

“Guard the Good Deposit”

2019-10-06 – Proper 22 Series C - 1 Timothy 1:1-14

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I.

Have you ever been entrusted by another person to watch over something very dear? And by this, I don't mean temporarily. I mean have you ever been given something by someone, a thing which was very valuable and carried great meaning for that person, and been told it was yours now? Perhaps it came with a set of instructions: “Take care of it. Protect it. Guard it.” Did you feel a great weight of responsibility? Or, perhaps, did you feel inadequate, knowing that the item which was being entrusted to you would never mean to you what it meant to the person who was giving it to you?

This happened to me, once. My grandfather has long been in possession of a turn-of-the-century fine pocketwatch, which was his own grandmother's. This little watch means so much to my grandfather. He's carefully researched the company who made the watch, the probable year it was manufactured, how best to care for it to keep it in good working order for time to come. How rare it is. How much it is estimated to be worth. But it's hardly any of these things which make it so valuable to my grandfather. He probably would have sold it long ago if not for one thing. A thumbprint. Yes, his grandmother, whom he called “Grandma Brown” carried this pocketwatch everyday of her life, and she took meticulous care of it. It was her most valued possession. The inside of the top open face of the watch is a highly polished gold, so smooth it serves nearly as a mirror. A jeweler a long time ago told her not to touch that part too often. Oils from the skin would affect the luster, and once damage was done, it would be difficult to ever recover the original shine. She would let people look at the watch, hold the watch, but she always exhorted them to be most careful not to touch the inside face of the opened watch.

When she was late in life, bedridden, and nearing death, my grandfather was by her side with some others when a family member asked if she had any last wishes. “Yes,” she had replied. “Yes, I'd like to see and hold my dear pocketwatch once more before I die.” Now, by this time Grandma Brown was hardly in her right mind, but she did know enough to ask for the watch. However, when it was brought to her, and by habit she pushed the clasp and it sprung open, she broke her own rule. As she was labored in breathing and perspiring, as she looked once more at the face of the watch her oily thumb pressed smack dab onto the pristine inside of the cover, and laid down a very obvious thumbprint. While she was too delirious to know this, she shut the clasp one last time. She would never open that watch again, and it would not be opened again until many years later when it was entrusted to my grandfather. The first time he ever opened it he looked, and there it was, after all those years, his long deceased and beloved grandmother's thumbprint. He resolved never to wipe it away. Over the years, when he would have it cleaned, he would tell the jeweler, “Clean it up nice, but leave the inside of the clasp cover.” And so that thumbprint has remained for in place, from the day it was made, for now over 70 years. Guarded. Protected. Watched over.

And now it's my turn. A couple of years ago my grandfather took me aside, took me back to a special cabinet where he kept some valuables locked away, and he showed me the watch, told me the story, and as he handed it to me, as he entrusted it to me, he told me to guard it. It's my responsibility. I'm not sure that watch can ever have the meaning for me it had for him, but because it was from him, I will take good care of it. The thumbprint will remain.

II.

The reason I tell this story is to get us thinking about some valuable things in our own lives, and why they might have value for us. Again, I don't know if you've ever been entrusted with the safeguarding of any family heirlooms, or other things of value, but I do know something that all of us here have been entrusted with. And that is simply this: the teachings of the Christian faith. We are the keepers of this tradition. It was handed from Jesus, to the Apostles, to others, down through the years, and finally to us. Had any one of those generations before us not handled carefully and protected the faith, we might not be standing here today, in this church, worshipping the One True God. Paul calls the faith a “good deposit.” What is it? It's the “pattern of sound words” that he has preached, that had been preached to him, that have been preached to us. It's the teaching that in Christ Jesus, and by His death and resurrection, the sins of the world have been atoned for and that the righteous will live, not by their merit or performance, but by faith in the Son of God who loved them and gave Himself for them. Let me repeat that: “the righteous will live by faith.” This is the Christian family heirloom that is so valuable to the family, this is what has been entrusted to us and will be entrusted to the next generation. And, Paul tells Timothy, he tells us: guard this good deposit with your life and by the help of the Holy Spirit.

Timothy, Paul says, had received this faith from first, his grandmother, Lois, who read him the Scriptures and acquainted him to the Christian faith. She passed it down to Eunice, Timothy's mother. And Eunice passed the deposit of faith down to young Timothy as she bounced him on her knee and spoke of a God whose promises filled her with great joy. Both his grandmother and his mother had taught Timothy of the salvation in Christ Jesus, that Timothy was already righteous, because his faith, that is, his trust, that God's Word is indeed true and gives life.

III.

And, perhaps we wonder—we wonder if this faith in Jesus can ever mean as much to us as it did those first-century apostles who lived and ate and drank Jesus and learned at His feet, and beheld His glory. But we can know this, this faith should mean oh so much to us. We know that we would be lost without it. We do hold it dear in our hearts, maybe not as dear as we should, but we are, after all, gathered here this day to seek His Word and allow it to strengthen our faith that we might continue to trust in Jesus.

But, we must admit. It's not all that easy to hold onto the deposit of faith in the midst of the world. It seems as if everything in our lives, everything in our American culture, continues to devalue the faith, to hold it in derision, to be doubtful of its worth or its truth. I don't care about that old pocketwatch probably near as much as my grandpa did, but I can tell you this, others in this world probably couldn't care less. It'd be pretty easy for me to feel the same way. It'd be easy for me to just pawn it off for whatever its worth and never give it a second thought again. Perhaps, when it comes to your faith, you've considered something like this. Maybe you've walked away in the past, or considered it. Maybe right now, you even wonder what the value is in hanging onto something that the world seems to have passed by. What value is it to have a Bible? To read its stories? To hear sermons? To go to church? And even if you determine to hold onto the faith dearly, you can so easily become dismayed when you look around at some many who have let their guard down.

So many in our church, who have been entrusted with the good deposit of faith, have failed to protect it. Pastors, yes, even pastors and church leaders, in our day, declare parts of God's Word irrelevant, or out-of-date. Some have perverted our Lord's design for marriage, and sexuality, and on life issues. Some, still under the guise of the label "Christian" have even questioned the essentialness of Jesus Himself, all but casting anything that was left of the deposit into the junkyard.

Conditions must have been similar in Habakkuk's day. Listen to what the forlorn prophet cries out. He says, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help? Why do you stand idly by? Don't you see what's going on? Violence! Strife! Contention! The law is paralyzed. There is no justice! Wicked are all around! Justice is perverted!" Perhaps you are thinking, that right now, you could cry out some of these same complaints in view of our own society. God's justice, His law, is certainly being perverted in many ways. And here, we hold onto the good deposit of faith for dear life, and wonder if eventually the inevitable might happen and we'll watch it slip right out of our hands. It can be hard to guard the good deposit of faith in a world that lives and believes so contrary to God's holy Word.

IV.

So what are the righteous to do in the face of such adverse circumstances? How will they overcome the temptations to let their guard down and let go of the deposit of faith? In the face of a hostile culture, how will they be able to protect what has been so dearly entrusted to them? The answer, it seems, has been staring us in the face all along.

I said before the essential contents of the good deposit of faith is this truth: that the righteous shall live by faith, faith that is, which trusts in the Son of God. Well, it turns out, that's exactly the answer to our question of how we'll hold on to faith in this world, in any age: by faith. You might not have noticed this, but after reading the first four verses of Habakkuk chapter 1 this morning, the reading skipped immediately to chapter 2. That might seem rather strange at first, however, not upon closer examination. You see, verses 1-4 are Habakkuk's complaint! The deposit is not being guarded any more Lord! Don't you see! Won't you do something? How long!" But it's in chapter 2 that God responds. Here's what he tells Habakkuk. He says, now write down what I'm about to tell you. Actually write it in big letters, like a giant billboard, so that even a person who's running by will easily be able to read it. Here's the solution, here's the key: you will live by faith. That's how you'll live in the face of this world, by continuing to trust and have faith in the reality that it is through faith that you live in the first place. When the times get tough, the technique never changes. Trust in Jesus. Trust in Jesus. Trust in Jesus.

When His Word is maligned, when the culture changes, when your life changes, through it all, live by faith. Trust in Jesus. And why is this faith worth hanging onto? Why is it so valuable? Why must it be so dearly guarded? Well, it's quite simple. It's because the truths of the faith bear the very fingerprints of our God in heaven. A little pocketwatch meant so much to my grandfather because it bore the imprint of his grandmother's thumb. But the truths of the faith, the truth that we are saved by faith, that is the imprint of our God upon our very hearts through His Word and by His Spirit. That truth is valuable, not because it's worth money, but because of the one Who has given it to us. The truth: "the righteous will live by faith" is a truth that must be guarded at all costs: precisely for the reason that it's Jesus own mark upon us, not only in this life, but even in the life to come. To eternity.