

Date: October 3, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 27 (World Communion)

**SERMON: Faith at the Family Table**

Text(s): 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:1-10

© 2004 L. R. Kalajainen

In cultures all over the world, the family table is probably one of the most important pieces of furniture, even in places where the “table” is just a mat or rug on the floor around on which the family sits cross-legged as they eat together.

This used to be true in America also, though it no longer is in some parts of the country or in many families, and from my point of view, this is a great loss we have inflicted on ourselves. In so many of our families, every member is involved in so many activities— work, volunteer organizations, sports, music lessons, that everyone keeps a different schedule. Enormous refrigerators and freezers are stocked with pre-prepared meals so that whenever someone wants to eat something, they can just take it out of the frig, pop it in the microwave, and eat it alone while watching TV or playing a video game. Small wonder that we experience so much alienation or that family dynamics become so dysfunctional.

To some extent, perhaps, we in Maine are a little behind that curve, thank goodness, because it appears to me that perhaps there are more families that still value actually cooking and eating meals together, but there are many instances even here in Maine where the family table is a forgotten or neglected piece of furniture.

I can still remember the Sunday dinners spent around my grandmother’s table with four generations of our family present. From a child’s perspective, they were not always thrilling experiences— often they were boring, such as when my grandfather prayed such a long grace that the food started to get cold, or annoying because my uncle, who was just four years older than I, and an incurable tease, was forever trying to get me in trouble with my mother, his elder

sister. But still, there is something incredibly powerful about those memories that has shaped me into the person I am today.

The reason I lament the loss of the family table in our culture and what it represents is that there is a qualitative difference between eating merely to survive and eating to *live*— eating as a way of fostering relationships, cementing the bonds of family or friendship. The table is the place where much of the experience, education, and wisdom of one generation is passed on to the next without any conscious effort or design. It just happens. When we eat together, we take in more than physical nourishment; we take in the being, the essence, of those who share the food with us. Which is why, perhaps, that the central means that Christians have adopted as the way to encounter and absorb the mystery of God’s presence is a symbolic community meal, the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion. All meals that we share with others have this sacramental quality. Sharing food mediates the presence of the one we share it with.

One of the things I took in at my grandmother’s family table, along with the food and the family relationships, was faith. You see, I am one of those, like Timothy in our epistle lesson today, who was fortunate enough to have been born into a family of people for whom their identity as Christians was *the* defining thing about them. Faith in God was simply part of the air that we breathed. And a good deal of that transmission of our identity as a family of faith happened around the family table. The knowledge that we were part of a large extended family of people called Christians was something that got passed along from one generation to the next as naturally and as unconsciously as eating the roast beef and mashed potatoes and gravy and my grandmother’s homemade bread with her homemade elderberry jelly. I know my own desire to be a missionary and do ministry in cross-cultural settings was due at least as much to the fact that often we had visiting missionaries sharing those Sunday dinners with us as anything else. While I was eating, I was also taking in

stories of life in the Ivory Coast or New Guinea or Thailand, so when I ended up in Malaysia some years later, it wasn't a great mystery about how I got there.

The importance of the family table in the transmission of faith is something to celebrate on this World Communion Sunday. I'm aware that many of us here didn't grow up in a family where faith was transmitted from parent or grandparent to child. But even if you didn't receive your faith around the family table, our texts, particularly our epistle lesson, call us to think about how we can be transmitting faith in our own family settings and how we as a church can be a kind of extended family of faith where that transmission of Christian identity happens. This is particularly important for those who may not have grown up in a family of faith, but who have come to faith or are questing for faith as adults.

The second epistle to Timothy is cast in the form of a very poignant personal message from St. Paul, written in the last months of his life from a prison cell in Rome, imparting some last words of counsel to his younger protege and colleague in ministry, Timothy. Timothy is now apparently in a leadership position in one or more of the churches that Paul had founded, and is facing the sorts of challenges that any leader of any community faces.

Paul begins by reminding Timothy that both of them are people who had a family inheritance of faith. *"I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience as my ancestors did— when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day,"* Paul begins. Paul may have had a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ that transformed him from a persecutor of the early Christians into the great apostle to the Gentiles, but that experience was not a conversion in the strict sense; he was not converted from a person of no faith into a person of faith. He already was a person of genuine faith in God, as he clearly says. He worshiped God with a clear conscience as had his ancestors. In

other letters, he gives even more details about the inheritance of faith that he had received. It was that faith passed on from his family tradition that prepared him for the eye-opening, mind-boggling deeper understanding of God's ways in his encounter with the risen Christ.

He goes on, *"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."* Like Paul, Timothy was born into a family of faith. Faith came to him as something passed on from generation to generation, from grandmother to mother to son. From what we learn of Timothy elsewhere in the New Testament, he apparently had a Greek father and a Jewish mother, so it was through his mother that his faith in the God of Israel came. And it was that faith that prepared him to hear the good news about what the God of Israel had done in and through Jesus of Nazareth.

There are people out there who insist that faith cannot be transmitted from one generation to another—that every person has to come to faith for himself or herself. I've heard the old slogan, as I'm sure many of you have, that "God has no grandchildren." Well, I don't think that's strictly true, or at least is only partially true. Paul certainly thought that he inherited his faith from his ancestors and thought that Timothy did too. And I'm sure I'm not the only one here this morning who grew up in a family where faith was as real and as natural as breathing.

When I speak of faith, I'm not talking about the content of faith, primarily—the specific beliefs or doctrines that we hold. I'm speaking of faith as a disposition of our being, a way of living in the world, a way of orientating ourselves around that which we consider to be ultimate reality. Faith is trust in Someone or Something outside and beyond ourselves, trust that there is a higher meaning for our lives than that we happen to be a bundle of DNA strings all glued together that eats, sleeps, drinks, works, and one day will dissolve back into the primal elements from

which we are made. Faith is the pair of eyeglasses that we put on every morning when we awake, through which to see everything around us clearly. Faith is the sense of identity that tells us who we are and Whose we are. It tells us that we belong to the family of God. Faith, in this sense, as a habit of life, as the primary orientation of our selves, is primarily the product of *formation* rather than *information*. Faith is something that is primarily “caught” rather than “taught.”

That’s why the family of God needs to pay close attention to the way we are helping to transmit faith and form the lives of ourselves and our children. The Church, through its worship, has always emphasized the importance of the transmission of faith from one generation to the next. Passing on the faith is one of the reasons we gather as a community for worship each week. Christians have been gathering like this for two millenia. Our worship is directed to God, but in the process, we ourselves are formed by the weekly repeated ritual words and actions that make up our worship. To be sure, our worship is shaped in our own language, our own musical idioms, our own cultural context and world-view, but we don’t have to re-invent the wheel each time we come to church. Rather we seek to draw on the deep well of tradition that we have received from Christians who have worshiped and lived and struggled before us. We recognize that we eat from a table that extends through the generations and at which millions upon millions of faithful Christians have found nourishment. When we gather around that Table, we are in communion, not only with one another and with Christ, but with all those people of faith who gathered around this same Table in the generations before us.

That’s why being part of a worshiping community is so central to the formation of our identity. And it’s why one of mine and Mary’s concerns as a pastors and of our Christian education director and our Music Director and

our Sunday School teachers and our Deacons is with the ways we transmit faith to our church’s children. I think we need to have a lot more conversations about how we can do it most effectively. Many churches, especially mainline Protestant churches for the past three or four decades, have seen children come up through Sunday School, go through confirmation class, and then drop out of church until they begin having children of their own. Eventually some make it back to church, but many more do not, as the now four-decade long decline in all the mainstream denominations reveals. In fact, in a conversation with your former pastor Bill Imes recently, Bill cited some recent studies that show that among the Baby Boomer generation, which is my generation, about 90% dropped out of church when they were teenagers or young adults, and only 20% ever made it back. Why is that? Why aren’t we passing on the faith from generation to generation as effectively as we once did, so that it becomes an essential part of our children’s identity? Is it, as the keynote speaker at the Maine Conference last weekend told us, that the churches in America have become entrenched in a culture of membership rather than a culture of discipleship? We always welcome new members, but don’t always understand that our primary reason for being a church is to commit ourselves to being disciples of Jesus Christ and to invite others to join us in that journey of discipleship in order to be a transforming presence in the world. I don’t imagine that I have all the answers to the issue of why most churches are failing to form faith deeply in the next generation, but I’m happy that we are beginning to have some serious conversations about that issue, for it is a critical issue.

In our own families at home, there are many things we can do to pass on and form faith in our own children. We can make a habit of such practices as grace before meals or regular times when we pray together or read the

scriptures together or read excellent books or watch excellent movies that, whether explicitly Christian or not, promote discussion about the values and moral convictions we espouse. If we do, then even if our children apparently rebel or reject faith as they go through adolescence or young adulthood, as many children will if they're independent thinkers, we and they will discover that their inheritance is still there waiting to be reclaimed when their life experiences bring them to a point of readiness.

And that's the crucial point of Paul's exhortation to Timothy as well. Paul doesn't stop with commending the faith that Timothy received from his family and in which he grew up. *Inherited* faith is an enormously valuable gift, but its value can only be fully realized when it becomes *owned* faith, faith that is personally appropriated and made to come alive in one's own life by nurture and reflection and the full engagement of one's own mind and heart. As someone said, if you only have the faith your parents had, it's like wearing a second-hand hat that doesn't quite fit.

So Paul says to Timothy, "*Rekindle the gift of God that is within you. . . for God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of self-discipline.*" The gift of God that we acknowledge at our baptisms, the gift of God that we receive from our families or which comes to us through a conversion experience if we haven't grown up in a family where it was passed on to us, is a gift that has to be personally appropriated, personally rekindled, just as the fire in our fireplaces in the winter have to be rekindled periodically and regularly if they're going to continue burning brightly.

How do we rekindle this gift of faith? By exercising it. Regularly. Frequently. Just as we have to feed our bodies regularly in order to receive adequate nourishment, so we must gather as a family around God's table regularly. We have to nourish ourselves on the bread of heaven and the wine of salvation. We have to practice

speaking the language of faith. We have to pray and listen to the scriptures that have nourished our family for thousands of years. We have to take the time from our busy schedules to listen to what other members of the family around the table are saying to us. We have to look around us and see who else is at the table with us, or who is absent and might be present if we were to invite them. We have to remember to listen to Jesus, our host, the one who sits at the head of the table, and seek to follow him as a disciple to the best of our ability. We won't do it perfectly. And that's why we'll always need the forgiveness of which Jesus spoke in our Gospel lesson, and why we'll always need to be ready to forgive those who offend us or who are less than perfect. Perfection isn't our goal except in one thing, and that is to become perfect in love— to become increasingly able to love others as God has loved us.

And isn't that what we really hope will be learned around our family tables? That we belong. That we're loved. That we're cherished as a member of the family. That even if we're imperfect, even if we're naughty, even if we fail at what we're trying to achieve, we're accepted anyway? What greater security could we ask for than that? And what greater hope for the world could there be than for those who know they are loved eternally and unconditionally to be able to extend that love to others, not only to our children, but even to our enemies?