

GO FOR THE GOLD: PASS THE BATON

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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TEXT: II Timothy 1:1-7, II Timothy 2:1-2

The year was 2004 and the Summer Olympics were being held in Athens. One of the exciting events of the games was the women's 4x100 meter relay race. The USA Women's Team was the fastest team, and everyone was expecting them to win the gold.

In that race, four runners each race 100 meters. After their 100 meters, they enter an exchange zone of 20 meters, where they will pass a baton to the next runner. *“Coaches say the most critical moment in a relay race is not the beginning or the end; it's that split second when one takes the baton and places it in the hand of the next runner. If there is a bobble, or if the baton is dropped, the race will be lost.”*¹ The entire race hinges on that exchange of that batons in the exchange zone!

Well, in 2004, during that relay race, as USA Olympian Marion Jones entered that exchange zone, she came in a little slower than she should of, because of being fatigued. By the time she tried to get the baton into the hand of the next runner, Lauryn Williams, she was already outside of the exchange zone, and they were disqualified and were out of the race.

In 2008, during that same 4x100 meter relay race, when Lauryn Williams came into the exchange zone and handed the baton to runner #3 - this time, they dropped the baton. So once again, they were disqualified. Here was the fastest team, the fastest individual runners and yet they couldn't win because they were either too late passing the baton or because they dropped the baton. You see, in a relay race – it doesn't matter how fast or strong the individual runner is – if there is not a seamless exchange – everything that came before falls to the ground – and the race is lost.²

So, it seems that that first lesson you have to learn when you're training for relays, is: “Don't drop the baton!” and “Make sure you are right on time – transferring the baton in the exchange zone! Don't slow down and delay.” Keep in sync with the runner coming before you – passing the baton to you. And keep an eye out for the runner coming after you – so that you can pass on the baton and keep the race going.

So, it is with our Christian faith! We are in the race of faith – a divine relay if you will, and each generation has a sacred responsibility to pass on the faith to others. Jesus began that race when He commissioned the disciples to go out to all the world and tell the good news of the gospel. He passed the baton to them. And because they faithfully passed the baton of faith from one generation to the next – down through the ages – we are here today as the Christian Church. And now – the baton has come to us – and the question becomes – what are we going to do with the baton? Will we be too slow to pass it on – or will we drop the baton – or will we faithfully run the race and pass the baton of faith on to future generations?

As we turn to our Scripture for today, we realize that the Apostle Paul is perhaps thinking about questions like this as he passes on the baton of ministry to his son in the faith, Timothy. I invite you now to turn to II Timothy 1. II Timothy is near the back of the Bible – right before the book of Titus.

II Timothy is considered to be the last letter that Paul wrote and could be considered his “Last Will and Testament”. This time, Paul is writing from a cold Roman cell and Paul is within weeks of being beheaded by Emperor Nero. So, Paul writes to give some advice to Timothy about how to not drop the baton of faith but to pass on the faith and make a difference in future generations. And his words are just as inspiring and challenging for us today.

Paul’s letter begins by reminding Timothy of his roots – of the faith that has been passed on to him. Look at II Timothy 1, beginning at verse 3:

³ Timothy, I thank God for you—the God I serve with a clear conscience, just as my ancestors did. Night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ⁴ I long to see you again, for I remember your tears as we parted. And I will be filled with joy when we are together again. ⁵ I remember your genuine faith, for you share the faith that first filled your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice. And I know that same faith continues strong in you. ⁶ This is why I remind you to fan into flames the spiritual gift God gave you when I laid my hands on you. ⁷ For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.

Timothy had been blessed to have a Christian upbringing. His mother and grandmother were early Christian converts and had passed on their faith to Timothy. Paul was sure that his faith was strong, and he encouraged Timothy to “fan into flame” that faith – to rekindle it and be bold in sharing it with others. For God hasn’t given us a spirit of fear or cowardice – but a spirit of power and love and self-control.

Our role as parents and grandparents is so incredibly important in the passing on of our faith. We have the primary responsibility to build a strong spiritual foundation for our kids. Our number one priority in raising our children should be to introduce them to Jesus and help them to grow up to be a disciple of Christ. And I believe that begins as you start by praying for them – and taking them to church and reading the Bible with them. It is never too early to start building a strong foundation for your kids. Actively show your kids what it means to be a disciple of Christ by doing things together to serve the Lord. For example, you might take the kids shopping to fill a bag with food or toiletries that can be donated to our Blessing Box. If you give them an allowance, teach them how to tithe their allowance – and the importance of giving to the ministry of the church. And then live a life that reflects the values and beliefs of our faith...because your children are watching and will follow your example. Model a character of love and patience, compassion and forgiveness that will form the solid foundation for their walk of faith.

Now it may be that you don’t have any children in your life right now OR perhaps you never *had* any children or grandchildren. I believe that we all have a responsibility to share our faith with the children among us in our church family. You’ve heard that phrase, “*It takes a village to raise a child.*” Well, I want to say that I believe “It takes a church family to pass the

faith on to our children”. We ALL have a responsibility to show Jesus to our children – and to pray for them – and yes, even volunteer to teach and work with the children to help them know our faith. That’s the promise we make as a church when we have baby dedications – and baptisms, isn’t it?

So, what are you doing to help our children and youth have faith? Are you being slow to pass the baton – or maybe even dropping the baton? Our children are in great need of your witness. Our education ministry team has given us information recently about all sorts of ways we can help with our children and youth – as a Sunday School teacher – a mentor or small group leader. Maybe even help with organizing crafts or helping serve a meal. Most importantly, what we ALL can do is pray for our kids and form relationships with them. We pass on the baton of faith to our kids, when we reflect the love of Jesus to them.

The Apostle Paul knew this was the kind of faith upbringing Timothy received from his mother and grandmother. They were faithful and didn’t drop the baton. And Paul was also faithful in passing on the truth of the gospel to Timothy. Look at verses 13 & 14 of chapter one:

¹³Hold on to the pattern of wholesome teaching you learned from me – a pattern shaped by the faith and love that you have in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴Through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within us, carefully guard the precious truth that has been entrusted to you.

2 ¹Timothy, my dear son, be strong through the grace that God gives you in Christ Jesus. ² You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.

Hold on to the truth of the Gospel Timothy – hold on to it and don’t drop it....and then pass it on to others ... so that they can then pass it on to others. And the race will continue. Because Timothy was faithful in sharing the gospel – the message was passed on to future generations – and eventually came to us! This message is not just for Timothy but is for us as well. We are now the ones entrusted with this wonderful message of the good news of Jesus Christ. And there are people everywhere who do not know the Lord yet – and future generations are depending on us.

There is so much crisis and pain and suffering in our world right now. And people are walking in darkness because they don’t know that Jesus is the Light that can bring them hope and peace and joy. And when we get so caught up in our own lives – and we make excuses, saying: “One of these days, when I’m not so busy – I’ll get involved and share my faith.” With that, we may just be too late to pass the baton – and will have missed the opportunity to make a difference in someone’s life. Or maybe we say, “One of these days when I have more money, then I’ll give to the ministry of the church and share my faith.” But that day never comes, and the baton is dropped, and the ministry of the church can’t continue, because there were not enough funds to do what God was calling us to do. And if we just get comfortable and ignore the needs of the people that are all around us – we drop the baton and people won’t know the Lord and the hope that can be found in Him.

If we are going to pass on the faith to another generation – we are going to have to keep our eyes focused on Jesus and have a passion and determination to NOT drop the baton. We have to remember those who have come before us. They are that great cloud of witnesses who are cheering us on. “Keep going. Don’t drop the baton. Keep sharing the faith – pass it on to the next generation.” And then we need to think of those who are coming after us – to love them as God has loved us – and have a passion to share the faith with them as ambassadors for Christ.

You may never know how God will use you to make a big difference in one person’s life when you choose to pass the baton on and share your faith.

Let me close with a story.

There was a great evangelist in the 19th century named D.L. Moody. Thousands of people came to Christ under his ministry. One of them was a man named Wilbur Chapman. Wilbur Chapman became an evangelist and while he was preaching in Chicago, a professional ballplayer named Billy Sunday came to his meetings, and Billy gave his life to Christ. Billy Sunday played pro baseball for two more years and then quit baseball and became a world-famous evangelist. He set up tent meetings all across the country, including here in Galesburg in 1907 and it is reported that there were some two thousand conversions, while he was here. At one of Billy Sunday’s meetings, a man named Mordecai Hamm accepted Christ. And Hamm became an evangelist in the Southeast. He ministered to large crowds in Southern states. In the 1930’s, a young man came to one of his meetings, and gave his life to Christ. That young man’s name was Billy Graham.

A chain of faith,
from D.L. Moody to Wilbur Chapman,
to Billy Sunday, to Mordecai Hamm,
to Billy Graham – a chain of faith.

But... I left out one part of the story. Do you know how this chain of faith started? It started with a Sunday School teacher. A Sunday School teacher named Edward Kimball wanted to make sure that every kid in his Sunday School really knew Christ as Savior. And so, he started visiting all the kids in the Sunday School. He found one of his kids, a young teenager, working in a shoe store as a stock boy. Kimball went back to the stockroom where this teenage boy was working, and talked to him about Jesus, and then he and D.L. Moody, knelt right there in that shoe store and Moody received Christ.

Now, Edward Kimball was not a world-famous evangelist, he was a simple Sunday school teacher. But he passed on his faith, and that chain of faith led to Billy Graham. Tens of millions of people over the next six generations have come to faith in Christ, because a Sunday school teacher wanted to be sure he didn’t break the chain, he wanted to be sure he passed on his faith.

You have no idea what kind of impact you can have on the history of this world when you decide to pass along your faith to a child. There may be no greater accomplishment, that you

will ever achieve in your lifetime, that is greater than passing your faith to someone else, building and extending the chain of faith.

What will you do with the baton? Will you pass it on?

Let's pray.

Invitation

RESOURCES

¹Ray Pritchard, "Passion – II Timothy 1", <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2003-06-15-Renewing-Your-Passion/>

²Christine Caine, "Passing the Baton", <https://youtu.be/h7OxJ5iTj0Y>.