

“Saints, Maybe”
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Andrew Foster Connors
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My Grandmother was a great storyteller. Some of her best she told while we rocked together on the screened in porch of her home in SC. She commented on the boyfriend of the neighbor next door who had moved in. “You know, they’re not married,” she said quietly in a voice that could have been judgment or intrigue. I said nothing and we rocked back and forth for another period of silence. “I hear she met him on the Internet.” I nodded and kept rocking, waiting to hear where this was going. A mischievous look came across her face as she told me, “he looks like something you’d find on the Internet.”

Our rocking went on like this for a long time, she telling me stories forever shaping the fabric of my memory of her. I remember all those stories told on various nights like this one. The way she fell down her sister’s concrete stairs in her late ‘80s without breaking a single bone. “I think she pushed me,” she told me. The way her sister dropped her off for a church potluck only to find out that she had the wrong night. “I couldn’t reach her by phone to tell her to pick me up, so the security guard and I ate the casserole together.” Rock, rock, rock. “He told me I could come back at the same time next week.”

I listened and laughed for a long time until she started talking about “the colored people.” I never remember the details. I just remember that every time she talked about “the colored people” I felt something like the hair rising up on the back of my neck. Often I held my tongue as I had been trained to do. But on this particular night, the topic of interracial marriage came up and my continued silence started to feel more like a betrayal. She made a judgmental comment. “Grandmother,” I said, “I don’t see anything wrong with a black person and a white person falling in love and getting married.” She pushed back with objections honed through generations of racism. I pushed back right back, my temper rising and my argumentative side with it. “Grandmother,” I said, “you just need to know that if I fall in love with a black women, I will marry her and you will have to learn to live with it.” The rocking stopped so did the conversation for the night. Later, my parents asked me if I please would not agitate my poor grandmother like this. She was having trouble sleeping. But I was still angry.

One day I was venting about her behavior with a friend of mine who is African-American. I told her the story. “Can you believe she said that?” I asked “How racist is that?” My friend looked at me with a look of disbelief. “Andrew, you should be more compassionate with your grandmother,” she said. I was shocked. How can you side with her? I’m not siding with her, she said. But your grandmother grew up in Jim Crow South Carolina. You can’t expect her to be cool with you marrying a

black girl. If my grandmother thought I was going to marry a white boy she'd flip out, too. Be patient with her."

We know that [the Apostle] Paul was patient with Timothy. That much is clear from scripture. Timothy was hand picked by Paul to be his traveling companion across all of his missionary expeditions. Together, for the first time, they took the news of Jesus Christ from Asia to Europe. Paul thought Timothy was the future of the church. He's mentioned as Paul's associate in six different letters. Whenever a crisis arose and Paul couldn't deal with it he chose Timothy to assist.

But I wonder if Timothy was patient with Paul, too. You'd have to be to work with a guy as passionate and impulsive as Paul. Paul was always storming into synagogues and public squares agitating leadership. He wound up in prison lots of different times. He demanded a lot from the communities he founded, led, and corresponded with. You'd have to be patient to be Paul's right hand man.

Maybe he sensed that in writing this letter. Actually lots of scholars think Paul didn't write this letter. It was written by Pauline schools, 20 or more years after Paul's death. But others scholars dispute that. They say that this could have been Paul's last letter just before he was executed in Rome.¹ It's hard to imagine today, but just before Paul's death, the future of the church wasn't clear. It was a fledgling movement. Its primary leader was in prison preparing to be executed. Some of the cornerstone churches were divided internally over belief and practice, pressured externally by governments and communities hostile to the idea that there is one God revealed in the person of a Jesus. If this was Paul's last letter, I can see why he would write it to Timothy. To write to his right hand man and encourage him.

A year after my friend told me to be more patient with my grandmother, a professor who also happened to be a pastor, was asking me why I cared so much about justice. How did a white kid from the suburbs get so interested in race and justice? I couldn't figure out why. I told him about the racism in my family, the racism in my church, the racism in my white suburbs. But he kept pushing. Why did I care so much? Other kids in my class didn't seem to care. Other kids didn't even notice. I wrote a paper on my personal history and personal philosophy. Still I couldn't pinpoint what he was talking about.

Soon he lost patience with me: "that anger for the way you think the world ought to be. That didn't come from nowhere. It comes from your faith. Your family, your church – they taught you all those stories about Jesus eating with people he's not supposed to be eating with, overturning tables, disrupting the status quo."

¹ Thomas Oden makes such a case in *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 1989, 10-16. I see no reason to weigh in on one side of this debate or the other, especially since definitive evidence seems to be lacking. I simply note that it is possible imagine more than one interpretive direction that results from either conclusion on authorship.

He was right. It was my faith that had led me to care so much. It was the stories of Jesus that God had seen fit to reveal through my grandmother and others, in all her imperfection that had given me that fire. She had been partly responsible for God's gift of faith even as that gift had led me to a different place in the world. Both could be true.

Paul writes to Timothy to "rekindle" the faith that was given to him by his grandmothers. It's one of the most personal letters in all of the New Testament. Both letters to Timothy and the one to Titus are written to individuals rather than to communities which is why they're called Pastoral Epistles. Paul is writing from prison and you can tell his time is near. And so he reminds Timothy of the gift that was given to him through a couple of generations of Christians. It's that gift, he tells Timothy, that makes all the difference. It's that gift that enables Paul to rejoice instead of weep in suffering. It's that gift that makes him boast. "I worship God with a clear conscience," he says, "just as my ancestors did." Whatever many mistakes he's made as a leader, as a mentor, as a friend, as a follower, he finally has complete confidence in what God is doing in the world. He has that confidence because of Christ.

Which is why he's not ashamed of being in prison – not ashamed of what looks like losing to the world. He's not ashamed of the gospel, that gift that Paul received directly from God, but that most of us receive through others.

It's easy to find fault with that gift since so many Christians have not lived up to it. That's as clear in our church's missionary history as anywhere. White Europeans took their euro-centric colonial ideas and foisted them on the rest of the world. That's the story that I learned. It's mostly true. But I heard a seminary professor speak his own experience one time – a seminary professor whose eastern family had become Christian through the efforts of western missionaries. "The missionaries came to India," he said "and brought their colonial mentality with them. Some of them did horrible things. I wish they hadn't. But I'm glad they came because without them I wouldn't know the joy of the faith that is part of my life today."

He understood that the gift of faith is almost always mediated through imperfect human beings, but the gift itself is from God, good news that works its way into our lives transforming us in way that might surprise even upset our ancestors. In ways that will transform the generations to come beyond our comfort or understanding. And this is good news. This is God's doing.

By the time my grandmother was on her deathbed, I had learned the wisdom of the kind of patience prescribed by my friend. The last time I saw her was in the hospital. She and I both knew death couldn't be far. And by now I think she had come to appreciate my tendency to cut to the heart of the matter. "Are you afraid to die?" I asked her. "I'm not afraid," she said, "I just worry about my family without me." I thought about how different I was than my grandmother. How the world had changed and we now saw it so differently. And yet, the faith that she had lived, had become central to my life – the flame that burns bright.

“Grandmother,” I told her taking her hand, “you don’t need to worry about that. You’ve given us everything that we need.” Despite our real differences, I like to think that she believed just as deeply as I did, that what I said was true.