

THE GIFT OF YOUTH • THE GIFT OF AGE

The Gift of Youth

1 Timothy 4:11-16

February 23, 2025

Three decades ago, the late pastor, scholar, and author Eugene Peterson undertook the monumental project of presenting the entire Bible in contemporary English. The result, published nine years later as *The Message*, is for me an arresting paraphrase of the timeless words of scripture. In his introduction, Peterson writes of the gradual realization that this project perfectly aligned with his vocation as a pastor. He wrote, "I was always looking for a way to make the Biblical text relevant to the conditions of the people I served." This morning, I'd like to share Peterson's take on these verses from Paul's letter to Timothy. Listen for God's word.

Get the word out. Teach all these things. And do not let anyone put you down because you are young. Teach believers with your life: by word, by demeanor, by love, by faith, by integrity. Stay at your post reading Scripture, giving counsel, teaching. And that special gift of ministry you were given when the leaders of the church laid hands on you and prayed—keep that dusted off and in good use. Cultivate it. Immerse yourself in it. The people will see you mature right before their eyes! Keep a firm grasp on both your character and your teaching. Don't be diverted. Keep at it. Both you and those who hear you will experience salvation.

This is the word of the Lord.

Fifteen years ago, Princeton Seminary professor and Methodist pastor Kenda Creasy Dean published a book on the faith of America's teenagers. Her title is telling. *Almost Christian*. Dean, following sociologist Christian Smith, describes the dominant faith system of our youth as *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*.

Simply put, this belief system:

1. Teaches us to be good and nice to others (Moralism).
2. Assumes that faith exists to keep us happy and solve our problems (Therapeutic).
3. Imagines God as distant, largely uninvolved in our daily lives, and only present when we need help (Deism).

It is a faith that asks little of us and expects little from God—one that might be comforting but is ultimately not very compelling. In fact, Dean argues that such a shallow faith will fail us whenever life becomes complex, doubts and questions arise, or crisis comes. And crisis *will* come.

I think her most significant finding is this one: *we get what we are*. In other words, the faith we model is the faith our children inherit. Dean writes: "It is common for us to understand Christianity as a set of religious ideals and not a life-giving identity. We Christian parents would say we trust Jesus, but our lives tell a different story. Look at our overscheduled calendars, our insatiable consumerism, our relentless anxiety...we're as vulnerable to these idols as anybody else. Our kids know us for who we really are. One glance at our lives tells the truth."

Regardless of what we say we believe, the way we *live* is the best measure of what truly matters to us. *We get what we are*.

So, how do we cultivate a faith that stands the test of time? How do we cultivate a faith that matures as the years pass? How do we cultivate a faith that gives meaning and purpose in the messiness and pain of life? Perhaps we listen to the voices of the young people among us.

In seven days, next Sunday, we will hear poignant words from Paul's second letter to his young protégé Timothy

in which the Apostle Paul, in the latter years of his life, reflects on the wisdom he has gained through decades of ministry. This week, the author and the audience are the same, but the focus is different. In this morning's text, we find Paul celebrating young Timothy's faith and urging him to make full use of the gifts God has given him.

I would suggest that Timothy has much in common with many of the youth in our congregation. You see, even though the Christian movement was still in its early stages, Timothy is a third-generation disciple of Jesus. He received this faith from his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice. In other words, Timothy is a child of the church. He was raised in the Christian community. Faith is a part of his identity, his self-understanding.

And, according to his mentor, Timothy is now ready to lead. Paul's words offer encouragement and high expectations. I love Peterson's translation because it captures the richness of the language. He reminds Timothy of that powerful moment (think Confirmation) when he was received into the church, and Paul implores Timothy to "cultivate these gifts"...to immerse himself in them. In another translation, the instruction is "do not neglect the gift that is in you."

There is urgency in Paul's command to Timothy. These are not suggestions. The Greek better translates: You **must not** ignore, you **must not** abandon, the blessing that has been given to you. You **must** cultivate that gift. And the Church must offer a place and an invitation for children and youth to immerse themselves in the deep waters of faith.

We do that best by listening. We do that best by living authentically. We do that best by sharing our faith and our doubt. We do that best by engaging the world that God longs to redeem, by intentionally moving faithfully from worship to work. This is the role of the Christian community—to live intentionally together in ways that form deeper faith in each of us.

I speak to you now about a topic that means a great deal to me, that matters deeply in my own life and ministry. One of Professor Dean's concerns about the faith being

passed from one generation to the next is the lack of thick Christian communities of practice. And I would suggest that in the years since her book was published, the concern has been compounded by accelerating societal shifts. In his 2024 book *The Anxious Generation*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt examines the rising anxiety and mental health challenges among Gen Z. Haidt attributes significant influence to the pervasive use of smartphones and social media. Haidt contends that the transition from a "play-based" childhood to a "phone-based" childhood has led to increased concerns of every kind. Among them is this reality: that play, by its very nature, is communal. Play involves others. Friends, neighbors, classmates, colleagues. By contrast, our relationships with our devices are, by their very nature, individual. They drive isolation and disconnection in the real world. Haidt goes on to emphasize the essential value of genuine community that fosters real-world interaction and provides a moral framework for values rooted in those communities. Values and virtues that are practiced together.

When I read his words, I think of Timothy and of his grandmother. I think of the grandmother in our congregation who has promised her grandchildren that she is willing to be their chauffeur, to drive them anywhere they want to go, with one rule. Their phones cannot be used so long as grandma is driving. This guarantees interaction across the generations. You have to talk to grandma in the car.

When I read Haidt's description of genuine community, I think of Timothy and his grandmother, and I think of *you*. Among the many strengths of religious congregations is our steadfast commitment to intergenerational community. I am proud of this emphasis on uniting folks across the life cycle, and of the lives that have been nourished, the faith that has been formed, and the vocational paths that have been discovered through these ministries. Think of this. When we gather in this space on Sunday mornings, every generation currently living is represented. This is a profound gift and an increasingly rare experience in a time when so much of our lives is stratified by generational identity.

But it must be about more than that. You see, our gathering in the same building at the same time might provide the opportunity for engagement, but it does not guarantee it. Each time I meet with the parents of a baby who will be baptized at our font, I describe the questions that we ask as part of the baptismal liturgy. The first, "*Do you desire that your child be baptized?*" is a formality. I always tell the parents they really need to say yes to that one or else there's an awkward moment here on the chancel.

The second question, "*By God's grace, will you live the Christian faith and teach that faith to your child?*" is a profound promise. There's a reason we ask about living the faith first. As parents, living the values of our faith is the single greatest factor in the formation of the faith of our children. But parents are not the only ones who answer a question in the liturgy for baptism. You, the congregation, make a promise to guide and nurture the newly baptized. And when I meet with parents, I always tell them what I know from pastoral and parental experience. That you, the congregation of Second Church, take that promise seriously. You will show up in their lives. You will embrace their presence. You will listen to their wisdom. You will welcome their gifts, encouraging and nurturing them at every turn. And then, parents, here's the hard part: and then we send them.

It happens every year. These babies grow, and one day the time comes for them to make their own commitment to faith, to speak the words that have shaped their faith, to profess their belief. And then, we send them off into the world to pursue the paths where God calls them. As they do, we trust that the efforts of our congregation have not been in vain. We trust that their faith will be strong, and that they will not abandon the gifts that God has given them. That when pain and difficulty come—and they *will* come—the faith formed in this place will be enough to sustain them. That's why we cultivate these gifts. That's why we immerse ourselves in them.

So church, please hear this. It's a truth Paul knew deep in his heart. Our children are watching how we as individuals, as a church, and as a society, live the faith we profess. It will not do to speak the words and pray the

prayers and then abandon all Christian virtue when you leave this sacred space. It will not do. You and I must not pay lip service to the value of community only to separate into echo chambers of isolation when we depart each other's company. If we fail to act as followers of Jesus in the world beyond these walls, if our lives are marked by hypocrisy and not humility, if our worship ends at the doors of the sanctuary, if our congregations are captive to the idolatry of power at any cost, the future of our faith is bleak indeed. And I must report that there are worrying signs of this around us.

But these signs do not tell the whole story. From where I stand, quite literally, I see something else happening. I see children, youth, and young adults eager to learn and ready to lead. I see a faith sturdy enough to stick. I hear it. The compassion of Christ calling to the next generations seeking ways to serve others. I hear it. The Spirit of Christ speaking to their longing for deeper meaning. And I know this. The church that channels that compassion, the church that gives voice to that Spirit, the church that listens to that longing, can build a future that is deeply faithful and morally coherent, where character is formed, and the truth is valued.

And so, the message is clear. *We get what we are.* So, know this. Our children are watching—how we live, how we speak, how we show up. How will we respond? Time will tell. Time *will* tell.

Let us pray.
Oh, Lord, we believe.
Help our unbelief.
In Jesus' name. Amen.