

Passing the Word Along
A sermon based on Luke 12:49-56 by Angie Witmer
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Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

Baptisms are incredible moments in the life of a family and in the life of a church family. When we baptize folks, we get to stop for a moment and remember how blessed we are—how holy life is—and remember that we are called to do something pretty amazing with our lives: pass the word along. That’s what this song “Generation to Generation” is all about: passing the word along from one generation to the next. It goes something like this:

*One generation to the next generation
Let us pass the word along
Mothers and fathers teaching their children
Let our faith grow bold and strong.*

*Come and hear faith so dear
Stories I’ve been told
Things we’ve heard, a mighty word, hidden from of old.*

*Love abide, never hide, you must be the one
Come and show so they might know the things that God has done*

*In the child, a heart so mild a promise for the day
They will tell their own as well that hope might guide their way.
(written by Steve Miller. Used by permission.)*

Ah. Come and hear. Come and show. Let our faith grow bold and strong. That’s what happens when we tell our stories and share our lives. Thanks for doing that with us here today. It is good to grow in faith together.

Call me crazy, but I think that the scripture lesson we read a few minutes ago is a great story to share on a baptism day, too. Why? Because it reminds us that passing the word along is serious business.

Oh, sure—when you read these verses out of context Jesus sounds a little harsh: Division. Fire. It's not exactly a warm, fuzzy, "welcome to the family, congratulations on your baptism" kind of story. But when you hear these words in light of the bigger picture—well, OK. They still sounds harsh. But they are true.

Jesus didn't come to make people more comfortable or to help them smooth over the issues in their lives. Jesus came to set the world on fire. Jesus came to set God's people on fire. And that's an important story to pass along.

Sometimes he was successful. We know those stories by heart and we are quick to tell them: how fishermen dropped their nets, women dared to speak out, and tax collectors left their jobs. These were ordinary everyday people who shook up their routines, turned their lives upside down and risked their reputations in order to follow Jesus—a guy they barely knew but believed would change their lives and the world. I don't believe for a moment that any of the friends or families associated with those first disciples were all that excited about their decision to say "Yes!" to Jesus.

I can only imagine the conversation at the dinner table between mothers and fathers when they heard the news: "I just don't know what's gotten into him. He used to be such a good boy. And now, look at him. What will people think?" And I can hear long time friends talking over a coffee, wondering aloud: "Why can't she just leave things alone and be happy with what she's got? Who is this guy, anyway? I just don't get it...it must be a mid-life crisis."

Those kinds of things didn't just happen back then, you know. They are still being played out today all over the world. Right here in this very community even. I

know dozens—maybe even hundreds—of people who have felt a call (or at least a strong tug) of one kind or another to do God’s work in the world. To change their jobs and risk disappointing their families and losing their friends all to follow Jesus. Some of those people are sitting here this morning. And most of them—if not all of them—have stories to tell of how those closest to them simply didn’t understand their need to listen to shake things up and follow their heart. These are stories full of tears and anger and frustration and accusations and the silent treatment. These are stories of division and conflict. And yet, to the best of my knowledge, if given the chance to do it all over again not one of those folks would go back and change their decision to follow that call.

Why? Because these people have other stories to tell, too: stories of fulfillment. Passion. Connection. Relationship. Love. Compassion. Purpose. Those stories win. Hands down, those stories win. God set their hearts on fire. And because of that fire, because of that amazing, unexplainable connection to God and other people, their lives are now much more full and rich and wonderful than they could have ever imagined. Was it painful? You bet it was. Was it worth it? Speaking for myself: yes. And from what I’ve heard from others: most definitely YES.

I don’t know why—there are lots of theories, but I’m still not sure why—but for some reason a lot of us have come to believe that if we’re just good enough, if we have enough faith, and if we follow the rules to the letter, God will make life easy for us. Lucrative, even. Peaceful. You know what? It’s just not so. Jesus’ words today are a reminder of the cost and joy of discipleship—a splash of cold water to the face intended to wake us up and shake us free from the illusion that a life of faith should somehow be a pain-free, bliss-filled existence. You might say Jesus offer full disclosure to his followers when he says: “Peace? Do you really think I came to bring peace? Not at all. There are things in this world worth fighting for—and I came to fight for those things. I want you to join me, but you’ve got to know that this is going to cause some conflict. With your friends. With your family. Maybe even within yourself. You’re going to have to deal with that.”

I suppose we should cut Jesus some slack for his sharp tone: he's been teaching and preaching and healing and talking and listening and eating and drinking and touching and holding and breaking rules and traveling around, sharing his gifts to get people passionate about God's vision for them and for the world, going, going, going...but people don't seem to be catching on as quickly as he had hoped. The problem is, he doesn't have all the time in the world and he knows it. He's inching closer and closer to Jerusalem and the major conflict that waits for him there. So when Peter asks him earlier in this chapter, "Are you talking to me?" Jesus snaps and it all comes pouring out: "Yes, I am talking to you. And yes, I'm frustrated with you. I'm frustrated with all of you."

As frustrated as he is, though, he doesn't give up. Jesus comes back and offers everyone within earshot an invitation: he still wants to do this thing with them. He still wants to do this thing with us. So here and in the stories that surround this one, gives everybody a choice: join in, shake things up, spread the word, and experience that fullness of life that only comes by having your heart set on fire. Or don't. The choice is yours. And the choice is ours. Today. Tomorrow. The choice is ours. That's a story worth passing along, too: following Jesus is a choice we make over and over and over again.

Before we're done here, I want to say something to the parents of the ones we have baptized here today: Wow. You have done something truly faithful today. Congratulations. It's easy to forget what a sacred thing this is: sometimes we put baptism on a check list with other "to-do's" for the baby: check ups, daycare, six month photos, baptism...but it's not just another to-do. It's a big deal. In this act, you have given your child a gift of a new family. A family of faith that will surround them as they grow. And along with that you have given yourself a gift, too: a family that will help you raise your children in faith. We promised to do that when we baptized your child. And we take that promise pretty seriously here. You also gave all of us the opportunity to remember what it means to be baptized. Thanks

for that. We don't stop to do that very often, but it's so important to do as we make the decision to follow Jesus every day. We were reminded today, in this simple, holy act that "the Lord is our shepherd." And that "love never fails." And that "Nothing—not anything—can separate us from the love of God found in Christ Jesus." And we remembered that baptism means living out the great command to "love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves" even when it's not easy. And it's not always going to be easy. It's not supposed to be. So as you all live out your call to raise your family in faith, be prepared: there will be conflict. There will be division. But we're in this together. As a family of faith, we are in this together.

May God bless you on your days ahead, give you strength for the journey and help your family pass the word along every moment of every day.

Amen.