

“Home: Our Ancestors”
2 Timothy 1:2-7

Have you ever taken a DNA test to trace your genetic ancestry? Why are such tests popular? One of the reasons is that we all like to know where we belong. Part of learning about our ancestors is about trying to figure out who we are and what groups we belong to. While each of us is unique, we do inherit certain traits and genetic codes from our ancestors. In fact, we not only inherit physical and emotional traits, but we also inherit the emotional experiences of the traumas and triumphs of our ancestors. One such experience for me is my connection to the Armenian Genocide which took place in Turkey around the time of World War I. My maternal grandfather and his family survived this tragedy. They were forced into the desert on foot but were lucky enough to make it to Syria and settle there. They had to change their last name to conceal their Armenian identity for fear of being found. Here is a short video clip with a summary of this genocide: <https://youtu.be/loUfANi97UU>. (from the New York Times: On the eve of World War I, there were two million Armenians in the declining Ottoman Empire. By 1922, there were fewer than 400,000. The others — some 1.5 million — were killed in what historians consider a genocide.) While I am sure I still carry some of the scars of the fear and suffering of that experience for my grandfather and his family, this tragedy is also at the heart of my commitment to bring healing and reconciliation to places of deep fear, injustice, and division.

Our ancestors and their experiences shape a great deal of who we are today, whether we like it or not! Future generations will be impacted by the decisions and choices we are making today. We always leave a legacy behind. Today the invitation is to embrace and heal our legacy so that we may leave nourishing legacies for future generations.

Our ancestors are a mixed bag of good and bad, of healthy and unhealthy choices. Sometimes we try to separate ourselves from them and other times, we idealize them as if they were perfect. And in each case, we miss the point. While we are unique, we are also connected to the places where we grew up and to the people who brought us to life: parents, grandparents, extended family, and our ancestors. Understanding and embracing our heritage can help us to blossom and become the people God has created us to be. When we know the secrets, successes, failures, and sufferings of our ancestors, we have the ability to heal them and to not let them blindside us.

In our Bible story for today we hear about the power of ancestors for shaping our faith. It is often said that faith is caught more than taught, and this was certainly the case for Timothy, to whom the letter was addressed. What is interesting is the claim that his faith was shaped by the faith of his mother and grandmother, Lois and Eunice.

Let's listen to 2 Timothy 1:2-7

I 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. 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, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. ⁶ For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷ for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Timothy was one of the mission coworkers with Paul. He was faithful in tending to the ministries of the different churches which Paul established. According to Acts 16:1 “Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek.” The letter was written as a challenge and an encouragement for Timothy to withstand the pressures of ministry and life. Paul had been in prison in Rome for a while. The church in Ephesus was struggling because some controversial teachings had been spread there that contradicted the teachings of Christ. The rich women in that church (rich women were often the sponsors of such churches) were manipulated by the false teachings of others who reduced the faith to personal piety and aligned it with Greek philosophy. There was also the threat of persecution and imprisonment, especially now that Paul himself was in prison and his reputation had suffered because of his trouble with the authorities. Even some of Paul’s faithful co-workers Phygelus and Hermogenes had already deserted him because they were ashamed of being associated with an accused criminal. The writer of the letter uses the voice of Paul to ask Timothy to reject any fear or shame. Timothy was being encouraged to keep the faith and not be ashamed of his association with the mission of Jesus and Paul.

So how does Timothy find the courage and resilience to do that? It is by embracing the resilient faith of his ancestors. The Jewish people have known persecution throughout their history and yet have remained faithful. From the stories of Moses and Exodus to the stories of Daniel in the Lion’s den, the Jews have experienced tremendous hardships but have also found a great refuge in their faith in God. Lois and Eunice instilled that kind of faith in Timothy. His call during this time of hardship was to find the resilience he needed by leaning into that long history of his people. Future generations were going to depend on it.

The same is true for us today. When we face the hardships of life, personal or global, we can lose heart and our sense of connection to others. One of the ways to find our way home is to embrace our connection to the generations before us. Even if there is stuff to heal, we cannot run away from it. What we can do is to learn from the lessons of the generations before us. Even though we are not able to change the events or tragedies of the past, what we can do is to make peace with them and to have compassion on our ancestors and the ancestors of others so that the pain of the past can bring us to a better future.

Our sense of belonging and of mission in life depends on our connection to the past and to the future. Where we come from and where we are going are connected as time in faith is eternal.

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So today, I invite you to embrace your spiritual and faith DNA. David Brooks writes, "There's a certain spot on this earth that is somehow sacred, the place where you came from, the place you never quite leave... We live our childhoods at least twice. First, we live through them with eyes of wonderment, and then later in life we have to revisit them to understand what it all meant."

Who are your Lois and Eunice? Who in your family line has withstood hardships and emerged more committed to serving and loving others?

These ancestors don't need to be idealized as perfect. Instead, the invitation is to see them with all their goodness and their shadows, their faith and their doubt. They are the ones who are cheering us on now to live a life of blessing, belonging, and of service.

We are going to take a few moments to let the Holy Spirit bring to mind one person who might have had the kind of influence Lois and Eunice had on Timothy. Give thanks to God for their lives. Invite your ancestor to rekindle your faith and your commitments to the ways of love and of service.

We will conclude this time by lighting all the lights on the communion tables in the front as symbols of their light that goes with us. Amen