

## Nana's faith

Preached on Sunday, May 11, 2008

By Rev. David Tinney

Text: 2 Timothy 1:1-7

Theme: As sons and daughters and even grandsons and granddaughters we are shaped by the faith of our parents and grandparents. In this case I was profoundly shaped by the faith of my grandmother.

Tony Campolo is one of my favorite preachers, story-tellers, and writers and he tells a story on himself that provides a perfect way to begin a sermon on mothers. Because he is such a well-known and highly respected speaker he is invited to preach all around the world. In the early days when his children were younger Peggy, his wife chose to stay at home. In fact she was one of those rare "stay at home moms" and was immensely proud of how she raised Bart and Lisa their two children.

But there were rare moments when Peggy traveled with Tony and would find herself engaged in conversations with some of the most accomplished, impressive, influential, and sophisticated people in the world. After one such trip, Peggy told Tony that sometimes as she visits with these powerful people... she finds herself feeling intimidated and sometimes even questioning her own self-worth. Tony said to her: "Well, honey, why don't you come up with something you could say when you meet people that will let them know that you strongly value what you do and you feel that it is dramatically, urgent and crucial and important."

Well, not long after that, Tony and Peggy Campolo were at a party... when a woman said to Peggy in a rather condescending tone, "Well, my dear, what do you do?" Tony Campolo heard his wife say:

"I am nurturing two Homo Sapiens into the dominant values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in order that they might become instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God envisioned from the beginning of time."

And the other woman said: "O, my, I'm just a lawyer."

Isn't that a great description of motherhood? Doesn't it raise the bar in our thinking of the job of being a mother and in our understanding of what really takes place? I need to make a confession this morning. Many of you know that I am not one to visit Hallmark stores and buy sentimental cards for my mother or my wife. I am not one to buy flowers all that often. For years in my ministry I ignored Mother's Day thinking that it was a secular, commercially- driven day that got all the attention it needed without me adding to the hype. But I have learned. The fine women of all the churches I have served have slowly educated me to the error of my ways and now I stop in the middle of whatever sermon series I am doing to contemplate the virtues of motherhood.

Here are some facts you may not know about Mother's Day. Did you know that the busiest day of the year for car washes is the Saturday before Mother's Day? Apparently one of the best gifts you children can give their mothers is a clean car.

Did you know that one of the busiest days for phone calls is Mother's Day?

Did you know that the average American spends \$105 on Mother's Day gifts and only \$90 on Father's Day gifts?

Did you know that Hallmark estimates (or should I say hopes) that Americans will send 150 million Mother's Day cards this year making it the third busiest greeting card holiday of the year?<sup>1</sup>

I am not like my dear wife who tearfully stands in front of the card racks and reads each one until she finds exactly the right card. But I did go online this year and look for a Mother's Day message that meant something to me. It is entitled "Somebody Said," and it has these words.

Somebody said it takes about six weeks to get back to normal after you've had a baby...  
Somebody doesn't know that once you're a mother, "Normal," is history.

Somebody said you learn how to be a mother by instinct...  
Somebody never took a three-year-old shopping.

Somebody said being a mother is boring...  
Somebody never rode in a car driven by a teenager with a driver's permit.

Somebody said you don't need an education to be a mother...  
Somebody never helped a fourth grader with her math.

Somebody said you can't love the fifth child as much as you love the first...  
Somebody doesn't have five children.

Somebody said the hardest part of being a mother is labor and delivery...  
Somebody never watched her "baby" get on the bus for the first day of kindergarten or on a plane headed for military "boot camp."

Somebody said your mother knows you love her, so you don't need to tell her...  
Somebody isn't a mother.<sup>2</sup>

Let us return to another text – the scripture that was read this morning from 2 Timothy. There are many in this room who just read this text as part of their Disciple Bible study. They could tell you that it is part of a letter written by Paul to his faithful co-worker and trusted companion Timothy. What we don't immediately understand in the introduction is how important Timothy's grandmother Lois and mother Eunice were in developing Timothy's faith so that he could be one of the great leaders of the early church. You see he came from a mixed family and his father was a pagan believer. His mother and grandmother were both Jewish before accepting Jesus as their Lord and savior. Had it not been for the "sincere faith" of these two women Timothy would have undoubtedly remained pagan.

Had it not been for the "sincere faith" of these two mothers this child of God would never have experienced the knowledge of God's love for him. It is a great story and it is one that is repeated over and over and over and over again. In fact I bet if I asked for a show of hands in this room right now I bet 75% or more of you would say that you owe your faith to the nurturing compassion and teachings of your mother or grandmother. I know that I do.

I would like to tell you about a short little woman who loomed tall as a giant in my faith development. Her name was Louise but I only called her Nana. She was my grandmother on my father's side and I swear if God was ever thinking about taking up a second human residence on earth he would have first chosen her. She was a saint and I am not saying that because she was my grandmother. Dozens of others thought the same as I did who were not related to her.

She was a hard core Southern Baptist and was never shy about sharing her personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but she was different from others of her kind. She was never one who was ruled by

rules. She was never one who allowed formulas and rules to do her thinking for her. Subsequently she drove the pastor crazy and if I remember correctly many more people came to her seeking counsel and spiritual advice than him. She had this rare ability to combine compassion with wisdom and the end result was a grace that could never be described as cheap.

I remember coming to her when I was eleven years old to tell her about my call to ministry. I have shared the story with most of you before that when I was very young I felt a very strong tug on my heart from God to be a pastor. I shared the news with my parents and I think they were glad but they probably dismissed it as a passing phase in my impressionable adolescence. But when I shared the news with Nana it was different. She understood. She talked about what it felt like to be called by God. She used words that matched my feelings and it was as if she had been in on the conversation with God.

Again most of you know that I held true to that call for my high school years and even followed it into my first year of college but then I rebelled and turned my back on the church and even on God. I didn't mind telling my folks about my change in occupational plans but I dreaded telling Nana. I remember getting the courage and confessing that I no longer felt the call or for that matter the need to be in church and waited for an explosion. It never came. She smiled and said knowingly, "God is not done with you yet." She was absolutely right. There have been times when I have wondered if she and God had been working together all along.

As I look back on my faith journey I realize that not only did my grandmother shape my ideas and faith but also the faith of my mother, father, sisters, and brothers. My mother did not come from a church going family and I am certain that it was a shock for my mother to encounter a strong Bible believing, God fearing mother-in-law. Nana never judged. She gently accompanied her in love as she had done so many others and over time my mother became knowledgeable about the Bible, a person comfortable in raising others in prayer, and a leader in her church community.

My faith today is in part formed by what Paul calls her "sincere faith." I marveled at how closely she walked with Christ and have yearned for the same intimacy. I was always in awe of her ability to take a contemporary challenge and dig into the Bible and extract a graceful solution that transcended all the other ideas being presented. Long before the WWJD bracelets (what would Jesus do?) ever came out my grandmother was living that question in every part of her life. She taught me how to live with grace – a grace that does not enable, a grace that is not afraid to confront, a grace that will not permit deceit, a grace that is merciful, a grace that is sometimes dangerous, and a grace that that transforms the giver and the recipient. I am indebted to the sincere faith of Nana.

Do you have someone like that in your life? I believe my understanding of God is more compassionate, more gentle, more loving, and more graceful because it was so shaped by two outstanding women. A mother's love is a unique expression of God's love.

A mother's love, like God's love, sees the best in us when we have a hard time seeing it at all. I am reminded of a story I heard a while ago about a man who had just been experimenting with his computer and created some new letterhead, with all sorts of graphics, and then used it to write his mother a note. A few days later he called her to see if she got the letter and to ask what she thought of his creation and she responded, "I love it dear. I have it hanging on the refrigerator for all the neighbors to see."

My mother still shows off my photos as if they were my latest creations in kindergarten. Do you know mothers that do the same thing?

A mother's love, like God's love, seems to never tire of giving. When I think of how many miles my mother used to drive us all to band practice where she would sit and wait, to camps with a carload of my

noisy and obnoxious friends, to special classes with all sorts of special projects in tow, or to baseball games where she had to cheer me on even when I made terrible errors, or those times she got up early and drove me around on my paper route because the weather was too nasty to walk – when I think of those times I see a love that was bottomless.

I read a story this week about a six-year-old boy who was sitting with his mother in a doctor's crowded waiting room. As they waited their turn he began to ask all kinds of questions. For a half an hour the boy covered nearly every subject known to humanity. To the wonder of all the others sitting in the room the mother answered each question carefully and patiently. Inevitably he got around to asking questions about God. As the other people listened to his relentless "hows" and "whys" it was plain to see from their expressions that they were all wondering "How does she stand it?" But when she answered her son's next question, she answered theirs as well.

"Why," he asked, "doesn't God ever get tired and just stop?"

"Because," she replied, "God is love and true love never gets tired."<sup>3</sup>

I don't know about you but that is the kind of love I felt not only from my mother but also from my grandmother as well.

Finally a mother's love, like God's love, never gives up hope. Let me share one more story with you. In 1942, hysteria over Japanese involvement in World War II led to the relocation of some 110,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps. In one of these camps, Carole Doi, a third-generation Japanese American, was born. Years later, Carole married a man who had also spent time in the camps. When she delivered their baby daughter, they noticed that the child's feet turned inward, the toes facing each other. Carole was determined to do whatever it would take to help her daughter walk normally.

For four years Carole provided the child with corrective shoes. She exercised her, walked with her and never gave up hope that her daughter would one day be normal. By the age of six her dream for her daughter came true. She was walking normal, but Carole wasn't satisfied. "I wanted her to do anything in which she would use her legs," she says. The girl chose ice skating.

The girl was a natural on the ice. Before long, the youngster was bugging her mother for more rink time. She'd refuse to leave the ice until she got a particular move right. Soon Carole was rising at 4 a.m. to get her daughter to the rink. Finally, after 15 years of lessons, young Kristi Yamaguchi represented her country in the Olympics.

As the U.S. flag was hoisted during the 1992 medals ceremony, Carole and Jim Yamaguchi watched Kristi receive the gold medal. Kristi Yamaguchi stood on that victory platform because of a mother who stood behind her and never lost hope.

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<sup>1</sup> All facts from Leonard Sweet's sermon "Mom, the original seatbelt."

<sup>2</sup> James W. Moore, "A Mother's Love" sermon on eSermons.com

<sup>3</sup> Gene Dobbins; Johnny Wilson; Wayne Sharp, "Roses for Mama" copyright 1977 Chappell & Co. Cited in IBID., p.106-107