

**II Timothy 1:1-9a (NRSV) –
Salutation**

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, ²To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanksgiving and Encouragement

³I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵**I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.** ⁶For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

⁸**Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord** or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, ⁹who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,

Women Sharing Faith

It was the summer of 1998, 20 years ago. We were camping at the farm on vacation...no easy task with 4 year old Paul (the wanderer), 2 year old Marthelyn (who decided to start potty training that week), and infant Daniel. Paul, being the oldest, took seriously his role of breaking me in as a parent, as he always had much to teach me. I tended to exert my rightful place of parental authority in true Yogi Bear fashion with lines like: “You can’t run away from me. I’m faster than the average Mama!” or “You can’t fool me. I’m smarter than the average Mama!” You get the idea. I wanted Paul to be sure he knew he was up against a better-than-average Mama!

Even if I cannot remember why, I clearly remember the scene on that sunny day in front of the clothes line filled with cloth diapers. Paul and I were engaged in a battle of wills. I was insisting that he do something he definitely did not want to do. I was frustrated. Paul was mad. I was just about to pull out the “time-out chair” card when Paul hurled the most vile insult his 4 year old mind could think of. With his hands planted firmly in his hips, he yelled, “You...you...you... average Mama!” Happily, all of our anger and frustration melted away as we laughed together at such a silly moment! That phrase has diffused family anxiety ever since that day. And even yesterday, as I asked Paul’s permission to share that story, we once again giggled at that tension-breaking moment, from which we have gained relational insights over the years.

Even today, I gladly claim the honor of being labeled an “average Mama.” But I aspire to be an over-achiever-woman sharing faith with others. It is a sacred responsibility shared by all women of faith, to find a means of living out that faith so as to influence others. In 2008 our U.M. membership vows were enhanced to include supporting the ministries of the church through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, **and our witness**. And yet, it seems that many of us do not share our own stories of faith in such a way that show we are motivated to claim, own, and model that witness with others. We are stingy with our faith stories, and reluctant to tell others:

- ✿ what a difference faith in Christ has made in our lives;
- ✿ how we have seen and heard the Holy Spirit working within us and the lives of others around us;
- ✿ and, what we know about broken hearts being healed and transformed through the unconditional love of God.

Who are the women of faith in your life who speak, or have spoken about, and model their faith in Christ? For Timothy, those women were his mother, Eunice, and his Grandmother, Lois. They instilled faith in Timothy, which the Apostle Paul reminds him should be shared with a spirit of power and love and self-discipline, and without shame. Paul goes on to describe this holy calling to live into God's purpose.

Who are the women of faith who have shaped us? For some the list may include the women of scripture, named or un-named. Some of those were portrayed powerfully by Barb Weaver during the U.M.W. program yesterday: Eve, Bathsheba, the Samaritan Woman, Mary Magdalene, Martha and her sister Mary, and others. As Barb reminded us, there were women of faith who traveled with Jesus and the disciples, and even financially supported Jesus' ministry. We don't hear much about them in scripture, but can surmise that they modeled extraordinary courage and faith to be engaged in such an endeavor as 1st Century Palestinian women.

Throughout history, there have been many women whose stories have been recorded, who inspire those of us growing in the faith even today. Perpetua, mystics Julian of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen, Susanna Wesley the mother of John and Charles Wesley, hymn writers Fanny Crosby and Christina Rossetti, theologian Georgia Harkness, and the list could continue.

But those who tend to have the greatest impact upon our lives are those we have encountered personally. Yes, it may be a mother, grandmother, aunt, or cousin. These women may be teachers, coaches, neighbors, choir directors, a friend's mother, a recovering addict, a kind customer, a gracious co-worker, an abuse survivor, a visiting nurse, or the person to whom we pour out our troubles who offers to pray for us. It might be Sally, or Sara, or Bonnie, or Judy, or Sharon, Deb, or Donna, and the list goes on.

And what does their story of faith include? How do they give expression to the faith they profess? Well, certainly through their witness and telling their story. Also through offering grace, extending mercy, sharing generously, serving selflessly, extending

hospitality, speaking with care, overcoming adversity by God's grace, reaching out with concern, teaching the tenants of the faith, and all with a humble spirit. Through our words, our actions, and our relationships we should be sharing what it means to us to have faith in Jesus Christ and how that faith motivates us to be who we are and do what we do.

It's not like we're unwilling to share our lives with others. We generally enjoy sharing news we believe is significant. We share joyfully at the birth of an infant and celebrate weddings and graduations through pictures and descriptive narrative. We share other milestones appropriately, such as a difficult diagnosis, the death of a loved one, the struggle to make ends meet.

Then we must ask when we expand the scope of our faith-based influence. How often do we tell our congressional representatives that we support legislation for more reasonable gun controls because we value the lives of every one God has created? How often do we speak up on behalf of refugee families because we believe God desires for families to be together to nurture one another, rather than having children separated from their parents in detention centers because we have **not** created a benevolent system for processing those fleeing oppression and violence? How often do we express to the recipient of our food pantry donations that we give because we believe God desires all persons to share blessings so that none are without sustenance? How often do we give a restaurant server a 25% gratuity expressing our belief that everyone deserves a living wage in order to have an opportunity to know abundant life, just as Jesus promised? How often do we sneak a jug of laundry detergent into the single mom's car to show support for one in a challenging situation...just because God is love?

Friends, while I may admit to being an average Mama, I contend that there is no such thing as an average Christian. When we believe in a Savior willing to give his very life so that we might live and know grace, how can we settle for a merely average witness to that gift? When our fervor for sharing Christ's love wanes and our energy level diminishes, may we hear again Paul's reminder to one influenced by Eunice and Lois: ***rekindle the gift of God that is within you.... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*** And do not be ashamed!

Women of faith, share the riches of your faith generously, even as you have been the blessed recipient of faith-sharing by others. And may our God be glorified! Amen.

PRAYER FOR WOMENⁱ

O God of provision and unconditional love, O divine parent who desires abundant life for each and every one, we come to you in gratitude for the women in our lives:

We acknowledge with thanksgiving the women who have modeled your love for us. We thank you that even when we were not acting in very loving ways, their love did not give up on us.

We thank you for women, who even without biological kinship, teach us lessons of faith-filled living, nurture our growing spirits, and celebrate our growth in knowledge, wisdom, faith, and love.

We are grateful for women who reveal their humanness, admitting mistakes, lack of knowledge, and the need for forgiveness. From their transparency and strength may we learn the joy of vulnerability in relationships.

We thank you for women who are life-long learners, servant leaders, generous givers, and willing partners on this journey of life and faith.

We give you thanks for the wide spectrum of womanhood represented among us today. In our diversity of age, ethnicity, relationships, and potency of spirit, may we receive and give your nurture to those we encounter.

O God of our creation, we thank you for women. Amen.

ⁱ Rebekah B. Sweet