



## It Takes a Village

2 Timothy 1:1-14

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On July 4, 1826, both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died. The last surviving members of the so-called Founding Fathers, the two of them together shaped much of this country as we know it today. A little history review for all of us — Adams would go on to be our second president, in 1797, with Jefferson serving as second in command. It was during this time, however, that their political views, once united, parted ways. Jefferson became so frustrated by his friend's leadership that he began strategizing about the next election. The election of 1800 was a bitter campaign, both men saying terrible and slanderous things about one another. In the end, Jefferson won, but in the end, it seemed the tears in their friendship were irreparable.

In 1809, however, after both men had vacated the office, each of them expressed to others their desire to reach out to their old friend. Adams eventually broke the silence, sending Jefferson a letter in January of 1812, wishing Jefferson many happy new years to come. Jefferson wrote back, and the pair shared correspondence for 14 years. All told, they exchanged over 300 letters covering all manner of topics.

And on that fateful July 4, 1826, exactly 50 years after the Declaration of Independence had been signed, John Adams, aged 90 years old, uttered some of the most famous last words. Right before he died, he said, "Thomas Jefferson survives."

Those words have etched themselves in history because they were wrong. Though Adams couldn't possibly have known it, Thomas Jefferson had died just five hours earlier.

Last words can be fascinating.

Beethoven. His last words were, "Friends, applaud; the comedy is finished." Winston Churchill, the elegant wartime orator. His last words: "I'm bored with it all." And Thomas Edison, who changed the way we could see the world, his last words offered something of a promise. "It's very beautiful over there," he said.

This second letter to Timothy is increasingly considered to be the apostle Paul's last words. We read from the first chapter a few moments ago; in the fourth chapter, Paul writes, "I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."<sup>1</sup>

Paul knows he is dying. He knows this may well be his last letter. He closes his letter saying, "The Lord be with your Spirit. Grace be with you." But he begins his letter with a bit of a history lesson that hits close to home.

"I am reminded of your sincere faith," he writes, "a faith that first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I am sure, lives in you."

If I understand it, what Paul is saying is that for most of us, faith doesn't simply fall out of the sky and land on us. Yes, there are stories of people who have that experience, including Paul

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 4:6-7

himself, but they are the minority. And a problematic by-product is that those stories are so spectacular, those of us without that sort of dramatic experience sometimes wonder if our faith is lacking.

So again, if I understand it, what Paul is saying is that for most of us, we learn faith from one another.

You have known this model to be true in other parts of life.

Think about starting kindergarten in a school that goes all the way through eighth grade. You are the shortest, the youngest, and those hallways seem enormous. When I started school, eighth graders were all assigned a kindergarten buddy. I still remember my buddy. His name was John. I think I survived kindergarten because of him.

Or think about your first day at a new job. You don't even know what you don't know. It's inevitable. That's why so many organizations and corporations use mentoring programs: someone who knows the ropes walks alongside someone with less experience sharing insight and offering guidance.

Mentoring is not a new practice, not by a long shot. But in the past two years, our understanding of mentoring has expanded. Now, Forbes and the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal all report,<sup>2</sup> those who have **been** the mentors ought to consider finding one for themselves. And, they say, the mentor you find should be under 30 years old. Otherwise, they say, you run the risk of staying stagnant while your colleagues or competitors move forward.

There's science behind this — as we age, our neurons change shape and size, which ultimately means we learn at a slower rate. Our brains learn the fastest, and with the greatest ease, before the age of 30.

Trust me, I'm as delighted about this as the rest of you. But, of course, the flip side here is that as we age, we have the benefit of accumulating more wisdom and information.

The point is, we are learning that no one age or level of experience has a monopoly on knowledge. Everyone has something to teach someone else. We need each other to become our fullest, best selves.

I have found this to be true when it comes to being the church, as well.

This past week, the trial concluded for Amber Guyger, a former police officer who shot and killed her unarmed neighbor, Botham Jean, in his home. As soon as the verdict was read, Botham's 18 year old brother Brant hugged his brother's killer and said he forgave her.

It was a remarkable moment, one that went viral as all sorts of Christians held that moment up as one to emulate. And my initial response was exactly the same.

But then I started hearing from some of my preacher friends who are not white. They were begging their white preacher friends, which is to say, they were begging me, to not to talk about Brant's forgiveness without also Botham's mother, Allison, who made a statement of her own. She said, "What Brandt did was cleanse his heart towards Amber ... I do not want it to be misconstrued as a complete forgiveness of everybody."<sup>3</sup>

She went on to say that she admired her son, but that justice demands an examination of the systems that contributed to her older son's death, systems that the Dallas Police Chief herself says require an internal investigation.

Now please, please hear me carefully. It is perhaps foolish of me to talk about this today, as I am still wrestling with this. I am still trying to figure out what this means, both for how I think and for how I live. I am still trying to figure out how forgiveness and justice live in tension with

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<sup>2</sup> One example: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/business/what-could-i-possibly-learn-from-a-mentor-half-my-age.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/amber-guyger-trial-botham-jeans-mother-reacts-to-sentencing-and-emotional-hug/>

one another. So I was hesitant to bring it up today, but if we wait until we have all the answers before we talk about something we'll never actually talk about some of the things that matter most.

And please hear this carefully, too: I do not mean to diminish that moment of forgiveness. Not in the slightest. All I mean to point out is that I could see the forgiveness part of the story, but I needed my preacher friends with black and brown skin to speak up and implore me to look further, to see things from their point of view. I needed them — I need them — to become a better and more careful and more faithful theologian and preacher.

So there it is again: we need each other. No one has faith figured out all by themselves. No one has all the answers. It simply is not possible.

Last evening, our Confirmation class met for the first time. I am profoundly grateful for each one of them, and each one of them (each one of you — I see you out there) contributed something only you could contribute. It was a good first gathering, with lots of questions, lots of learning, and lots of tacos. And without putting any one person on the spot, there was a lot of awkward silence in the room when I asked "Why are you here? Why bother with Confirmation?"

It seems that parental pressure is still a highly motivating force. And then there was a collective rush to say, "I mean, no offense. We don't want to hurt your feelings."

I will tell you now what I told our Confirmands last night: It doesn't offend me at all. It doesn't hurt my feelings. And when I went through Confirmation — let me assure you, I went for one reason only: my mother made me do it. And my mother made me do it because her mother made her do it. Now, obviously, at some point, faith became something I clung to, rather than something pressed upon me. But I never would have gotten to that point had

someone not put me in the position to encounter it.

"I am reminded of your sincere faith," Paul writes, "a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you."

So hear this: There is faith in you. Even if you aren't sure of it. The apostle Paul is sure. I am sure. There is faith in you, and at some point, when you need it most, you'll reach deep down and you will discover it's there. And I suspect you will be grateful.

Sometimes we only have faith because someone else did first. Sometimes we only have faith because someone else gave it to us. Sometimes we only have faith because someone else showed it to us. Sometimes we only have faith because someone insists we consider a new way of looking at the world. And that is exactly as it is supposed to be. Faith is a gift that comes from God, but more often than not, human hands are the ones that offer it to us.

That idea is so central to who we are as Christians, Paul begins his last letter with it. And if you need encouragement, as Paul seems to think Timothy might — Paul knows that when your faith is unsteady, it helps to remember. Four times in the first six verses, Paul says: remember.

Remember those who taught you something of faith. Remember the story they taught you. Remember the love they showed you. Remember what has always been, and you will find strength to face what is still yet to come.

It is World Communion Sunday today, a day when Christians throughout the world break the bread and share the cup together. It is a day when all of us remember yet another person's last words, or at least, the last words spoken to his closest friends, when they gathered for a last meal.

This is my body, Jesus says, given for you. Take, eat, and remember. This is my blood, Jesus says, poured out for you. Take, drink, and remember.

Now here's the thing about World Communion Sunday. We all celebrate communion, but we don't all do it the same way, or even with the same understanding. Do we use bread or wafers? Is it always bread, or does it change into something more? Do we use wine, or juice? Is it always juice, or does it change into something more?

Christians don't all believe the same things about this meal. But in observing this day years ago, William Sloane Coffin said that on this day, at this table, Christ is found not in the nouns, but in the verbs.<sup>4</sup> This is my body, **given** for you. This is my blood, **poured out** for you.

**Take, eat, drink, remember.**

Remember: When it comes to faith, you do not have to know it all. It is not possible to know it all. We figure it out together. We make our way together. And if that is not the last word on the subject, it certainly is the lasting word.

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<sup>4</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *The Broken Body*, preached at the Riverside Church in New York City, October 4, 1981.