

“The Church’s Stake in the Home”

a sermon by

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Text: “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.” (II Timothy 1:5)

This past Sunday I came across an article in the *New York Times* by Nicholas Kristof, entitled “Who Can Mock This Church?” in which the author speaks to the crisis that has affected the Roman Catholic Church – particularly in the past weeks – concerning pedophile priests and the accusations of cover-ups that have reached the highest places in the church. Kristof, who has spent a great deal of his time traveling to troubled places in the world, notes that there seems to be two Catholic Churches – one the official church of the Vatican that is highly political, highly organized, and filled with ritual, splendor, and great wealth. The other church is the grassroots network of humble priests, nuns, and laity in places like Sudan.

It is this second group that has a particular interest for Kristof. He speaks of Father Michael Barton, a Catholic priest from Indianapolis, who works in the remote village of Nyamllell, 150 miles from any paved road in south Sudan. Father Michael runs four schools for children who would otherwise go without an education and his graduates score at the top of statewide examinations.

Father Michael came to southern Sudan in 1978 and speaks all the local languages. To keep his schools alive, he persevered through civil war, imprisonment and beatings, and a smorgasbord of disease. “It’s very normal to have malaria,” he says, “Internal parasites – that’s just normal.”

And then there is Cathy Arata, a nun from New Jersey who spent years working with battered women in Appalachia before moving to El Salvador during the Civil War and then ending up in the Southern Sudan region of Africa. Sister Cathy and the others in the project have trained 600 schoolteachers. They are fighting hunger, not with handouts, but by helping villagers to improve agricultural techniques. They are also establishing a school for health workers with a special focus on midwifery to reduce deaths in childbirth.

At the hospital of that school the surgeon is a nun from Italy. The other doctor is a 79 year old nun from Rhode Island.

It is not hard to see the disconnect to which Kristof refers. But it is certainly not limited to the Catholic Church. One often sees a large gulf in the Protestant churches between large bureaucratic offices in places like Louisville, Kentucky, New York City, and the remarkable work that goes on in many local churches – at the soup kitchens, in homeless shelters, in Haiti, Mexico and in Russia as well.

I.

The scripture this morning is taken from one of Paul's letter to Timothy, a part of what are called the "Pastoral Epistles," which includes I and II Timothy and the Letter to Titus. Both Timothy and Titus were young men who had grown up under the tutelage of Paul. The Pastoral Letters reflect a later time in the church. While they deal with matters of theology and contain some magnificent doctrinal statements, for the most part they deal with practical matters in the church: the qualification of church officers, the capacity to distinguish between true and false teaching, as well as administrative issues that arise in a church.

But there is something particularly powerful about II Timothy. It is written from prison and Paul's death is not far away. As a result, the letter contains some very remarkable personal observations and comments from Paul to his friend Timothy.

In the passage from which I have read there is a very personal reference that Paul makes to Timothy. Paul is reminded of Timothy's faith – but then almost immediately notes that this was a faith that lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and now lives in Timothy.

II.

So, let's be clear. The church of Jesus Christ has a stake in the home. Much of the language of our faith is language that is borrowed from the home. We speak of God as our father and refer to one another as the children of God.

Many of the parables that Jesus told were stories rooted in the home: a prodigal son, a woman who was searching for a lost coin, a father whose son had epilepsy.

Whenever children are baptized in this church, we ask the parents to affirm their faith and remind them that in addition to all the other responsibilities they have as parents, they also have a responsibility for the faith of their children and what happens in the home is highly important for the faith of children. Several years ago Don Browning, who teaches Pastoral Care at the University of Chicago Divinity School, wrote an article in *The Wall Street Journal* on the role of families in the church. He noted in particular that the Presbyterian Church (USA) had recently adopted a paper on "Living Faithfully with Families in Transition." In that paper the church noted that there are many types of families today: traditional families, blended families, families with a single parent, the list goes on. Browning notes that the Presbyterian Church affirmed these many families and was very supportive of the different family arrangements that are present today.

But Browning goes on to say that Presbyterians have an edge on many groups in our society. Generally Presbyterians are better educated and wealthier than most groups in this country. Seventy-five percent of Presbyterians are currently married and only 19 percent are divorced. These are far higher marriage rates and lower divorce rates than the rest of the nation. Browning then goes on to report something quite revealing that is in the report: “Most Presbyterians ... were once children in middle and upper income families of the 1950’s and have been able to repeat that family form for themselves.” In short, most Presbyterians today do what their parents did 40 or 50 years ago. They get educated, get married, and have children. When divorce happens, or a baby is born out of wedlock, tradition, education and income give Presbyterians a social and cultural capital to manage the effects.

Unfortunately, not every social group in our country is so lucky. There are many groups in our society that are being wrecked by divorce and illegitimacy. Browning notes that while the report concludes that there is not anything wrong with families that a warm acceptance by churches won’t cure, it fails to note the real reasons that Presbyterians have fared as well as they have. In the end the report is a marvelous example of how elitism can silently march under the banner of inclusivity.

III.

The church has a stake in the home for yet another reason and that is that it is the home where faith is most often taught. The Apostle Paul, in thinking of his young friend Timothy, immediately thought of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Let us make no mistake about it. The family shapes the faith in a way that no school and no church can match.

One of the interesting traits of my mother was her capacity to identify characteristics in her children and grandchildren. She had the remarkable capacity to sum up the character of a child or grandchild in one word: indomitable, curious, adventurous, stamina. But she understood something else. Words not only describe, they inspire. In a subtle way she was trying to tell her children and grandchildren not only who they were, but also what they could be.

The great novelist Charles Dickens was often ridiculed about the exaggerated way that he depicted his characters. In fact, however, Dickens’ ability to describe his characters was so powerful that he introduced a new vocabulary into the English language. “Micawber” stands for waiting for something to turn up, “Scrooge” for miserliness, “Uriah Heep” for mock humility. To be sure, Dickens was capable of over exaggeration, but he was also able to describe personalities in a way that made them unforgettable.

There is something remarkable about the way families shape the faith of their children. Several weeks ago the scholarship committee that bears my name interviewed a remarkable man by the name of Noe Juarez, who is a student here at Union Presbyterian Seminary. He is a native of Peru and his family was part of the Presbyterian Church in Peru, a denomination started by Scottish and American Missionaries in the 19th Century. Noe Juarez’s father was a laborer. But he and his wife were loyal Presbyterians and believed in education. All five of his brothers and sisters received a college education as did Noe. He has just graduated from Seminary and hopes to earn a Ph.D in New Testament studies in order that he may minister to Latinos in this country and in his native Peru. When I listened to his story, I was amazed as to how a family could instill this kind of energy,

drive, and ambition into all their children. It is hard to overestimate the difference a family can make in the faith of their children.

That was certainly true in my own life. Two of the people who influenced me were my father and great uncle, both of whom were Presbyterian ministers. My uncle, Dr. James L. Fowle, was for many years the minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. What I remember about him as a boy, was his physical presence. He must have been at least 6' 5" tall and I am sure he weighed well over 300 pounds. He had a towering presence and voice. He once told me that he had buried three doctors who had told him he needed to lose weight.

When I was a student at Davidson College, he asked me once what I wanted to do after college. At that point I was not sure. I told him I was considering law and medicine. He replied to me and said, "You need to be a minister. Anyone can be a doctor, but you can be a minister and that's what you ought to do."

No one had ever said that to me, but it had a profound effect on me.

IV.

This sermon began with a reference to Nicolas Kristof's piece in the *New York Times* with the haunting question: "Who Can Mock This Church?" Kristof points out that there are many people who ridicule the church today – and not just the Catholic Church, but all churches. And clearly they have their reasons. But we ought not to forget those who have so bravely practiced the faith – people like Father Michael and Sister Cathy and all the faithful people who have kept the faith through the years. And unless we are willing to endure beatings alongside Father Michael and willing to stand up to the war lords with Sister Cathy, we have no right to disparage them or their church.

Harry Emerson once noted that human beings are like flag poles. Some are tall and stately; others may be short and unattractive. But the glory of a flag pole is not its shape but the colors it flies.

What are you standing for? How would you like to be remembered? We may not have much control over the kind of flag pole we are, but we should never be ashamed of the colors we fly.

Amen.