

The Story of Us

Ephesians 4:4, 2 Timothy 1:3-7

September 26, 2021

La Verne Church of the Brethren

Susan Boyer

When Timothy, protégé and missionary partner of Apostle Paul, needed a pep talk, Paul began by reminding him of his family legacy. As Muir just read, Paul said:

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. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of purposefulness.

Those times in my life when I have needed to be reminded to be strong and courageous, I too remember my grandmother and my mother.

In June of 1930 my grandparents, Desmond and Irene, set off on a freighter to cross the Atlantic Ocean, headed for Garkida, Nigeria. At the time they left, my grandmother was twenty-four years old and three months pregnant with my mother. Once in England they changed boats and spent three weeks sailing down to Africa on a German vessel, stopping often along the way to load and off-load freight. When they got to Nigeria, they got off the boat in Port Harcourt. The plan was to travel up the Niger River to the Benue River, but the rainy season was late that year. The water simply wasn't high enough. They camped beside the river for several weeks hoping for the rain to arrive. But eventually they gave up, leaving most of their belongings behind to be delivered later.

From there they traveled over 500 miles by train headed for the tin mines. Once off the train they took a series of lorries that got them as far as Damaturu. From there they decided they must travel the last 100 or so miles by horse. Those were hungry days. They had to shoot their own game in order to eat. When they got close to Garkida they sent word ahead that they would need help crossing the swollen Hawal River. By the time they made it to the river they had been traveling inland for weeks. My grandmother, Irene, was worried she might deliver her baby before she ever arrived in Garkida. When they got to the Hawal River, missionaries were waiting for them. They had brought a bathtub to float my very pregnant grandmother across the river. My mother was born on Christmas Day in 1930 in Garkida, Nigeria, just weeks after they had arrived from their arduous journey.

Of all the stories about my grandmother, Irene, that is the one swells my soul with a desire to be like her. Pregnant, she takes out on a journey of thousands of miles in which she will travel by boat, train, lorry, horseback, foot and bathtub in order to share her faith with others.

My mother, Pattie, was courageous like my grandmother, a courageous adventurer born of a courageous adventurer. I have so many memories of her courage, but the one that

sticks out for me comes from later in her life. My mother became an ordained minister at the age of 58 while she was serving as a District Executive Minister. While serving in that role she was asked to represent the Church of the Brethren at the Dunkard Brethren Annual Meeting in California. She gladly accepted but, because of her gender, the Dunkard Brethren leadership would not welcome her nor acknowledge her presence. They couldn't reconcile the idea of a woman in that role and so they didn't speak to her....the very person who came to bring them greetings. She stayed present and visible. When she returned from the meetings she offered to represent the denomination again if needed. My mother was a bold, courageous woman born of a bold, courageous woman.

I was handed a legacy...a gift passed down from my grandmother Irene and my mother Pattie...a courageous faith, born out of conviction in service to truth, love, sacrifice and humility. This gift isn't a family heirloom I can put on a shelf and admire. The stories of my grandmother and mother make me proud but they also demand something of me. This family legacy of courage requires me to be strong...adventuresome...resilient.... and bold so that I can rightfully hand down this legacy to my children.

But just in case this legacy skipped my generation, I told my children they came from independent thinking, adventurers. Some days I regret telling them those stories, as I watch with a bit of anxiety as they make their stand for truth in the midst of the world's chaos. Their stories of courage in the world inspire me and demand something of me, as well. As it turns out this legacy of courage isn't just something just passed on to us by our ancestors, but it is also passed back to us by those younger than us. I have a legacy of courage that is handed back to me from my own children.

Just as Paul reminded Timothy that he stood in an unwavering line of faithful discipleship, I am here to remind you of the same thing. If you are in need of being reminded of that today...if you need a pep talk to have courage and you need to be reminded that you have a responsibility to your spiritual legacy, you have come to the right place.

The legacy I am talking about today is the generations of bold, courageous, loving, purposeful people who came before you here in the La Verne Church of the Brethren. In November of 1890, this church began with twenty-seven charter members. That doesn't sound like a huge critical mass. What could 27 people accomplish? But those 27 people turned around and started Lordsburg Academy (now the University of La Verne) in March of 1891. Less than six months after they committed themselves to being church together, they began an educational institution that is now a thriving university.

Out of those 27 people we now have each other. Their purposefulness gave us this connection and spiritual nourishment. Out of those 27 we have generation after generation of stories of courage and faithfulness. For those of you who have called this your church home for some time you know some of those stories first-hand. For those

of you who are new or who have found us online, let me tell you just a couple stories of this church's legacy of love and bold faithfulness.

Over the years we have had many members who have lived out God's call to love our neighbor as we love ourselves by conscientiously objecting to war as an answer to our world's problems. Don't get me wrong. These people were willing to serve their country but they couldn't do it by killing others. There was Jesse Brandt who during WWI, when he was 24 years old and preparing to head off to Berkeley to work on a PhD, wrote his draft board to explain the teachings of his church. Within a month he was imprisoned as a resister. He was assigned to hard labor and even spent time in Alcatraz. During World War II dozens and dozens of men from this congregation served in Civilian Public Service, an alternative way to serve their country. They were smoke jumpers, built roads, worked in mental wards and even served as guinea pigs for the National Institute for Health. Their courageous stories are part of our legacy as a church.

Twenty years ago on September 11, four coordinated terrorist attacks against the United States left us all feeling terrified and vulnerable. While many of us stayed home and watched the terrible after-effects of this disaster on CNN, some of our members leapt into action. A couple women from this congregation went to New York City to create a childcare center at Pier 94 to provide care for traumatized children whose parents had been killed or injured. Others went to the local Muslim School and stood outside the gates as parents dropped off their children in the morning and picked them up at the end of the school day to provide safety and solidarity. They knew that these neighbors would become targets of people's prejudice and they wanted to shield them from that misplaced anger.

In 2010, our youth attended the National Youth Conference of the Church of the Brethren. It is an amazing denominational conference that only happens every four years. However, the youth from this church knew that there would be LGBTQ kids from conservative Churches of the Brethren who would be at National Youth Conference and would feel unable to name their identity. So, our youth decided to wear rainbow scarves at an event where not everyone would appreciate their statement of solidarity. It was important to them to physically display to any LGBTQ youth who felt unsafe that they were providing a circle of safety for them. People in this congregation knitted and crocheted their scarves. There were those at the conference who let our youth know that their act of welcome was not appreciated but our youth boldly provided community anyway. One gay teen told them at the end of the conference that their witness had saved his life.

I could tell you stories all day about courage, love and purposefulness but you have stories of your own. Stories about the Peace and Carrots Garden, the ministry to feed those dealing with homelessness, Mary Blocher Smeltzer's solidarity with those living at Manzanar....there are generations and generations of sincere faith here. It is our legacy. It is the story of us.

I tell you these stories to remind you of your sincere faith. A faith that first lived in Jesse Brandt...a faith that lived in those whose first reaction after 9/11 was to reach out in love to those left most vulnerable by this act of hatred....a faith that inspired our youth to create a safe zone for LGBTQ youth who have a statistically higher rate of suicide....a faith that now is passed on to you....a legacy we must own anew.

One of the ways we can do that is to tell these stories to each other and encourage each other and ourselves to live into this legacy of courage, power, love and purposefulness. Lisa Cron says, "Story as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution – more so than opposable thumbs let us hang on; story told us what to hang on to." Today, on the courtyard after worship we are going to gather around the tables once again for Spiritual Formation. We are going to take time to hear the stories you tell around these questions:

- When were you most proud of us? By us, I mean us as a church.
- At what point did you think, "This is it. I've found my church home"? Or if you are new to this congregation, what made you decide to come and see if we might be a place you could call home?

If you are watching us online, please email the church office at office@lavernecob.org and tell me your answers. It will bless me if you do.

The stories of us help us know what to hang on to. The story of us and our legacy fuels the future of our courage. Amen.