



MOTHER'S DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, May 8, 2011

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Lection – 2 Timothy 1:3-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 3) 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. (v. 4) Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. (v. 5) 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. (v. 6) For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; (v. 7) for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

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The historical origin of Mother's Day in the United States is rooted in 1905 when Anna Jarvis lost her beloved mother. Seeking to find a way to commemorate her mother's legacy, Jarvis spearheaded a national campaign to honor mothers in 1907. By 1912, a joint resolution in the United States Congress designated the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day. An official resolution for Mother's Day was approved by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914.¹

In the African American church tradition, Mother's Day is a day to give thanks to God for those who have mothered us in the faith. On this Sunday, we recognize that motherhood is not limited to biological association, nor is motherhood restricted to a woman's fertility or marital status. Motherhood is ascribed to those caregivers whose testimony of faithfulness has nurtured and inspired our own faith formation.

In many congregations, it is common that flowers are offered to all or a specific group of mothers present on Mother's Day. Flowers become a liturgical symbol to illustrate the beauty and grace of our God-sent mothers and to illustrate that God has used our mothers as seeds for our own faith to flower.

Note for the Liturgical Moment:

On Mother's Day, be mindful of those who will mourn their mothers because of death or estranged relationships.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Timothy 1:3-7

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The past nine months have been a time of prayerful reflection for me as my husband and I anticipate the birth of our first child. Ever since I can remember, I have been surrounded by strong mothers. These mothers include my biological mother, as well as those whom Dr. Stephanie Mitchem calls the "othermothers" who have transmitted wisdom and faith in my life.² Whether Grandmothers, aunts, cousins, and the cloud of mentors who have left indelible imprints on my soul, the mothers in my life are a diverse tapestry with at least one thing in common: their presence has waged a protest to a culture which often denies gender equity. Today, African American women earn only 68 cents on the male dollar.³ Glass ceilings have yet to be shattered. Considering this reality, I am grateful for mothers whose faith in Christ compelled them to stand up and say, "We too are pastors, preachers, professors, presidents, scientists, architects, community organizers, engineers, truck drivers, and CEOs." While this may not be everyone's experience with mama, these are the mothers I know. They have blazed a trail for me. Their witness has nurtured my faith and has been formative in the person I am today.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In 2 Timothy 1:3-7, the attributed author is the Apostle Paul, who writes to encourage his beloved mentee and younger co-laborer in the gospel, Timothy. Timothy, a leader in the church, is apparently facing opposition by those who “despise his youth” (1 Timothy 4:12). In our text, Paul offers Timothy a word of wisdom to help Timothy overcome his opposition. His charge to Timothy is to remember. In the five verses of our text, the concept of memory is referenced four times. Paul constantly “remembers” Timothy in his prayers (v. 3). Paul “recalls” Timothy’s tears (v. 4), and he “reminds” Timothy to “rekindle the gift of God” that is within him (v. 6). On Mother’s Day, the interpreter is struck by verse five, where Paul is “reminded” of Timothy’s faith, a faith that lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother, Eunice. By invoking the memory of Timothy’s “faith-full” foremothers, Paul hopes to *evoke* Timothy’s faith and encourage him to move forward in the face of opposition.

This practice of looking back to inspire forward faith resonates with African cosmology. For instance, the Akan people have a symbol called Sankofa, which is presented as a “bird whose body is heading in one direction but whose head is turned in the opposite direction. What the symbol is teaching is that we cannot go forward without first going back to our past to understand how it is we got to where we are.”⁴ In the tradition of the Akan people, Paul invites Timothy to look back in order to move forward. Indeed, there is power in remembrance, and by invoking the memory of Timothy’s foremothers, Paul is able to call forth Timothy’s awareness of at least two things: his **identity** and his **inheritance**.

First, Paul calls forth Timothy’s awareness of his **identity** when he recalls the names of Timothy’s foremothers. One should not overlook the fact that in this text, Paul literally calls forth the names of Lois and Eunice. The naming of these women honors their God-given identity and has significant import when we consider the historic underpinnings of many ancient and present-day cultures, which too often render women nameless or render women without an honorable name. For instance, referring to women as “female dogs” or a “garden tool” is no way to honor the identity of a child of God, and yet today, these offensive names are notoriously used in the prose of music lyrics to refer to women. With this in mind, naming Lois and Eunice becomes a prophetic exclamation point about the dignity and sacredness of their God-given identity. Here, we should note that Eunice’s name means “good victory.”⁵ As a child of God and by the grace of God, Eunice’s testimony is that she lived up to her name. Consequently, her son Timothy has “good victory” in his biological and spiritual DNA. Timothy is the offspring of overcomers, a child of “good victory.”

Not only is Paul instructing Timothy to remember his identity, but by invoking the memory of his foremothers, he also instructs Timothy to remember his **inheritance**. In writing to Timothy in verse 5, Paul recalls a faith that lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and that Paul is sure now lives in Timothy. This faith is Timothy’s inheritance. By calling forth Timothy’s inheritance, Paul is affirming that Timothy has what it takes to meet the challenges of his present call. However, Timothy will need to draw upon his faith inheritance with greater intensity. So in verse 6, Paul instructs Timothy to “rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” The image that

corresponds with “rekindle” is that of a “campfire kept going for days on end requiring that the flame be fanned every morning.”⁶ Just like fire needs oxygen to burn, the memory of Timothy’s foremothers becomes the oxygen that fans the flame of Timothy’s flickering faith so that his faith may expand and intensify. Put another way, the memory of Lois and Eunice is the wind beneath Timothy’s wings. Their memory evokes Timothy’s awareness of his faith inheritance, granting young Timothy the confidence to “conduct his ministry with a God-given spirit of ‘love, power, and self-discipline.’”⁷

In the words of Clarice Martin, “memory is a rallying cry in this text.”⁸ It is also a familiar tune in the African American church tradition. Songs like “Somebody prayed for me”⁹ harken to women like Lois and Eunice who have mothered us in the faith. These songs often provoke great gladness on a Sunday morning because the congregation can look back and understand that we did not come this far by faith by ourselves. Lois and Eunice represent generations before us whose faith in the Lord propelled them to pray and work while facing great hostility, and because of their faithfulness we are where we are. We may not be where we need to be, yet we are certainly not where we used to be. For this reason, we say “Thank you, Lord!” Amid the challenges we face today, we are inspired to work towards God’s beloved community with the same gift of faith that our foremothers handed to us. Thank you, mothers!

Celebration

Now is the time to fan the flickering flames of our faith and gain confidence to face the challenges of today. Fan the flame with the memory of mother Mary McCloud Bethune, who with \$1.50 started Bethune Cookman College. We are her children! Fan the flame with the memory of mother Fannie Lou Hamer, a sixth-grade-educated sharecropper who pioneered the right for black people to vote. We are her children! Fan the flame with the memory of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who endured the ridicule and doubts of the gift she carried inside of her, yet she had faith to carry the gift full-term. We are her children!

We’ve come this far by faith leaning on the Lord!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: Flames; fire; smoke; tears; laying on of hands; grandmothers; and

Sounds: Mother’s teaching, pleading, and praying

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

For Sermon Illustrations or Content:

- Cannon, Katie. Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community. New York, NY: Continuum, 1995. (See appendix entitled “Exposing my Home

Point of View,” where Dr. Cannon shares a reflection on her mother and grandmother.)

- Mother to Son
By Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you,
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.

But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

- “A Song for Mama.” By Boyz II Men.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tap90z44WR8>
- “Dear Mama.” By 2 Pac Shakur
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNcloTmvTeA>

Notes

1. www.mothersdayshrine.com/history.php accessed 3 February 2011
2. Mitchem, Stephanie Y. Introducing Womanist Theology. New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2002. p. 50
3. www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1983185,00.html#ixzz1FTwjUFR8 accessed 3 February 2011

4. Wright, Jeremiah. A Sankofa Moment. The History of Trinity United Church of Christ. Dallas, TX: St. Paul Press, 2010. p. 17

5. Strong, James. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1986. p. 418

6. Gunn, James D.G. *The First and Second Letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus.* New Interpreters Bible Commentary. Leandar Keck, ed., et al. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002.

7. Martin, Clarice. *1–2 Timothy and Titus (The Pastoral Epistles).* True to Our Native Land. Brian Blount, ed., et al. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 409

8. Ibid.

9. Darling, Alvin and Dorothy Norwood. African American Heritage Hymnal. Delores Carpenter, ed., et al. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. p. 505