

Soul-Tending
2 Timothy 3:14-17
The Rev. Nancy Conklin
Sunday, May 9, 2021

One of the reasons pastors such as myself moved stewardship season to Eastertide is that it affords the church an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the many ways in which our time, talents, and treasure have impacted the lives of people and the life of our world. In real and tangible ways, we see the resurrection power of Christ at work among us. To that end, I'd like to begin by sharing a letter I received a couple of months ago from one of our preschool teachers. I share it with her permission and with the permission of the foster parents of the child about whom she wrote.

In our class we always use the word "grown up" when talking about who is dropping off/picking up students and who they are spending their time with outside of school. There are currently 13 students in our class and more than half of these students are dropped off and picked up by someone other than their parents. This includes grandparents, babysitters, professional nannies, and even foster parents. We want all students to feel loved, even if their home situation is different from their classmates. We are so fortunate that each of our students has "grown-ups" who fully participate in their lives and are engaged with the preschool.

One of our students has, in a few significant ways, a home life very different from his classmates. Shortly after turning 3 last spring, he and his half-brother entered the foster care system. God always knows what he is doing and placed the brothers with an incredible young couple to foster them. When he started school last September, he was often agitated, could not sit still, called out and interrupted, and had a difficult time sharing. He had a hearing and speech problem. He gobbled his snack as fast as possible, often to the point of almost choking. It made us wonder about his life prior to being placed with his loving foster parents. This is the type of student that, as teachers, we often say an extra prayer for every night.

Since September, he has grown in ways that we never imagined. This week, his foster mom told us that he had a check-up late last week and the doctor was amazed at how his demeanor had changed since last summer. The doctor noticed how he could sit still, have a conversation, and was using words and not grunting sounds anymore. He knew his shapes and colors. He was not the same little boy the doctor had first met last summer as he was entering the foster care system.

Two weeks ago, he was given his spring assessment in class. His improvement was staggering. In October, he drew a self-portrait that was so unrecognizable that he had to explain to us where he had drawn arms and legs. There was a circle for the head, but no eyes or mouth. No expression. When he drew his self-portrait again two weeks ago, he drew a very recognizable self and this time his drawing had a huge smile. And he had used his favorite color green to draw his picture.

Some preschools only concentrate on learning shapes, colors, letters, and writing their name. CHPCP also emphasizes the emotional and social development of our students. This student may have a different life at home with incredible and loving foster parents, but he also must attend court hearings and supervised parent visits. Although his classmates are not going through the same experiences as him, he believes that he is just like all his friends. He's dropped off and picked up with hugs and kisses from his "grown-ups" and is loved beyond measure by his teachers.

Having worked as a child advocate in the foster care system, this letter really touched my heart. If we ever wanted to know the value of our investment in our preschool, just look at this child's two self-portraits in your bulletin. Can we even put a price tag on the love and dedication of our teachers that transformed a stick figure into a little boy? Today is Mother's Day, this week was National Teacher Appreciation Week, and this month is National Foster Care Awareness Month. At the heart of those three celebrations is their witness to the resurrection power of unconditional love.

There's an old African Proverb about a band of elephants who come upon a raging river needing to cross over to the other side. The adult elephants didn't have a problem, but the small young elephants following behind them were too afraid to step into the raging waters. Elephants, as the saying goes, never forget. And so, as the adults were crossing over, one of the elephants in the middle of the line shouted to the front of the line to those who were already on dry land: "Brother leader, we have some folks still standing on the banks of the river who haven't made it into the water." The lead elephants turned around, got back into the water, and stood shoulder to shoulder. Their enormous bodies created a dam that parted the waters enough to allow the young elephants to wade through the shallow water until they reached dry land.

We've all had loving adults, be they parents, teachers, coaches, or youth pastors, who parted the way for us as we dared to step into the scary waters of life. Hopefully, we've had a chance to show them our appreciation. This proverb reminds us that we mustn't forget to turn around and part the way for those coming behind us.

As theologian Alan Jamieson wrote, "Like Abraham and Sarah, the question that we too must consider is whether we will have descendants, not (necessarily) children in our own biological line, but descendants in faith." Musicians and other artists will tell you that one of the worst things anyone could say about them is that they left no protégé behind to keep alive the artistic and creative imagination of their life's work. That we left no protégé behind in the wake of our lives ought to be the worst thing anyone could say about us, especially when it comes to leaving a legacy of faith to the next generation who are afraid of stepping into the raging waters of life.

Timothy was the Apostle Paul's protege. But, even before Paul entered his life, Timothy received a legacy of faith from his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice — an important reminder that faith development begins at home and that the experience of faith is passed on more by way of osmosis than by way of formal education. Like the disciples did with Jesus, Timothy traveled with Paul. He listened and watched and learned from all that Paul did and spoke. And every once in a while, like the disciples often got from Jesus, Timothy was given a pop quiz to see whether he was paying attention. As our young step into the raging waters of life

we pass on the faith to them best by inviting them to walk alongside us on our own spiritual journey (not simply by entrusting all their faith development to their Sunday school teachers or youth leaders, no matter how capable they may be.).

As we seek to mentor a young person in the faith, we need to remember what Charles Darwin discovered about nature and all things natural. Nature doesn't reproduce by the way of cloning, but by way of evolution. When we pass our experience of faith (or any other life experience for that matter), we shouldn't be seeking to make copies of ourselves. We should expect that through our influence and example our proteges will put their faith together in their own way. That is more important now than ever as the church is in a time of Reformation.

As Professor Leonard Sweet wrote:

In the 20th century, a Timothy's key assets were a right arm and a left brain. The future belongs to the right-brained and the left-armed. That's turning out to be true, as now most left-brained tasks, rational, logical, linear thinking functions, are now being done by computers. A right-brain world is being born. A world where inventiveness, empathy and meaning are critically needed. Creativity and imagination will be the most important resources for every Timothy.

As spiritual mentors, we need to encourage every Timothy and their female counterparts to think outside the box rather than simply do the same things we have done. One of the emerging trends in the church is a renewed emphasis on teaching the Bible as the way of living a transformed life. Our youth want to know how to live like Jesus and how to impact the world as he did. Our spiritual ancestors who wrote the Bible used story, metaphor, imagery, poetry, and song to communicate the deep truths of God and God's desires for them in the very real context of their own lives. Which means, we pass on our experience of faith by creating an environment where questions and doubts can be openly and respectfully asked and explored because it's the questions we ask that inspire creativity and ignite imagination leading us in the way of spiritual growth and transformation. We pass on the way of transformation as we invite our youth to explore the Biblical story through artistic expression in a variety of forms using symbols, images and language of their own creating. When we engage our young people in mission projects and mission trips, we nurture their ability to imagine a better world and instill in them a sense of hope.

When it comes to investing our time, our talents, our wisdom, and our treasure in our children and youth, it is we who receive a huge return on our investment. As much as Timothy needed Paul to mentor him in his faith, Paul needed Timothy not only to carry on the tradition, to grow in his own as he taught. Teaching the faith to a new generation of believers requires that we be a perpetual student of our own. We can't teach what we ourselves don't know or fully understand. We can't inspire faith in others unless we grow in our own. Having to learn new ways to communicate ancient texts comes through our own participation in Bible study and adult education. Thanks be to God, we have an abundance of gifted teachers and a variety of educational experiences here at CHPC. May we continue to invest ourselves and our treasure in tending to the souls of our children and youth that they may grow in the way of Jesus and live a life of wholeness and joy.