***PASSING THE TORCH***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church

October 2, 2022

Texts: 2 Timothy 1:1-14 and Luke 17:5-6

A recent article in *The Washington Post* citing research from the Pew Charitable Trust indicates that if current trends continue, Christians could make up less than half and as little as a third of the population in the United States within 50 years, while the number of “Nones” – not NUNS but those identifying no religious affiliation – may constitute more than half the population.[[1]](#endnote-1) As the article notes, referring to two of the Pew researchers:

*Hackett said that the projections for the country do not show the end of Christianity or of religion in general, which he expects to remain robust. And most nones, while claiming no religion, do not*[identify](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/) *as atheists. Instead, Kramer said, the United States appears to be going through a pattern of secularization that has happened in other countries, though “we may be a bit behind”.…None of its models shows a reversal of the decline of Christian affiliation, which dropped from 78 percent in 2007 to 63 percent in 2020, according to Pew research.*

What is happening here? According to the article, in part this is a result of Christians in the population being older; in other words, demographics are working against us. But there is another troubling trend identified in these statistics:

*Currently, about a third (31 percent) of Christians become disaffiliated before they turn 30, according to Pew Research. Twenty-one percent of nones become Christian as young adults.*

In other words, we are not effectively passing along our Christian faith to the next generation. For whatever reason they are wandering away and while some return, many do not. This research encompasses all Christians; it is not particular to us as Presbyterians or to any other denomination. The authors stress that their research cannot predict what will happen. It is simply a mathematical analysis of current trends projected over time.

It has long been said that *the Christian faith is only one generation away from extinction.* The first time I heard that comment I thought it was a rather pessimistic view of our faith. It seemed to suggest that the Christian faith is fragile, something always on the brink of dying out and disappearing from the face of the earth – like the Giant Panda or a winning football team in Washinton. To say that the Christian faith is only one generation away from extinction is to suggest that in a hundred years,

faithful disciples might be nowhere to be found, and

the good news of salvation might be dead and gone.

Books might survive, church buildings might survive, but the Scriptures and the Church and individual followers of Christ might not. Is it possible that our faith could be so tenuous, so endangered that it stands only one generation away from extinction? The research seems to point in that sobering direction, but with this caution:

*In the report, researchers note that “there is no data on which to model a sudden or gradual revival of Christianity (or of religion in general) in the U.S….That does not mean a religious revival is impossible. It means there is no demographic basis on which to project one.”*

Such revivals of faith have happened in the past. Might it happen again before we Christians, like the dinosaurs, become extinct? How might we stave off extinction and pass the torch to the next generation so that faith might burn brightly in the future?

When I was a child my parents told us stories and taught us nursery rhymes. My dad corrupted the nursery rhymes for us; it wasn’t until kindergarten that I learned that the proper nursery rhyme was not:

*Mary had a little lamb, his feet were black as soot,*

*And everywhere the little lamb went, his sooty foot he put.*

He did a little better at telling the stories. My parents told us stories of our family – stories of parents, grandparents, and great- grandparents, some of which were true. They told us stories of our nation, stories of bold pioneers and great presidents. But most often they told us stories from the Bible.

Each night before we went to bed, my parents would read or tell us one of the stories of our ancestors in faith – stories of Gideon conquering the mighty army of the Midianites, Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt, David slaying the giant Goliath with a slingshot, Jesus calling down Zaccheus from a sycamore tree, or Mary and Martha hosting Jesus in their home (a story we especially liked since it seemed to suggest that the one who did less house work did the right thing.) We learned that Christmas was really about the birth of a savior and Easter about the resurrection of the Lord. At the side of our beds each night we were introduced to our ancestors in faith and to the God in whom they believed, the God to whom we prayed at those same bedsides. At the table before each meal, we said grace or more often sang a blessing for the health, strength, and daily food we enjoyed each day. In worship each week we sang the hymns, said the prayers, heard the Scriptures, and listened to the sermon (which we later critiqued around the lunch table). My brother, my sisters, and I learned about God and experienced God, through the hands, voices, and love of our parents, grandparents, and friends. The faith we hold was nurtured by those generations before us.

Who nurtured such faith in you – a parent, grandparent, spouse, or friend? Did it happen when you were young or only recently? For two thousand years one generation has told the next about the saving love of God in Christ Jesus in some way shape or form. For two thousand years the Gospel has been handed down from generation to generation to generation by saints and sinners who dared to tell the old, old story of Jesus and God’s love. “*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*,” writes Paul to Timothy. The faith we hold is the faith we received from generations before us, faith shaped by those generations and continually reshaped in us, faith now entrusted to our care to strengthen and guide our lives and the lives of generations to come.

That is not to say that the Christian faith is static or unchanging. The Word of the Lord is not frozen in time; it was inspired at its writing and continues to be inspired in its reading and study across the years. The discoveries of science, the lessons of history, the light of reason, the guidance of tradition, the insights of new generations of theologians, and our own experiences of God inform our reading of Scripture and its interpretation, for our God is a dynamic God who continues to work in us and through us today. We experience God not only in reliving the stories of the Bible, but also in living day to day. As Karl Barth suggests, we read with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, seeking to connect the faith we hold with the world in which we live. The world is very different from the world in which our great-grandparents lived, yet our God is one and the same, and the faith we hold is that which we have inherited. We hold it not as owners, but as stewards.

It may seem odd to think of the stewardship of faith. We are barely able to grasp the stewardship of things despite recurring reminders that all things are God’s, not ours. We hear a lot about being stewards of the earth, responsible for caring for this planet entrusted to our care; we are told we are stewards of our time and talents, holding those gifts to be used for God’s good purposes. Jesus reminds us that we are stewards of our riches; they are not ours to do with as we like, but are given to us to use to the glory of God. But Paul reminds us that we are also stewards of faith, stewards of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In his second letter to Timothy Paul urges Timothy to guard the good treasure entrusted to him by the Holy Spirit. This good treasure is the gospel entrusted not only to Timothy but to each of us. An early confession of faith taken from this letter declares:

*God saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to God’s own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

This is the gracious gift we have received from generations past; it is the good treasure entrusted to us to share with generations to come. You and I are stewards of this treasure, this good news, this faith. If we bury the treasure, it will not be found. If we do not declare the good news, it will not be known. If we fail to share the faith with the next generation, then it risks extinction.

Today all around the world Christians will gather at the Lord’s table to break bread in remembrance of the risen Christ, just as generations before them have done. The bread will not be the same in all places; the hands that break it will be varied in color, texture, and age. The cup that is shared will hold the juice of grapes – some of it fermented, some of it clear, some of it Welch’s. But the Lord of this table is one and the same around this world and across the generations – the Christ who came to save us and to entrust to us the good news of God’s saving grace and unending love for all God’s people so that we might enjoy and share it with generations to come.

What then will you do with it – with this treasure, this gospel, this faith? The next generation is watching and wondering: is this faith something worth holding? Is it true? Does it offer anything that can help make sense of this world in which we live now? Watching and listening to you, they will learn a little more of the answers to those questions – but only if you share the good news and live it and treasure it like the treasure it is! How then will you share this gospel, this treasure? Will you tell the story of faith as you have come to know it? Will they see in your life how precious it is? For the good news has been graciously, lovingly, faithfully shared with us by generations of faithful Christians who have gone before us. Now this treasure is passed to us – what then will you do with it, you steward of the faith? Amen

1. Bob Smietana, “U.S. Christian majority could fade in coming decades, models find”, *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2022, [↑](#endnote-ref-1)