

I will never forget the day I stood up in front of this congregation to become a member. It was the first church I'd joined since becoming a baptized member of the church I grew up in back in Texas. I'd been involved in other congregations during college, but joining Woodbury was the first church membership choice that I made as an adult. As a parent, too, since I was making that decision for our Tim as a 4year old.

Maybe I should back up just a bit more... Paul and I were married in the church I grew up in. And because the Disciples of Christ tradition doesn't baptize infants as we do in the Presbyterian Church, when Tim son was born we had him dedicated there. Had we remained there, he would have had the opportunity to take a membership class and be baptized at about the same age as we encourage young people to be confirmed.

I will confess that I didn't really get a handle on all the theology of infant baptism at the time, but I what I did know was that I wanted to be a part of a faith community. And I wanted Tim to be a part of the community as well. So I joined, and Tim was baptized.

When I read our scripture passage for today, I wondered if that's how Eunice felt as she came to the church in Lystra with her own Timothy... and how her mother Lois came before that... They had found this community they wanted to be part of – a

new way of living. Perhaps they longed to bring their children into that community of faith to be nurtured as well.

Since the day my Tim and I joined, I've seen many families stand in the very same place and watched many children and grandchildren baptized here. While some children taller and others tiny, and some are more squirmy or quieter than others, the basic celebration of the sacrament is the same... Pastor Rod reminds us that the Spirit of God moved over the waters at creation, and that the Lord God made covenants with his people. We are reminded that it was for us that the Word of God became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. For us, Jesus Christ suffered death crying out at the end, "It is finished!" And we are reminded that it was for us that Christ triumphed over death, rose in newness of life, and ascended to rule over all. And all of this was done for each of us before we could know it... Before we could understand it.

That's the beautiful poetic part- when we hear again what God has done for us. Next comes the more businessy part, and yet it is beautiful in its own way. This is when we respond to all that God has done.

There are the questions for the parents. Will they renounce evil and affirm Christ as Lord? Do they promise to raise their child in the faith? But that's not the end... There are questions for the congregation that echo those for the parents...

Did you catch that? First each parent answers - it's my job to grow in my own faith and to help raise this precious one to know God. Until then, my faith will cover her. My faith will cover him.

Then the church promises to those parents – We (all of us gathered in the room) will stand with you and behind you, helping you bring this child up to know and love God.

In this way, we are saying – together - to that little life, we PROMISE – before God - that we will continue to tell you this good news over and over and over again... and again... again... as many times as needed until it becomes your own.

And then the promise of the gospel is fulfilled: "We love because God first loved us."

That's what we covenant to one another and what we model to the world:

Parents & Church together raising the children –

It's like the old old proverb says "It takes a village to raise a child"

Well, it takes an ekklesia... a gathering of believers... to nurture and pray and push and prod and pull and teach and raise a child of God.

That funny looking word- ekklesia – is where we get the word ecclesiology... just one of several -ologies my classmates and I fought though in Doctrine this semester. Basically ecclesiology is understanding of how we are the church...

how we relate to one another and experience God as a gathering of believers. It's the academic exploration of the Sunday School song, "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together... all of God's people all around the world, let's build the church together"

Anyway, it was while I was working on my paper about Ecclesiology that this sermon started bubbling up to the surface. I blame it all on Paul... not my Paul, but the apostle Paul. All you have to do is read through his letters and you begin to understand that following Christ isn't just about our individual conversion experiences. If that were the whole deal, we probably would see much about Paul after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus.

Paul helps us understand that we are meant to follow Christ in community, gathering together those who believe and who are learning how to love and follow God more completely. You may remember how Paul talked about the people in the church being the Body of Christ, with each person being a valued part... the ear isn't any more important than the foot, that sort of thing.

In other places, he talked about the way that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to each person, but that they are meant to be used to build up the church as a whole. If you think about the lists Paul makes- when he describes what love is or when he lists the fruits of the Spirit or when he lists out the gifts that we see from the Spirit... those lists are actually descriptions of Christ. When we gather our gifts to live and work together in love, we are the picture of Christ.

That means two things

- 1- No matter what our inner perfectionist might be saying, we don't have to try to be everything and do everything
- 2- No matter what our inner spectator might be saying, we can't just sit on the sidelines; God's got a job for each of us.

Now, how that job pans out might look a little different from person to person, but everyone has work to do in God's Kingdom. I would submit that whether your primary gifts and ministry are in teaching, hospitality, music, administration or evangelism, there is a second job for you.

This is where Paul comes into Timothy's story. When Paul writes to Timothy, he's not just writing to a young leader in the church, the way that someone from our presbytery office might write a form letter to Kate or Mike in thanks for their service here at Woodbury.

Paul addresses his letters to Timothy, my dear son (or in 1 Timothy to his True Son in the Faith). Based on information throughout the New Testament, we can piece together a great deal about Paul and Timothy's relationship:

- Timothy was personally converted by Paul in Lystra, where Timothy watches Paul and Barnabas build the church
- After Timothy had been a Christian for about two years, Paul took Timothy on the remainder of his second missionary journey. Though he was an emerging

leader in the young church at Lystra, Paul was not afraid to take him away in preparation for greater, future service.

- Timothy also went with Paul on his third missionary journey to Ephesus, where he was being trained, along with eight other men as church planters
- Paul trusted him to travel between churches and do work in his stead. In fact, Paul left him in Ephesus, in the midst of a difficult situation to teach, to silence false teachers, and to put things in order
- Later in II Timothy we learn that Paul summoned Timothy to come to Rome to be with him during his final imprisonment.

But here at the very outset of this letter, we see the depth of Paul's feelings for his protégé. He writes:

³I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy.⁵I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

This was not a boss-employee relationship. This was not a young upstart-respected elder relationship. This was a loving relationship that had been nurtured over the course of 15 or so years, even when separated by distance. And that was without cell phones, email or Facebook!

This is the sort of relationship that each of us longs for, isn't it? Someone who is willing to invest something of himself or herself in us... not because we are part of a program, but because we come to see one another as Christ does... through eyes of love and grace we can see someone who wants the best for us. Through the eyes of love and grace we can see the potential God has built into his children.

I know it's Mother's Day. How could I not? After all, I'm a mom whose mom made plans to come hear me preach today. I'm thankful that she has been faithful to God and to me and to my child – covering us with her faith. But if I'm honest, there were times in my life when I felt more comfortable being loved and nurtured by women other than my own mother... so I am grateful for the youth group leaders, pastors and camp counselors, the Girl Scout leaders, coaches and teachers, the pastor's wives, classmates and teammates who loved me. Who spent time helping me figure out who I was, where I was going and what I really believed.

But they weren't all women. As it turns out, I had a lot of moms. And dads. And grandparents, uncles and aunts in the faith. It took a great big ekklesia to raise this child. And the names on that roll continue to be added. Many of you are among those who have encouraged, prodded, pushed and challenged me to grow in my own faith.

As a church that is committed to building growing disciples, Woodbury has taken on a challenge. You see, growing disciples isn't just about small groups, Sunday School, youth group and the quality of preaching that the church provides

week to week, although all of those are important in the process. Growing disciples is also about having the sort of nurturing relationships that require us to be someone's father or mother in the faith. To be someone's son or daughter in the faith.

It's also about taking with grave seriousness the covenant we make every time a child is baptized here. Loving those children so deeply and personally that no matter what twists and turns their lives take, we accept them and continue to cover them with our own faith. And, it means offering the same radical hospitality and acceptance to new members of any age who join our community.

In a few moments, we will be taking up today's collection. Along with the plates for tithes and offerings, we will be passing baskets. You should have received silk petals as you came in this morning. What I'd like for you to do is write on that petal the name or names of people who have nurtured you in your faith at some point. Those who covered you in prayer, loved you into the Kingdom or simply served as a model of quiet faith. Men, women, near or far, alive or already in the presence of God, we will honor them today. When the basket comes around, place your petals in. The ushers will bring them forward and before we sing the Doxology, I will offer a prayer of thanksgiving for these men and women who mean so much to us.

I would also challenge you to consider whether how God might be at work in creating these relationships here and now. Imagine the depths of faith we might

plumb together if each person in this room had someone committed to helping them grow as a disciple... Imagine what it might look like if each person committed to helping someone else... in some small way... to grow in his or her understanding of God's love.

The Spirit is moving among us, sisters and brothers. God has great plans for you and for this faith family. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, knowing that God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. Through the power of Christ at work within us, Amen.

Call to Confession

We are called to confess our sins before one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Not so we will be embarrassed, or so we might compare ourselves and our sins. No, we lay our sins before God together, so that we remember that we are called as a community to hold one another accountable and to lift one another in prayer. Come now, my sisters and brothers, and pray not only for yourself, but every person in this room, that we might all experience God's steadfast love and mercy.

Benediction

⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—
put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.