



Last Sunday we began a series of messages titled *Life Lessons On Faith*. The messages are based on some of the things I have learned over the years about both life and faith, from my own experience and from the experience of others.

Our topic today is *Remembering*. I believe that in the stressful, crazy context in which we live, we all long for *the good old days* (which probably weren't as good as we remember), but we find some measure of comfort in looking back to a time when life seemed simpler and less complicated.

We all like to remember, don't we? Remembering, in the form of nostalgia, has become big business, especially in the field of entertainment. "Oldies" stations fill the radio airwaves, pulling at our heartstrings with pleasant memories of our childhood and adolescence. I was thinking about this topic one day this past week, while driving to Louisville, and I realized that the radio presets in my car reflect a lot of remembering – the 60s channel, the 70s channel, the 80s channel, Classic Vinyl, Classic Rewind; most of the channels I listen to play music from my younger years. In reality, I don't think I need to hear *Freebird* for the 10,000 time, but those songs remind me of a time in my life when things seemed relatively easy and carefree.

But did you know that nostalgia was once considered a mental disorder? According to *The Atlantic* magazine, treatments for the "disorder" of nostalgia once ranged from the use of leeches to burying people alive. In the case of at least one nation's military force, some soldiers became so overwhelmed with nostalgia upon hearing a popular song from their country that it became punishable by death for anyone to play the song!

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/08/when-nostalgia-was-a-disease/278648/>)

I am staring down my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday this year. I have long admired the attitude of my mom about aging, who has always maintained that *age is just a number*. I think she really means that, as I have never seen any indication that reaching a particular age troubled her. Each time I reach a milestone age – 40, 50, and now looking at 60 – I can't help but marvel at how quickly the time has passed. *Where has the time gone*, I often wonder, *and how can it be that I am now staring down 60 years of age?* In a few weeks, Tanya and I will celebrate our 33 anniversary! 33 years! Do I look old enough to be married 33 years? We must have been kids!

What is it about the past that has such a powerful grip on us? Thinking back on my life, it often occurs to me just how powerful it is to *remember*. We look back on our youth, on special events, and other happenings in our lives – both positive and negative – and, as we do, we realize what a powerful force the past can be upon the present.

Our text for today comes from a time when the apostle Paul was writing with a sense of looking back. When Paul wrote his two letters to Timothy, to whom he served as an example and mentor, Paul

was most likely near the end of his life, which makes it possible to hear a sense of nostalgia in some of his words. Listen as I read our text, from II Timothy 1:3-12 –

*3 I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.*

*4 Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy.*

*5 I am 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.*

*6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.*

*7 For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.*

*8 So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.*

*9 He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,*

*10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

*11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.*

*12 That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.*

I want to think about *Remembering* in relation to several lessons this morning, the first being –

#### *1. Remember your blessings.*

That is not a profound lesson, but it is one that is easily forgotten in the midst of life's struggles. Life can be tough. Life is stressful. Life can be very trying. In the midst of our struggles, in the midst of the tough times, in the midst of the stress, and in the midst of what tries our patience and our faith, it is easy to forget the blessings we have in life. In saying this, I do not mean to minimize the immense difficulties that some people face. There are many people who face enormous challenges and difficulties, and I do not mean to imply that all they need to do is count a few blessings and everything will be all right. No, that is not at all what I mean. For many, if not most of us, we have enough blessings in life that it is important for us to keep life in perspective. We have food to eat. We have adequate clothing and shelter. We have money to pay our bills (most of the time). When our needs are met, let us give thanks for what we have. When our families are healthy, let us give thanks for the blessing of good health.

One of the blessings of life is certainly the time we have with those whom we love. Paul often spoke of people important to him, as he does in verse four, as he speaks of how much he longs to see Timothy. In Acts 20:36-38 we read of the time when Paul departs from Ephesus – *36 When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. 37 They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. 38 What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.* There was a lot of grief as Paul departed from his friends. In Philippians 1:3 he writes *I thank my God every time I remember you.* Obviously, Paul was very grateful for the blessing of time with his friends.

Honestly, when I was younger, I didn't like when people would remind me to appreciate the time when our children were young, because those years would pass quickly. My thought was generally *yeah, yeah, yeah. Give me a break. I'm trying to keep up with everything and trying to pay the bills. I don't need to be reminded of what I already know.* But I didn't know. I didn't know how quickly that time would pass. And when time is gone, it's gone forever. One of the advantages of aging is the

perspective we are given when we have more years behind us than ahead of us. When we're younger, we can become overwhelmed with life, and it becomes easy to forget that we are limited in the amount of time we have with those whom we love.

And, very importantly, we must remember that we are called to be a blessing to those who are struggling. How many of you have been through the Bethel Bible Study series? If you have, you know their motto – *Blessed to be a blessing*. When we have enough provision that we can give to others, let us give thanks for the ability to help others.

## 2. *Remember lessons learned, even from difficulty.*

I use a lot of personal examples in my messages, and sometimes I wonder if I get too personal. As I was running through memories of difficult times in my life I was wondering which might be appropriate to share. A few of them I really considered but thought, *no, just suffice it to say that like everyone else, I have had some very difficult times in life*. And even though I don't want to go into any details, I will say that up until recently I had a difficult time with reconciling with a challenge in my past. For a good while, when I thought about that time, I would wish that I could go back and make a different decision that would have spared me from that challenge. But I finally realized that would not be the right thing to do, even if it were possible for me to do so. As much as that time in my life was difficult and as much as I have wished it could have been avoided, I have to admit to a few truths – for one, I am very grateful for the people who were in my life at that time. They helped me in ways that were enormously important to me and I will be forever grateful for their kindness, love, and support. When I wished that I could have avoided that time of my life, it would mean those people would not be a part of my life, and that would be a great loss to me. Secondly, that lessons I learned – even though I wish I did not have to endure what I experienced – have been very important to me and helpful to me.

I am very grateful for the good things that have happened in my life, and I try to be faithful in thanking God for the blessings I have received. Sometimes, although it is not been easy to do so, I also thank God for the difficulties – and even that great difficulty – that I have experienced. I do this because much of what I have learned, unfortunately, has been accomplished *the hard way*. Some of my most important lessons have come about precisely because of difficulties that I have experienced, and without those experiences, I wonder if I could have learned some of the lessons I needed to learn and have learned. Not that I wanted to go through those difficulties, but it is an interesting fact of life that we learn some of our greatest lessons from some of our greatest challenges.

One of the lessons I have learned, looking back, is how I can see the hand of God so much more clearly than I could at the time I was looking for it. We all have those moments in life when we hope and pray with great intensity, asking God to reveal himself, and his will, to us. While neither may seem clear at the time, the passing of the years does make it more obvious as we look back. Though I couldn't always see it plainly at the time, I can look back and see how God has been with me throughout my life, which provides me with the hope and the promise that he will continue to be with me, whatever I might face in life.

I grew up in coal country. We had a coal furnace when I was young, and there is nothing quite like the coal dust and soot that gets everywhere and all over everything. It is rather amazing to me that out of that dusty, grimy carbon can come something as beautiful as a diamond. It takes, of course, a great deal of pressure for that diamond to be formed, but nature itself teaches us that beauty can come out of pressure, and stress, and difficulty. Now, I'm not intending to be insensitive to the sufferings of anyone, but we all understand that out of difficulty can come some measure of blessing. But just as a diamond is not only beautiful, but also hard and tough, we want to be strong, but not hard of heart. We want to be strengthened by our testing, but not bitter.

### 3. *Remember your faith.*

It's interesting that Paul writes in verse 5 that *I am 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.* It sounds a bit as though Paul is reminding Timothy to live up to the faith of his family.

We are all, as people of faith, products of the faith of others. Someone taught us faith. Someone taught us to pray. Someone took us to Sunday School and church. Someone served as an example of what it means to have faith. Paul was gently reminding Timothy to live up to the examples of faith that were present in his life.

I do not hold to what I would call the *false narrative* of the decline of faith and religion; I think those predictions are vastly overstated. That is not to say that faith and religion are changing, because everything is changing. In October we will recognize the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, which was a time of enormous change in the world and, in particular, the world of faith. Many felt it was a time when faith itself was unraveling, but, in fact, it was a rearranging and reformulating of faith, much like our present day. As far as the false narrative of the decline of faith, the Pew Research organization just released their findings from a massive study done in many of the countries once under the control of the Soviet Union, which was officially atheistic. The study found that 25 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, in 18 countries that fell under the umbrella of the Soviet Union, that *the comeback of religion in a region once dominated by atheist regimes is striking.* Would you like to hazard a guess at what is now the percentage of people in those countries who believe in God? Would you guess 25%? 40%? 50%? How about 86%? In 18 of the countries once dominated by the officially atheistic policy of the Soviet Union, 86% of people in those countries believe in God. Isn't that amazing?

Sometimes, in our crazy, challenging world, it might seem as if our faith is crumbling, but don't believe it. Hold to your faith. Keep the faith that has been handed down to you. There is an interesting passage at the end of Paul's letter that serves as a bookend to the text I read at the beginning of this message. It is a passage I have read many times over the years at memorial services – II Timothy 4:6-8 – *the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

I want to be able to echo those words one day. When I am about to draw my final breath, I hope that I can proclaim those words that, *I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*

Remember these things. Never forget these lessons. Remember. Always remember.