovers from the turkey that his disciple brought him. No further visitors disturbed him.”²

The Eucharist, by contrast, is not an empty, bland meal that has no power to nurture. Eucharist is a meal that **re-members**. It reconnects us as the body of Christ. It adds a physicality to our spiritual notions of who God is and what Jesus Christ offers. It takes us out of our heads and into our bodies. We are called upon to look at each other and **remember** that our bodies matter. Jesus didn't just come to us in an idea. He came to us in a body. So, when we **remember** Jesus' body, we **remember** other bodies that matter. We remember the bodies of young black men and boys who have been shot in acts of police brutality. We **rekindle** the flame of our faith foremothers and forefathers who insisted on civil rights-- some of you who are a generation or two older than me may be part of that courageous group. We **recall** the stories that kept us apart and brought us together again, naming honestly the racism that was in our churches that kept pews divided on Sunday mornings, and also how congregations responded in solidarity with one another in contradiction to the acts of violence that divided our communities. I am only beginning to learn the stories.

Our faith is not something to hang on the wall. Our faith is something to be worn and used daily. Our faith is not something that belongs individually to us as some sort of personal piety. Our faith belongs to each other, and to our ancestors, and to our next generations if we are doing our job to share some good news with them. Our faith is not a jar of water, empty of color and of taste. It is a chalice that is red, robust, and brimming with wine, and it is bread-- yeasty, hearty bread that fills and nourishes.

Our faith does not forget-- even when there are truths we would much rather gloss over. And when our communities come together across 3 different towns, and in this day from at least a dozen countries represented today, we are reminded that we do not hold this faith alone. We are

² Lamin Sanneh, "Naming and the Act of Faith" in *The Christian Century* Oct. 4, 1989

members of one another, just as we are members of the body of Christ. Faith is not just an individual practice, but something that we hold for one another, so that even when belief and practice seem an impossible task, we know there are others in the community who can uphold and continue until we are able to **rekindle**.

Remember

Recall

Remind

Rekindle... and rejoice! Because it is a delight to be together. It is a delight to share in the feast. It is a delight to be present in our bodies and at the same time possess the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a delight to bear the treasure of the gospel and to live it and hope for it. May we all do so.

Amen.