I am taken by what spiritual writer Steven Davis says: *My favorite track and field event is...the one-hundred meter relay. It is a team event. You can have the fastest sprinters and still lose the race if you drop the baton... Each of (us)...is a Christian because certain people in our history passed the baton. In fact, countless Christians...from the time of Jesus until today...are to be thanked. They ran the race and passed the baton. Jesus gave this mission of baton passing to his disciples; they turned it over to the generations who followed, and because of their trustworthiness, we are Christians today. For myself it is easy to think of several people who passed the baton to me. Had they dropped it... I would not be a Christian today.*

It makes me think, “Who are the people who passed the baton of faith to me?” Who are those people for you? You and I are followers of Jesus because certain people in our history passed the baton. Can you name them?

Reformation Sunday is a celebration of baton passing. Today we tip our hat to Scotland, not because all of us have Scottish roots but because Presbyterianism came primarily from Scotland to the states. Scotland, of course, is famous for producing golf, Scotch, bagpipes, poets, tartans and also, Presbyterians. And whereas on St. Patrick’s Day we all are a little Irish, on Reformation Sunday we Presbyterians are all a little Scottish.

Some of the oldest churches in North Carolina can be found down east. The Highland Scots came up the Cape Fear River and settled all the way up into Moore County and the Pinehurst area. These Scots also brought their faith and established Presbyterian churches. So some years ago, a Scottish preacher came to deliver a sermon in one of the Presbyterian churches in the Cape Fear Valley. Old Scottish preachers had a tradition of beginning sermons with rhetorical questions, and so this Scot began his sermon by saying, “Mary, the mother of Jesus. Who was she?” And one older Scottish woman piped up, “I’m pretty sure her mother was a McNeil.”

So, even if you are not a McNeil or a Stewart, I hope you will join me today in feeling a bit Scottish and by being grateful for a tradition that passed a baton of faith that has shaped our life, our education, our faith, and, indeed, the First Presbyterian Church of Greensboro.
In this day of ecumenical spirit, it is hard for us to imagine the climate that surrounded the Reformation of the 1500s. Martin Luther in Germany, John Calvin in Geneva, and John Knox in Scotland were reformers who could not accept the status quo of the church of their day. They saw the church as something that had become something less than the church—something corrupt, more concerned about power, politics and money than the gospel proclaimed, the Bible studied, or faith lived out. We live in the shadows of former days when we bashed Catholics and Catholics bashed us. Thank God we are beyond that! And as historians will point out, the Reformation not only produced new Protestant churches, but it sparked a reformation within Catholicism. Today on Reformation Sunday we proclaim that we are brothers and sisters in Christ with our Catholic counterparts…and many of us would contend that we have more in common with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters than with some forms of Protestantism.

I

It is this matter of *baton passing* that caught my eye in today’s scripture. It comes from Paul and the Apostle's second letter to his young friend Timothy. It was a letter, written as you and I might write a letter to a young friend whom we had mentored in some way. Paul was in Rome, under house arrest, and by now aging. Timothy was a young man who Paul calls his “beloved child,” making clear how deep the relationship was between them. He prays for him and encourages him for the important ministry ahead. This part of the letter struck me—Paul writes:

“I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now…lives in you.”

Yes, that is the baton of faith passed to Timothy by Lois and Eunice, his grandmother and his mother.

This is to say that the reason you and I are people of faith is because someone passed that baton to us. Your mother. Your father. Your grandmother or grandfather.

But others as well: A minister, a Sunday school teacher, a youth leader, a Young Life leader, a friend in high school or college. Your spouse. A co-worker.

We all come to those important life moments where we have to own and claim our own faith. But even in those times where we claim that God has a hold on us, that Jesus is Lord of our life, we should also understand that these are not merely times of personal decision. They are also times realizing that we did not get there on our own.

A college student who had been reared in a mainline church had an important religious awakening with a religious group. When he came home, he was asked to be a part of a
college-student Sunday at his church. And in his talk, he chastised his congregation saying they really didn’t know the real Jesus, that they weren’t spiritual enough, that their religion was too soft, uncommitted and lacked zeal. But afterwards one of the elders of the church said to him, “Had you not been nurtured by this congregation, its teachers and teachings, its preachers and preaching, you would not have known who Jesus was to give yourself to him.”

One mistake we make is believing that we make spiritual decisions in a vacuum….that following Jesus is solely a personal decision made entirely on our own.

No, someone, probably many, passed the baton to us.

Some will remember Everett Koop, the bearded Surgeon General in the ‘80s. In his memoirs, Koop writes of becoming a physician.

“As I prepared for my career as a doctor, there was one thing I knew for sure. I would attend medical school at Columbia University…When I went to Columbia for my admissions interview… it was inconceivable that I would not be admitted. My discussion with the admissions panel seemed to go well until one of them asked me, ‘Do you ever expect to make any major discoveries in medicine?’”

Koop replied, “I think that those people who make (discoveries) are building upon the efforts of many who preceded them, but did not do that final thing that achieved success and fame. I would like to be the one who makes a major discovery, but I will be content to contribute to the process.”

A rather astute observation from a college senior, don’t you think…“those people who make the discoveries are merely building upon the efforts of many who preceded them.” And by the way, Koop was rejected by the Columbia Medical School and went to Cornell.

Today we celebrate “the efforts of people who preceded us,” whose efforts we are building upon, the people of faith who passed the baton.

II

I am really thankful for the baton passers. But there is a saying most of us have heard: “Christianity is one generation away from extinction.” Which sounds a bit overdramatic but it does raise a very important issue for you and me: “Who are you and I passing the baton to in our own life?”

Now, this may be a tricky issue for some. There is this certain thinking among us that faith is private and personal and that what people believe is up to them and none of our
business….even if those people are people we love, our own children and grandchildren, sisters, brothers, cousins or good friends.

But suppose the baton carriers, who were so important in our life of faith, had been so reluctant? Where would we be? Probably not here….probably not on a spiritual journey….probably not looking for a way to integrate faith and life….probably not looking at the world thinking “What would Jesus have us think and do?”

People need our faith, our model of faith. Their life will look different with faith or without it. I mean, we are all George Bailey, with opportunities with people that are small, subtle, but hugely significant. If we are reticent or wonder how or what to do remember…. it’s not entirely up to you; it’s allowing God to work in us so that we are shown a way forward.

Are you with me? That part is critical. God guides as we connect, ask and open ourselves to God’s leading and working in us. Do not go to sleep tonight without pondering how God is using you or not in passing the baton of faith.

III

Lastly, baton passing is not merely an individual matter; it is one of the primary missions of the church. I mean we are here because of all the baton passers who were Christians with a Reformed/Presbyterian lens. I love the passage from Deuteronomy where God’s people are reminded— you live in cities you did not build and under vineyards and olive trees you did not plant.

Yes. We dare not forget these baton passers. I mean we have inherited such a legacy of faith and commitment. But in addition to that we have inherited here a legacy of excellence, of making a difference, of seeing “wanting-to-do-well-folks” who sacrificed, gave of themselves, used their extraordinary talents, to push forward the ministry of Christ through First Presbyterian.

A few months after I came to Greensboro I was asked about my initial impressions about this congregation. There were three things already apparent: people loved this church; people wanted the church to do well and people here had a disproportionate amount of talent.

Now I know the news about mainline churches shows us declining in numbers and influence. But we are bucking the trend here, holding our own and even though, regretfully and painfully, some folks left over the Session’s decision on same gender marriages, our church is vibrant and poised for the future.

But here is the point: our mission is to pass the baton. The way we do that as a congregation is by building up the church, by making the church stronger with our
leadership, with our ideas, with our participation, with our money. Each ministry of our church—worship, Christian formation and education, outreach, discipleship, and congregational care has a specific mission within a larger mission.

For instance—
- When we care for each other, we also pass on the baton.
- When we worship, we also pass on the baton.
- When we reach out and serve, we also pass on the baton.
- When we teach and learn, we also pass on the baton.
- When we welcome a new family or a single young adult or a retired couple, we pass on the baton of faith.

Everything we do here is some form of passing the baton...therefore our task is to build up the church!

And if anyone thinks that baton passing is unimportant, then imagine this church in decline a generation from now, or this congregation withered, or weakened fifty or one hundred years from now. The point is not the survival of the church for the church’s sake; no the church is for the world’s sake. First Presbyterian is a church for Greensboro...for families, for singles, for children, for people who eat a hot meal here, for the influence we’ve had, do have, and can have in the moral and spiritual direction of our city. This is baton passing.

When we are about the business of making First Presbyterian better, it is not about preserving the institution for the institution’s sake; it’s about what is good, right, sacred, and loving for our city, for our children and grandchildren.

So today, give thanks for those people who passed you the baton. Give thanks for the generations of people who called themselves First Presbyterian Christians and passed a baton of faith to us all.

But as important — or maybe more important is hearing these words from Paul: *This treasure has been entrusted to you!*