

Carol M. Strickland  
 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia  
 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, February 10, 2019  
 Texts: Deuteronomy 24:1-9, I Corinthians 15:1-11

## Pass It On

*Pass it on.*

Moses climbed to the summit of the peak known as Mt. Nebo or Mt. Pisgah. He gazed across the Jordan River into the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. The palm trees of the oasis city of Jericho waved. The hill country to the north was green with fertile valleys. It was the land of his dreams, the land which he had for forty years been leading the band of escaped Hebrew slaves and then their children across the wilderness towards. It was the land that God had promised to their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. He could almost taste it. But setting foot in it was not to be, not for him, at least. "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there," the Lord told him. It was time for him to hand over his mantle to another.

*Pass it on.*

In Honduras last summer we learned how to mix concrete on the ground in a heap called a volcano. You add water in the middle and repeatedly shovel the dry powder into the wet, like making a cake mix with a spoon but no bowl. When the consistency was right, our team of youth and adults, Americans and Hondurans lined up shoulder to shoulder between the volcano and the doorway of a mud house. Then a bucket full of heavy, wet concrete slopped its way down the line until the last person poured it onto the dirt floor. We relayed the concrete this way, handing the bucket person to person, until the volcano was gone and that floor was covered with love.

*Pass it on.*

A few Sundays ago, we participated in an ancient rite which the church has been doing since its beginning: laying on hands. Members in whom you saw the gifts and calling of God, whose lives you saw as demonstrations of the gospel, knelt before the congregation. A great many people who had at some point before been in their position, came forward and placed their hands on these new elders' heads and shoulders, and if they couldn't reach, they touched someone who could, or someone who touched someone who could, forming a network of reaching arms like branches of a tree. Through those extended arms and hands the power of God's Spirit flowed like sap. It infused the ordinands with fresh faith and courage to take up the responsibility of leadership in the church.

*Pass it on.*

I was gathered with the other incoming students in the refectory at Yale Divinity School. There to address us about the history of the school was the esteemed Reformation historian, Roland Bainton. Dr. Bainton, then in his eighties, talked about the men whose portraits adorned the walls (and at that time, they were all men!). When he pointed to the one of Timothy Dwight the Younger, he told us that he had met him when he himself was a student in 1915. The frail, elderly professor had told Dr. Bainton stories of his grandfather Timothy Dwight the Elder and how he

saved Yale from going the secular Unitarian path of Harvard and abandoning its historic mission of training young clergy for Christian ministry. Timothy Dwight the Elder was the grandson of Jonathon Edwards, the sparkplug of the Great Awakening. Gesturing in turn at the three portraits, Dr. Bainton said, "It's a span of about 280 years from me to Johnathan Edwards." Then, nearly at a whisper he went on, "Counting by similar spans, passing the faith from generation to generation, it's only seven spans back until you reach Jesus." The hair stood up on the back of my neck.  
*Pass it on.*

Circles have been meeting this month as they do every month. The Bible study this year focuses on a theme that is woven throughout the Bible like a scarlet thread. It is the promise of God, "I am with you." The last lesson included what scholars call "salvation oracles" from the prophet Isaiah, written to the Israelites when they were in exile. One of the discussion questions was this: "When was a time in your life that you felt abandoned, alone, or "exiled" and needed to be reminded of God's presence?" You can imagine the kinds of things women shared: when I was going through my divorce, when I moved to a new city, when a family member was mentally ill. But these confessions were soon followed up with stories of experiencing God's presence through friendship, hospitality, and sometimes unexpected events. This sharing--this testimony about God's faithfulness--from woman to woman is a proclamation of the gospel that's arguably more meaningful than any sermon.

*Pass it on.*

Collisa Langford is a single mom. A series of unforeseen circumstances landed her homeless, living in a motel with her three-year old. She was out of a job, and money was quickly running out. She heard about Interfaith Hospitality Network of Athens and got into the program. She spent several months dependent upon the kindness of strangers, living in Sunday school rooms and youth quarters of sponsoring churches around Athens. Grateful for the clean bed and warm meals each night for herself and her daughter, she was able to focus on getting a job. She was hired as a substitute teacher and got back on her feet. I know her story because she shared it at the IHN fundraiser La Table last year. Her new job is the Service Director for IHN. Collisa wants to help others like she was helped.

*Pass it on.*

Sylvia, a member of one of my churches, told me that one of the ways she fights depression is by doing something for someone else. One day she was feeling a little blue. She was in the drive-through line at Burger King. When she paid for her order she said, "I'd also like to pay for the car behind me." As she drove away, already she felt better. A few weeks later when she found herself in the same line, the clerk at the window recognized her. "Hey, you're the woman who paid for the car behind you, aren't you? Do you know that for the rest of my shift that day, every single car after you paid for the car behind them!"

*Pass it on.*

Mary Frances Early was one of the first African Americans to attend UGA, and the first to graduate. In 1961 life on campus was most difficult for her. Her car was vandalized. Students threw rocks at her. She endured slurs. But there were also acts of kindness. A speech professor invited her to the Presbyterian Student Center for supper one evening, and the students there

surprised her that night with a cake and ice cream. She had expected to celebrate her birthday alone.<sup>1</sup> As the PSC approaches its 80th year of ministry, the staff, students, and board are hard at work living into the ministry's legacy as a community of hospitality and belonging. Today, in addition to weekly worship and sharing meals together, PSC students receive faith-based racial reconciliation training; they learn about creation care, and host an interfaith gathering of students who need a space in which they can safely be committed members of both the LGBTQ+ and the religious community.

*Pass it on.*

A girl asked her mother, "Why do you cut the roast in two and cook it in two pans?" She replied, "Well, that's the way my mother always did it. Go ask her." So, the girl asked the grandmother, "Why do you cut the roast in two and cook it in two pans?" The grandmother replied, "Because I didn't have one pan that was big enough." We inherit tradition from previous generations, but it's incumbent for each generation to question the validity of what they inherit. Our Presbyterian motto is *Reformed and Always Being Reformed, According to the Word of God*. That's why our church constitution includes a **Book** of Confessions, not a single creed, but twelve statements of faith. Different eras call for new and relevant understandings. Faith takes on fresh expression as it is handed on.

*Pass it on.*

As you know, next Sunday we will welcome Dr. Ryan Baer as our new pastor. I don't know if the search committee mentioned this to him, but one of the perks of the job is a large piece of engraved marble. It's free. But there's one catch; you have to die to get it placed in the narthex. Don't get me wrong. I hope it's a very, very, very long time before Ryan's plaque joins the others commemorating all the senior pastors who have served this congregation so well, beginning with its founder, Dr. Moses Waddel in 1820. Doubtless each pastor has had his own unique gifts and style, faced the issues of his day, and led this congregation in ministry which featured both continuity and change. I like the inscription on Dr. Nathan Hoyt's plaque. He was the pastor from 1830-1866. It reads, "Valiant for Gospel Truth: the pious lives and triumphant deaths of many who enjoyed his ministry proved his faithfulness. Believing, hoping, loving, working, he served two generations by the will of God."

*Pass it on.*

It was clearly a gifted congregation, but also somewhat dysfunctional, which is to say it was a pretty normal church. There were conflicts and issues, including theological misunderstanding in the Corinthian church. Paul is writing to them to try to straighten things out. At one point in his letter, he wants to bring the Corinthians back to the basics, as it were, back to the heart of their faith, back to the Good News. He reminds them of the tradition he inherited and proclaimed to them. "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received." He then recites what must be one of the earliest creeds in Christianity, "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." Paul goes on to list other eyewitnesses to the resurrection. Then he adds his own experience: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

*Pass it on.* It is the modus operandi of people of God.

*Pass it on.* It is practice of the church.

Someone has said that the church is always one generation away from extinction, so it's up to you to keep sharing the transformative Good News in words and deeds, in worship and service, in proclamation and acts of compassion and justice. It's up to you to continue to hand on a faith that is founded on grace—grace that turns a life around, that heals a marriage, that transforms a bitter heart, that forgives a sinner, that teaches a fearful person to love, that shows a greedy person how to give, that works to correct societal ills, that welcomes a stranger. You have received the great gift of God's love and mercy revealed in Jesus Christ. *Pass it on!*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ajc.com/news/mary-frances-early-first-black-graduate-honored-uga/21bceTIXQtFXWsd4cVkqpL/> on 2/10/19