

October 7, 2007
Deut. 6:4-9; II Timothy 1:1-7
First Parish UCC Brunswick
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A Living Faith

On World Communion Sunday, we might be inclined to remember famous people like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Billy Graham, Dorothy Day or Mother Theresa, each of whom has done so much to keep the faith and share it with others all around the world. But for each of these famous folk, there are millions and millions of ordinary folk, some who have gone before us and some who will be gathering at table today.

Often in the life of the church we listen to stories about extraordinary people and events and we think, “But I’m not like them.” One of the things I like about today’s scripture readings is that they point to the ordinary – to our real lives.

In Deuteronomy we are reminded, “love God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might.” In other words, with our whole lives. It goes on to say that we are to teach this to our children... not just during Sunday School...but when we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we rise up. Any and every moment is a time for a living faith to be shared.

In Parent Conversations recently we were talking about the questions and comments children share about faith, often in unexpected moments. One of our daughters, when she was three, out of the blue said to me one day,

“God must be in a million pieces.” I looked puzzled and said, “Why is that?” She replied, “Because God is everywhere, so God must be in a million pieces.” I smiled for a moment and said, “I like the way you think.” Her faith was alive and seeking understanding at her developmental level.

In the reading from II Timothy I am struck by the references to Timothy’s mother and grandmother. Do you remember their names? Eunice and Lois. In the Spiritual Practices group this fall, we are looking at stories about little known women in scripture. Here are two of them. Lois and Eunice are mentioned only briefly, but you can sense so much behind this reference. Paul says they each had a living and sincere faith, which they shared with Timothy. They wrote the love of God on their hearts and shared that love with Timothy.

A living faith in ordinary people is a powerful thing. Marie Livingston Roy shares her experience of her grandmother’s faith in this writing:

A Grandmother’s Faith
They went together – those wrinkled hands and tattered book. And something in the awe with which she held it made me think she held a sacred fire.

The old brass-bound Bible came to her from her mother, and hers before that,

too, through more generations than I know how to reckon – faded, cracked, worn with use.

I wonder how it felt to hold the past within her hands – how many broken hearts found comfort there, how many searching minds were fed; how many fears were calmed in its reading; what songs of joy were hummed over it; what secret tears still stain its pages?

I loved to hear her talk to God, and when she prayed, I sometimes imagined I felt God hear. It was a very safe place to be – with God and her. I like her God, so wrapped up in the small goings-on of daily life – not too far away and busy with eternal things to take notice of one small child.

The Bible became mine today, and my smooth hands look somehow out of place – and somehow right at home. Like her, I hold the accumulated joys and sorrows of my heritage and join my life with theirs. There is a strength to it – forged by faithful living in the presence of a loving God. The line still holds – all those who have gone before, myself, and those who are to come.

(Marie Livingston Roy, *Imaging the Word*, V. 2, p. 43)

The history of the church is filled with little known women and men- none of whom made it into the history books – but who, with living faiths, have sustained one another and their children and other people’s children.

Each of us, I’m sure, can name folk who have been those ordinary people in our lives, who have offered us support on our faith journey. Some of them are

family members and some are not. One for me, who is not a member of my biological family, is a woman named Erna Stripe, who died several years ago. Erna was not a mother or a grandmother. However, each time she participated in a baptism and promised to love, support, and care for the one about to be baptized, she meant it. And it didn’t matter how old they got to be.

For many years Erna prayed for our family on Tuesdays. I’m embarrassed to say that when I initially learned of this I thought it was a bit ‘quaint.’ Erna had a prayer list for each day of the week and Ron and I were on her Tuesday prayer list. We were young adults when we joined Erna’s prayer list; she was retired. We tended to be idealistic; Erna had been sobered by life. While we were in seminary spending a lot of time talking about God, Erna spent a lot of time talking *with* God.

Little did I know when I first learned of her practice of prayer how significant this witness would be to me over the years. Now, when I visit older adults who are painfully bemoaning that they are no longer useful, I often think of Erna. I suggest that one thing they can do is pray – for individuals, for the church and for the world. Remembering when they could more actively help with the life of the church, some of them seem to find my suggestion ‘quaint’ – and not a very satisfying solution to their sense of uselessness.

But I have come to know that it is not quaint. There is nothing more ordinary, and yet extraordinary, for folk in the midst of a living faith than to hold one another in prayer.