

Saints Lois and Eunice, Among Others
2 Timothy 1:1-14
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There is a tension in the letters to Timothy with which the church has always wrestled. In contrast to earlier letters by Paul to the churches he founded or nurtured, the letters to Timothy and Titus suggest a development in the life of the early church toward more organization. In these letters, we hear a little less about things like crucifixion and resurrection and a little more about church government and its offices like bishop and elder and deacon that the church implemented as more and more people followed the message of Christ. The tension stems, of course, from the need to organize, versus the constraints that organization creates. Even the most flexible structure is inherently limiting, and although God's Spirit cannot be limited, the messengers of that Spirit can, and frequently are. Organizing people and resources can enable the Gospel to travel much further than without the structures, but organizing people and resources can become an end unto itself and thus stop the voyage before it even begins.

Our passage from 2 Timothy tonight hints at a related tension, as we read when Paul instructs Timothy to "guard the good treasure entrusted to you," the treasure being the testimony of grace Paul has received and desires to pass on, what he also calls the "sound teaching." Biblical scholars more learned than I have seen in this terminology a tendency less missionary and more institutional than in

other, earlier Pauline letters, as the early church tried to help its followers discriminate between the truth it had received from Paul and the influence of other, less reputable sources. In the period of this letter, God's gift of faith is beginning to be defined, and boundaries are being erected to protect it from being corrupted. Earlier church leaders want to make sure their followers do not change the message and so what were previously splendid, if vague, notions of what it meant to be a follower of Christ, were being gathered and sorted, a process which, like the institutionalization of the church, created its own tension.

This latter tension is sometimes described by the use of the words "doctrine" or "creed." Doctrinal and creedal statements are an essential part of the faith and even Jesus himself relied on those of his Jewish heritage, most famously the declaration that "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" that we find both in the book of Deuteronomy and on the lips of Jesus. Doctrines and creeds are how we put into a more coherent and comprehensive fashion what we believe. They make up what Paul here calls "sound teaching" and "the good treasure." Yes, the content of that teaching and treasure is faith and grace, but the way we express those important gifts from God in doctrines and creeds helps us transmit them. Where doctrines and creeds have become a problem in the life of the church is where they themselves have become more important than the grace they represent, when they are only spoken and not lived, when their memorization means more than their meaning.

Let us take for example the doctrine of the communion of the saints, a key element in what is known as the Apostles' Creed, a statement used in the life of the early church as a pre-baptismal teaching tool, a way to introduce soon-to-be professing Christians to the most basic elements of the faith. And so the Creed begins with "I believe," then recounts some of the most significant moments in the story of Jesus, and concludes with a series of theological statements, about which, presumeably, those about to be baptized had been taught. One of those final theological statements is "I believe in the Communion of Saints," an idea which has caused no small amount of controversy given the multiple ways the word "saint" is used in various sectors of the church. Here in Costa Rica, we are well acquainted with one idea of the word saint, as it is plastered just about everywhere, including the names of many of the places we live and work. Saint Joseph, otherwise known as Joseph the carpenter and stepfather of Jesus and for whom our capital city is named, captured the imagination of the early church who recognized in him certain values worth affirming, and so placed him in that category of persons whose faith deserves to be emulated. Likewise with St. Anthony, St. Theresa, and many, many others.

But of course, there are many other ways the word "saint" is used, including the way the Apostle Paul did when describing the people who make up the body of believers. "Saint" in this case refers to all believers, and comes from the word which means "holy," the same word used in today's passage from 2 Timothy when

our “holy calling” is described. The word “saint” itself may not appear in 2 Timothy, but the sentiment does. Paul lists numerous faithful people who are like those, in other letters, whom he calls saints. For Paul, the word saint applies to all believers, not just those whose efforts on behalf of the kingdom were so noteworthy they were singled out for special status within the early church. You see, for every Saint named Joseph, there are many saints Erastus and Trophimus, to name just two of the believers mentioned later in 2 Timothy. And for every St. Teresa, there are countless saints named Lois and Eunice, the mother and grandmother of Timothy, who are mentioned in tonight’s lesson. We’re all saints because God has made us holy in Jesus Christ.

The Communion of the Saints, then, using this broader understanding of the word saint, signifies the whole community of believers who have received their holy calling. The doctrine of the Communion of the Saints, however, is not limited just to those we see around us, but incorporates every person, no matter where, or when, who has received that holy calling according to God’s grace. That is part of what we celebrate on World Communion Sunday, that the body of Christ is not just us gathered here at ECF, nor just those Christians in Costa Rica, nor our particular denomination if we have one, but indeed everywhere. And just as the Communion of the Saints is not limited to place, it is not limited by time, such that we also celebrate on World Communion Sunday the fact that we are connected with countless generations of believers both before us and after us, those who are

already breaking bread with Christ in heaven, and those who will one day attend the heavenly banquet.

When, in our verses tonight, Paul gives thanks for the connection Timothy has with his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, he is referring to the same connection we have with all who have gone before us and all who will come after us. Indeed, it is not the blood relationship that interests Paul most, but the faith relationship. Paul is very clear that it was not the blood of Timothy's ancestors that "abolished death and brought life and immortality" to young Timothy and to us all, but rather Christ's blood, but he knows how to give credit where credit is due. And so he credits those sisters in the faith, Saints Lois and Eunice, with transmitting the faith Christ won for them to subsequent generations. And likewise, it is not our parents' and grandparents' blood which brought us to faith, or the blood of anyone who helped us to know Christ, but rather their witness, their guardianship of the good treasure and the sound teaching that God's grace "has been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

The resolution of the tension created by doctrines and creeds will not come to pass if we simply cast them aside. Indeed, Paul's own testimony recalls the witness of his own ancestors, whom, he said, worshiped with the same clean conscience he employs. They may not have had the revelation of Christ that Paul had, but he knew that his own faith was in continuity and community with theirs,

that it was the foundation on which Christ's message was laid. You see, the message of Christ was only comprehensible to Paul because he knew from where he had come, and that knowledge had been transmitted to him through the faith of his community, through Passover suppers, remembering the festivals, and all the other ways his people enacted their faith. He knew the promises. He knew that God keeps promises. You see, if we would avoid the pitfalls of doctrines and creeds it will be because we live them and breathe them in addition to learning them and reciting them. It will be because we act them out every so often in church, and then act them out every day as we live out our holy calling. It will be because we capture our children's imaginations with them. It will be because the world will be able to see that we believe what we say and we say what we believe.

And so, even though it may not seem necessary to set aside one Sunday a year to remember that the church is broader and deeper than those of us gathered in this particular place at this particular time, it is vital if we take seriously Paul's words to Timothy to "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you." The communion of the saints, a doctrine which proclaims to the whole world that Jesus was killed and raised not just for the elite but for all, not just for the rich but for all, not just for the physically perfect but for all, not just for spiritual superheroes but for all, that is a treasure which must not only be guarded but proclaimed.

And thus we gather on World Communion Sunday to enact the wonder of that doctrine, to celebrate that God has invited us all to the table. And in the spirit

of remembering that we celebrate Jesus Christ through time and space, we'll try to live the doctrine as well as say it. In a few moments we'll celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in a way which will bring to life that doctrine and the grace it represents. But first let us stand and say what we believe, declaring that sound teaching by saying together the Apostles' Creed.

[At this point, the congregation speaks together the Apostles' Creed]

As you gather around the bread and cup, I invite you to say to those around your particular table, the name of a person you wish were right here with us sharing this meal, but who you know is enjoying it elsewhere, whether in time or in place. And then I invite you to serve one another, saying to those you serve, "I believe in the communion of the saints." Amen.