

**Heart-full and Handed Down**  
**Brookfield Congregational Church**  
**October 17, 2010**  
**2Timothy1:2-7, 3:14-4:2**

There once was an elderly grandfather who lived on a farm with his family, including a young grandson. Each morning, Grandpa rose early—long before the sun was up—to sit in front of the coal stove and read from his old, well-worn Bible before the morning chores began.

The grandson loved his grandpa and wanted to be just like him, so he tried to imitate his grandpa in every way possible—including trying to read the Bible as he saw his grandpa do.

But one day the grandson said, “Grandpa, I try to read the Bible just like you but I don’t understand it, and what I do understand I forget as soon as I close the book. What good does reading the Bible do?”

The grandfather quietly turned from putting coal in the stove and said, “Take this coal basket down to the river and bring back a basket of water.”

The coal basket was dirty and black, and the boy couldn’t imagine why his grandpa wanted it filled with water. Still, the boy did as he was told, although, of course, all the water leaked out before he could get back to the house.

The grandfather laughed and said, “You will have to move a little faster next time,” and sent the boy back to the river with the basket to try again.

This time the boy ran faster, but again the basket was empty before he returned home. Out of breath, he told his grandfather, “It’s impossible to carry water in a basket,” and he went to get a bucket instead.

The grandfather said, “I don’t want a bucket of water; I want a basket of water. You can do this. You’re just not trying hard enough,” and he sent his grandson out the door with the basket once more, then went and stood on the porch to watch.

At this point, the boy wanted to show his grandfather that even if he ran as fast as he could, the water would leak out before he got back. The boy scooped the water and ran with all his might—and when he reached his grandfather the basket was again empty.

Out of breath, the boy panted, “See, Grandpa! It’s useless!”

”So you think it’s useless?” The old man said, “Look at the basket.”

The boy looked at the basket, and for the first time he realized that the dirty old coal basket had been washed clean by his repeated trips to the river.

”That’s what happens when you read the Bible,” his grandpa told him. “You might not understand or remember everything, but when you read it, it will change you bit by bit.”

This sweet little story speaks directly to the central issue in our scripture lesson this morning. In it, the apostle Paul is writing to his young protégée, Timothy, encouraging him to carry on the faith.

There is some urgency in this letter. Paul is growing old, the passage of time signified by his reminding Timothy that he has inherited his faith from the preceding two generations—Timothy’s grandmother,

Lois, and his mother, Eunice. Paul is growing old and he is sitting in prison, facing death. The question on his heart is this: How will the faith be passed to new generations?

The same question came up several times during the meet and greet sessions that we have been conducting over the past couple of weeks: Like Paul, you want to know, how will the faith be passed to a new generation?

In the lesson of the coal basket, Grandpa was passing on his faith to his grandson. How did he do it? He did it by the example of his own faithfulness in reading the Bible each day. He did it by sharing the story with his grandson, trusting that he would grow in understanding over time.

Two ways: he did it by example. He did it by sharing the story.

This is the same method that Paul used with Timothy. Paul offered the example of his own faithful life and the faithful lives of Lois and Eunice. And he shared the gospel story with his young disciple.

My own handed-down faithfulness began in the small church I attended with my grandparents when I was six and seven years old. My mother, brother and I lived with my grandparents at that time, and on Sundays my mother would stay home while my brother and I went to church with my grandparents.

My grandfather was an elder in the church, so he always had business up in front during the service. My brother and I sat with Grandmother in the pews. Like the little girl in the story Debbie and Katie read for us, I loved the coziness of Sunday morning, snuggled safely against my grandmother.

She didn't have cough drops for me, but she usually had a roll of lifesavers in her purse, and she would give me one to suck on. Like the girl in the reading, I loved the music, but the talks were long and boring. When I started fidgeting, Grandmother would take a handkerchief from her purse and deftly fold it into a bunny rabbit—a small amusement to quiet a restless child.

On a warm Sunday morning, it was sometimes hard to stay awake through the whole service. But after the service, came Sunday school—which I loved.

The opening song we sang this morning—"Jesus Loves Me"—is among my earliest memories of Sunday school. I remember Bible stories, too: Noah and the Ark, Moses in the Bulrushes, Daniel in the Lion's Den, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the Fiery Furnace. The Old Testament stories fired my imagination. Then there were the stories about Jesus, how he healed people and how he fed thousands of people with just a bit of bread and some fish. Even better were the stories Jesus told: The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son.

Faithfulness did not stop at the church door for my grandparents. At home, we blessed every meal before we ate. At night, after I had been tucked into bed with a prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." I could hear my grandparents in the next room, down on their knees offering their nightly prayers to God.

All the years that I was growing up, well into my teens, I spent nearly every Saturday night with my grandparents, went to church with them on Sunday, and stayed with them through Sunday afternoon, watching old movies on television while my grandparents read the Bible or religious tracts from their church.

It needs to be said that my grandmother did not hand down her particular beliefs to me. This takes a word of explanation. My grandmother converted to the Mormon faith in midlife when she married her second husband—the man I knew as my grandfather—after she had raised her children. My mother did not attend church as an adult, and she allowed Grandmother to raise me in her Mormon faith. But in my

teens, I rejected the Mormon understanding of God and the world and began seeking a different faith on my own.

My grandmother was not able to hand down her Mormon beliefs, but she did hand down her faithful seeking after God. The time I spent with her in church gave me a lifetime love of singing hymns on Sunday morning. Sunday school gave me a love of the biblical story. Listening to my grandparents praying gave me confidence to talk to God in prayer—in good times of thanksgiving and in dark times of supplication.

Most of all, my grandparents' absolute and abiding faithfulness gave me the conviction that God is central to our lives. My grandparents never missed church unless they were too ill to attend. They said their prayers every day without fail. They were dedicated members of their congregation. They even spent four years of their lives on two extended missions for their faith. . And like the grandpa in our opening story, they read religious materials every day.

How does faith get passed from generation to generation? Two ways: by the example of our own faithfulness and through sharing the story.

Now perhaps this is a scary thought to some of you. Perhaps you are like the young boy in our opening story. Perhaps you think you don't understand the stories in the Bible well enough to pass on the faith to your children or grandchildren.

Like me, many of you came to Brookfield Congregational from another Christian denomination. But no matter where we came from, most of us know certain parts of the Bible. I'm guessing that everyone in this room knows the Christmas story, and most of us know the Easter story. I'm guessing that many of us are familiar with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd." I'm also guessing that most of us know some version of the Lord's Prayer, although some of us may pray about "debts" and some of us may pray about "trespasses."

Today, we also have songs and prayers that are based on the Bible but don't appear there. These, too, become means for handing down the faith. How many of us know the prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep"? How many know the songs, "Amazing Grace" and "Silent Night"?

Can you guess which song is number one on the all-time Christian Hit Parade? We sang it this morning: "Jesus Loves Me." Let me tell you the story of this song.

Anna Bartlett Warner and her sister Susan were the daughters of a well-known New York lawyer who lost his wealth during the 1837 depression. The sisters wanted to help their family's income, so they turned to writing novels and children's books to make money. Among the 18 books they wrote there was a story in which one of the characters comforted a dying child by singing a song written by Anna. The song went like this:

Jesus loves me! This I know  
For the Bible tells me so  
Little ones to Him belong  
They are weak, but He is strong.

In 1862, William B. Bradbury, a music composer of gospel hymns, stumbled across the song's lyrics and wrote the tune as we sing it today. He also added the chorus: "Yes, Jesus loves

me/Yes, Jesus loves me/Yes Jesus loves me/The Bible tells me so.” Within months, this song raced across North America, and eventually across all the continents of the world.

Over the next century, “Jesus Loves Me” became the number one spiritual song in the world. It has been translated into more languages than any other song. Missionaries favor its simple and easy-to-remember chorus as a means of explaining the gospel in a clear, simple way.

Corny? Oh, yes! And yet, it sums up the gospel that Paul called Timothy to proclaim, and it has been a source of inspiration for millions over the past one hundred fifty years.

I’ll cite just one example.

Karl Barth was considered by many to be the greatest reformed theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Barth knew the Bible inside and out. He wrote volumes and volumes of detailed, well-reasoned, dense prose outlining a systematic theology. His books fill entire library shelves in the nation’s seminaries, and there is a cottage industry in explaining his complex thinking.

Late in his life, Karl Barth was asked to sum up his theology. He turned to his questioner and said, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

How will we pass on the faith to a new generation? We know that we are all like the boy in the opening story. Our minds are like coal baskets, and we have trouble holding all the information we think we need in order to convince our children and grandchildren of the importance of faith.

But we can learn, as that boy did, that our basket of information is enough. We don’t need to know all the answers. We just need to give the example of our own faithfulness in showing up for church on Sunday mornings, offering a word of blessing at dinnertime, opening a Bible now and then. And we need to share a very simple idea: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Amen.