

THE LEGACY OF LOIS

Passing Our Faith to the Next Generation

Text: Psalm 23; John 10:1-10; Acts 2:42-47; 2 Timothy 1:1-7

He Makes Beautiful Things

It was mid-October and the trees along Virginia's scenic Blue Ridge Parkway were ablaze with color." A middle-aged woman had stopped at an overlook in order to show the view to her elderly mother. As the incandescent leaves waved and floated in the breeze, the daughter remarked: "Isn't it wonderful of God to take something just before it dies and make it so beautiful." "Hmm," mused her mother. "Wouldn't it be nice if He did that with people." The younger woman gazed intently at the stooped figure beside her and murmured softly: "Yes, mom, and sometimes He does."

Sometimes He does. Sometimes we don't see God's creatures for the beauties they are until the winds of time have swept them away. Sometimes it is only then that we realize how there would be no ongoing life in the tree had those leaves not once been there to soak up the radiance of the Sun and pass it on before they went.

That's how it was with Lois. Did you notice her name in the passage we read a moment ago? It's not a part of the text that Bible scholars or preachers usually dwell on. Like Zerubbabel or Jehoshaphat or so many of the other names of dead people that carpet the floor of the Scriptural forest, we tend to walk right over the name of Lois. It doesn't occur to most of us how different life might be had not once upon the tree of life there blazed a woman named "Lois." It is easy to forget from whence we came.

We take for granted that we live in a culture where many people seek to live by a set of higher standards than the law of the jungle. We blithely live as if there were always hospitals and schools, service organizations and democracies. We go about each day as if concepts like freedom, or equality, or concern for the weak just arose spontaneously from the ground. But that is not so. As eminent scholars like Stephen Carter of Yale or Rodney Stark at Baylor have widely demonstrated, most of the mores and institutions which define our experience of civilization grew from the tree of Christian spirituality.

Someone will immediately say: "Oh, c'mon; aren't you aware of all the crimes committed in the name of Christianity along the way?" And I would answer, "Yes." But that's like questioning the value of a massive fruit tree in the desert simply because parasites exist on some of its branches. The truth is that there's not an atheist on earth who would really want to live in the nasty, brutish world we would have certainly inherited had the Church of Jesus Christ never taken

root and grown.

The Beauty of a Sincere Faith

But what I want you to understand today is that all of us very nearly had to. You see, nineteen centuries ago, the church of Jesus Christ was very nearly destroyed before it had chance to take root. In the latter half of the first century, the tornadoes and wildfire of a tyrannical persecution tore across the ancient world. Vast numbers of the spiritual saplings planted by the Apostles of Jesus during their first missionary journeys were now torn up or burned by the Roman emperors, Decius and Nero.

Archaeologists have now uncovered thousands of parchment fragments from that period. These "libelli" as they are called, are the written statements of once-Christian people who -- in order to avoid the shunning, imprisonment, torture, or slaughter to which the followers of Jesus Christ were routinely subjected in that era -- publicly and utterly recanted their faith.

It was in that context -- while he languished in a Roman prison, soon to have his head hacked off -- that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter. He wrote it in the hope that a seed of life God had planted through his ministry many years before now had sufficient strength to bloom even after Nero finally blew Paul's leaf away. That seed of life in which Paul staked such HOPE was the faith that came alive in a mother named Lois.

The scriptures tell us precious little about Lois. Her name appears in this passage and nowhere else in the New Testament. We know that her name means "desirable," and that she lived in Lystra, one of the cities of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). We know from Acts 16 that she was a Jew, and can surmise that Lois took pains to instruct her family in the scriptures of the Old Testament and their persevering hope for an eventual Messiah. We know from Acts 14 that the Apostle Paul passed through Lois' town on his first missionary journey, and that when she heard the good news, the bud of Lois' faith opened to the Sun of God and the living water of the Holy Spirit.

But there's something more about Lois that we know from studying 2 Timothy chapter 1 -- something at the heart of what I want to communicate to you today: As Lois grew in faith, she passed on the new Life in her to others. Paul tells us that the "**faith lived first in... Lois**" and then in her daughter "**Eunice**," and finally in her grandson, "**Timothy**" (2 Tim 1:5). And then Paul tells Timothy, and all who would later read this letter, that it is precisely Lois' kind of faith that the church of that time -- and, I maintain, the church of this time -- needs to "**fan into flame**" today (2 Tim 1:6). What is that kind of faith? Verse 7 tells us. It's the kind that lives with a spirit of such "**power, love, and self-discipline**" that younger generations can't help but be infected with those gifts (2 Tim 1:7). Let me think with you on just the first

two of those gifts, if I may, and save the last one for another day.

Model What It Looks Like to Seek Out the Gift of Power

I'm sure you hear, as I do, all kinds of people giving prescriptions for what the world needs today. But let me suggest that what is most needed in our age is more women and men with a **"sincere faith"** in God (2 Tim 1:5a, 6a). When more individuals again walk and talk with the Lord of Life; when more people again open themselves up to the renewing work of God's Holy Spirit; when more people don't just fast-feed on this Word on Sundays but digest it daily, then we shall see unleashed upon this earth a genuine power for living -- a power that yet has the capacity to bring order out of chaos and light out of darkness, and hope out of despair.

One of the most important ministries a mother, or any other adult, has is modeling for younger generations a daily commitment to opening themselves up to the Source of that Power. Have your kids or grandkids or others watching seen from your devotional practices that you make it a priority to seek the Lord's companionship daily? Can they tell from the frequency with which you attend worship or meet with your small group, that this faith is deeply sincere to you? Do they know that you believe that letting the Good Shepherd lead your steps and restore your soul is the key to a truly abundant life? (Psalm 23:1-3)

Don't beat yourself up if that hasn't been your pattern. Just make it your objective from here on out. Write a letter or start a conversation with someone younger about the strength you've found or are starting to find in God. Resolve that when the family and friends stand at your funeral someday and talk about what they observed in you, they will speak of having learned from you the importance of opening themselves up daily to the Power of God.

Anna Mow once wrote: "Any child will learn to worship God who lives his daily life with adults who worship Him." Psychologist Larry Christensen observes: "Happy is the child...who sees mother and father rising early, or going aside regularly, to keep times with the Lord." Or as the Book of Proverbs sums it up: **"He who walks with the wise grows wise"** (Prov 13:20). You know, it apparently worked that way with Timothy. He turned out to be an individual of immense spiritual power -- able to live with courage and integrity in the midst of tornado times. Who do you think he learned that wisdom from? Where'd he learn about the Gift of Real Power for living?

Model What It Looks Like to Give the Gift of Radical Love

Or consider the second gift that someone of sincere faith passes on to those who are younger. I'm thinking here of the Gift of Radical Love. If I came down and put a microphone in front of your mouth and asked: "Do you do your best

to give love to the younger people in your circles?" I'm betting all of you would say YES. The result is that the people under your influence probably grow up being fairly good too at caring for the people in their circles. And that's a great thing. At the same time, one of the greatest gifts we can give to the next generation is to offer them a vision of the sort of radical love that reaches beyond our familiar circles. We can teach and model the kind of outreaching heart by which God once left his safe heaven in order to love a distant and difficult people. We can present a picture of the kind of radical love by which the early church won the heart of their world (Acts 2:45, 47).

I read recently of an older woman named Jan who apparently thought that it wasn't too late to impart that example to her grown children. In the weeks leading up to Mother's Day, Jan's kids began fishing for what their mom might like them to do for her on the big Sunday. "You know," she said, "considering all the grace God has given me in life, what would really make me happy is if you went out this year and did something wonderful for somebody else that maybe doesn't have a family like ours. Then, just write me a card, and let me in on the joy of what you did."

Jan's oldest son was a recovering alcoholic; so he decided to spend an evening making coffee and talking with residents of a chemical dependency halfway house. Jan's middle child bought a bike for an underprivileged girl she located through a local Crisis Center. And the youngest of Jan's kids bought a bag of groceries and anonymously left it on the doorstep of a family whose father had recently lost his job. As she read the cards that Mother's Day, her heart swelled larger than ever.

I hope we're all doing something lavish to love up on our Moms this weekend. They deserve rest and refreshment, candy and flowers, mani's and pedi's and all the thanks we can pour out. But one of the most sincere gifts we can give is to imitate their generosity with. In his first letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul says: **"Be thou an example for the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity" (1 Tim 4:12 KJV)**. I suppose that might have been where young Timothy learned the kind of compassion for others that would eventually make him one of the most beloved and far-reaching missionaries of the early church. But you know, most of us don't learn that sort of radical love from the letters or sermons of preachers. The kind of life-changing love that sees strangers as simply the family we haven't yet met -- well that isn't taught; it's caught. It's absorbed at the knee of elders who model it for us. Where do you suppose Timothy caught it? (2 Tim 1:5)

What Will Be Our Legacy?

A little boy's mother once told him that it is God who makes people good. He looked up and replied, "Yes I know it is God, but mothers help a lot." The Apostle Paul would have concurred, I think. That's why he says: When I am

reminded of you, Timothy, I can't help but think of your grandmother and mom. Lois and Eunice had obviously read that passage in Deuteronomy that says: I **"Be careful... not [to] forget the things your eyes have seen [of the Lord] or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them"** (Deut 4:9).

But what if all they did was read it? What if Lois had said: "Gosh, I'm too old to start practicing this stuff now. It's certainly too late where my daughter Eunice is concerned. She doesn't seem to care much for church, and she's married to that Greek humanist who thinks religion is for the birds. And my grandson, Timothy? He's one of those modern teenagers; he's not going to pay attention to what an old woman like me says or does." What if, at the point that faith in Jesus Christ became sincerely alive in her, Lois had said: "I know they're always clamoring about needing Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders and Vacation Bible School helpers down at the Lystra Community Church, but listen -- I put my time in earlier; I'm too busy right now; someone else will step forward."

What if that was her reply? What if, as a result, there never arose a Saint Timothy to lead the church fearlessly through that tornado time of paganism and persecution? What if, as a result, all the people he might have touched never received the gift of power and love he might have passed on? And what if, as a consequence, the generations of believers that built the school and hospitals, that fought for freedom and justice against the tyrannies of bygone ages, that passed the grace and truth of the Son to you and me -- what if they never came into spiritual being?

But Lois and Eunice did their job, thank God. They were people of **"sincere faith"** who bequeathed to us an extraordinary legacy -- withered a bit in our age, perhaps, but still alive. Now the question is: What can we do before our leaf drops from the tree to continue this legacy through younger generations? As you consider that question, permit me to let you in on a little secret," says the Lord. "Sometimes, as wonderful as they already are, I make people even more beautiful before they die."

Let's pray together...

Benediction

Let me leave you with one final thought on this splendid day: Your Mother needs you. By that I mean the Mother Church needs you. Whether you have literal children or not, this branch of the Mother tree needs the spiritual parents and grandparents I talked about earlier. She needs people who can help as teachers or assistants in our Sunday School program, our Summer Children's Ministry, or our Youth Ministry.

If you are looking for some extremely practical way to act on what you've heard today, then... [INSTRUCTIONS] We'll give you a position that fits your gifts and availability; we'll support you with any training you need; we'll encourage you along the way; and then we'll watch together as God makes something even more beautiful of your life.

Thus, as you go forth today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of God's Holy Spirit keep growing through your life a glorious legacy. Amen.

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