

## CHARACTERS WITH CHARACTER: LOIS

### 2 Timothy 1:3-7

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 18, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. 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.*

*For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

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#### I.

So in this summer sermon series on characters with character, you have heard two sermons on complex characters who are the subject of complex texts: Miriam and the Daughters of Zelophehad; and you have heard one sermon that was effectively a stewardship sermon in the middle of July inspired the stewardship commitment of Lydia of Thyatira.

Today's sermon is different. At our worship planning meeting on Tuesday I had originally presented a one-verse scripture reading; but the group thought that would be entirely too innovative for my personality, so we expanded it to five verses.

But the truth is today's character, Lois, is only mentioned in one verse in the Bible – Second Timothy 1:5. Paul is writing to his colleague and understudy Timothy, and as part of his warm greeting to Timothy early in the letter, Paul says:

*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.*

Of the 31,000 verses in the Bible, this is the only verse in which the name Lois appears.

In order to get a feel for the character Lois had, we have to follow the life of her grandson Timothy, whose faith he attributed to her influence.

- When Timothy is 35, he joins Paul and Silas in their journey to Macedonia,<sup>1</sup> and soon becomes a trusted co-worker with Paul, accompanying him to Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Macedonia again,<sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> According to the apocryphal *Acts of Timothy*, he died at age 80 in 97 CE. Available [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Timothy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Timothy). Accessed 7/16/21.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 20:3-6.

Corinth again, where he is with Paul when Paul writes the Letter to the Romans.<sup>3</sup> He also ventures on without Paul to Troas<sup>4</sup> and Ephesus.

- When the Apostle Paul writes Timothy near the end of Paul's life, he describes Timothy's faith as "sincere."
- Timothy is jailed for his faith at least once.<sup>5</sup>
- He is listed as co-author of II Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, I Thessalonians, II Thessalonians, and Philemon.
- Though Timothy is frequently hampered by stomach issues<sup>6</sup> and is shy and sometimes intimidated in the presence of strangers,<sup>7</sup> he remains committed to Paul to the end of Paul's ministry, and according to legend, leads the church at Ephesus until he is captured and stoned to death at age 80.<sup>8</sup>
- Paul says of Timothy, "I have no one like him..."<sup>9</sup> and as death draws near for Paul, it is Timothy to whom he writes "Do your best to come to me soon"<sup>10</sup> and "Come before winter,"<sup>11</sup> for Paul doesn't believe he will survive another winter in prison.
- Over the course of their several years of service together, Timothy has shared enough of himself with Paul to credit his faith as having been passed down through his family, particularly his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois.
- Paul describes Timothy's faith as "[living] first in your grandmother," and "now...living in you."

Perhaps it is the length and steadfastness of Timothy's faith that comes directly from the length and steadfastness of the faith that "lives in" his grandmother Lois. No drama is reported. No conversion experience is evident. No tragedy or crisis giving rise to a turning to God. Just faith. Pure and simple. Living in a woman, then her daughter, then her grandson. Like a tall oak tree growing in Beverly Hills, the faith in this family stands majestically as part of who they are, generation after generation, surviving drought and derecho, fire and ice:

*...a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois  
and your mother Eunice  
and now, I am sure, lives in you.*

## II.

Over the years, several people at Westminster have shared stories with me of how influential their grandmothers have been in their lives, in their faith, or in both.

When I preached two weeks ago on the twelve daughters of Zelophehad and mentioned that one of them was named Milcah, it prompted a former member of our young adult group, who now lives in another state and worships with us through livestream, to write me and share memories of his great grandmother, whose name was Milcah, and the history of her and several generations after her who migrated to America in the 1920s and created the life that this young adult has inherited now a century later.

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 16:1.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 20:4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 13:23.

<sup>6</sup> I Timothy 5:23.

<sup>7</sup> I Corinthians 16:10.

<sup>8</sup> The Apocryphal *Acts of Timothy*.

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 2:20.

<sup>10</sup> II Timothy 4:9.

<sup>11</sup> II Timothy 4:21.

To hear of Timothy's grandmother Lois can prompt us to remember our own grandmothers, or other people who have gone before us and who have formed our faith and life. I share memories of mine with you, that you may be prompted to remember your own stories, the sources of your own faith.

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Both my grandmothers were faithful, in nearly opposite ways.

One was named Dorothy Freida Bertha Gerlach Hayward. And while she was not intimidating, she was as austere as her string of names implies. She came from a large family of farmworkers and laborers in the Midwest, married my grandfather when she was still in her teens, and they lived with their two children above the small truck stop and bar they ran in Sparta, Illinois, whose claim to fame is as the location where the movie *In the Heat of the Night*<sup>12</sup> was filmed and in which the line "They call me *Mister Tibbs!*" was uttered by Sidney Poitier.

Sometime during the Depression they moved to Jonesboro, Arkansas, a town of 20,000, where my grandfather worked on the railroad. He never went to church, but she was a member of First Presbyterian, where I was baptized as an infant. She later left that congregation out of what she said was a feeling that the people were too high society for her tastes. She joined a small, brown, wooden Presbyterian Church, in a working-class part of town, that I remember looking like the set of *Porgy and Bess*,<sup>13</sup> and which, without air-conditioning, seemed as hot and humid as the settings and scenes in that opera seemed to be when I saw it a decade later on Broadway.

She was one of the first women elders in the state, serving on a Session of three people in a church of just a few dozen members. They had such a difficult time getting ministers that I preached my first sermon there when I was not yet old enough to drive. They even asked me back.

I do not recall seeing my grandmother smile. I never saw her laugh. I never saw her show any emotion at all. There seemed to be little or no affection between her and my grandfather. But she kept an immaculate, small house; always had chocolates awaiting us in a jar on the coffee table when we arrived; sewed stuffed animals for an orphanage in Africa; volunteered in a Head Start program housed in her church, though she adamantly opposed any government programs of any kind, views she imbibed from the only books – in addition to the Bible – I remember being in her house – anti-communist tracts produced in the McCarthy era which so influenced her.

When during my first semester of college my father became ill, we had to move her and my grandfather to Arizona to be near their daughter. By the time I flew out to see her a year later, he had died, and she was in a nursing home. When she looked up from her wheelchair, she seemed puzzled as to who I was, but I think I detected a slight smile of recognition. She spent another decade or so in that nursing home before she died, the last few months I am told in the fetal position.

I inherited from this grandmother – Dorothy Freida Bertha Gerlach Hayward – an appreciation for hard-working, unostentatious blue-collar life; as well as a deep understanding that Christian faith can be lifelong, steady, devoted, and true, even if it never manifests itself in an outward expression of emotion. If faith is a matter of heart, mind, and will, for this grandmother, faith was primarily an act of will.

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<sup>12</sup> *In the Heat of the Night*, produced by Walter Mirisch, directed by Norman Jewison, United Artists, 1967.

<sup>13</sup> *Porgy and Bess*, Opera by George Gershwin, 1935.

My grandmother on the other side could not have been more different. My mother's mother was simply named Madge.

When I was a small child, she was frail, thin, and seemingly very old, but that was the weight of alcohol and drug addiction on her body from drugs brought home by and mutually imbibed with her pharmacist husband. Sometime after his death, when I was three, when we were visiting her, I remember police being called and my parents pleading with her to come out of the locked bathroom in her house.

She was placed in a state mental hospital in Little Rock which I remember with gray walls and gray floors and which would come back to me in memory when several years later I saw *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.<sup>14</sup> She received shock treatments – this the 1950s, but they worked.

She emerged a completely different person: jovial, jolly, eccentric, talkative, nosy, prying, rotund, Baptist, bridge-playing, warm and huggy. I have memories of watching Johnny Carson with her – on her brand-new color TV (a luxury we did not have) – in her living room with a floor that slanted so much you could place a marble in front of her refrigerator and watch it roll through the kitchen and living room to the other end of the house. We would pull taffy every New Year's Eve, which I loved, and eat her famous ambrosia, which I did not love. When I was seven, she gave me this King James Bible. It is the only copy of the King James Bible I have, but I still use it from time to time when looking something up in the unique and beautiful language of that edition.

My last year of seminary I received a call from my mother one afternoon saying that my grandmother had not shown up for her weekly bridge game; her friends had gone to her home and found her in her bed, peaceful, in curlers, purse and keys and bridge scorecard on the table by the door. She died peacefully, looking forward to her bridge game the next morning. A few weeks later I learned she left me just enough money to put down on a small house in Texas when I graduated from seminary, and I have been lucky to be able to buy a home ever since.

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Though my two grandmothers *shared* the same small city; though neither graduated from college nor had a child who did so; though each had a boy and a girl who grew up to marry the boy and the girl of the other, they *bequeathed* me contrasting dimensions of Christian faith.

- My grandmother Hayward left me with the *seriousness* and *austerity* of faith; her counterpart, with the *lightness* and *joyfulness* faith can bestow.
- Both left me with the knowledge that faith can lead us if not to *overcome* at least *survive* hardship and to live in its aftermath with *resolve*.

As they come back to memory in my writing of this, I, like Timothy, am grateful for them both for the faith that “lived in” them and now “lives in” me, as a seeming unshakeable part of my life.

### III.

You may not have a grandmother like Lois, or a mother like Eunice, or grandmothers like the two opposites who were mine.

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<sup>14</sup> *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Milos Forman, produced by Saul Zaentz and Michael Douglas, 1975.

Perhaps your faith has come to you not from generations who have preceded you but contemporaries – friends, siblings, soulmates, spouses – leading you to say of them what Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* said of Sonia who had quietly given him a Bible and who visited him in prison nearly every day, even when she was ill: "Can *her* convictions not be mine now? Her *feelings*, her *aspirations* at least...."<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, perhaps you are not a second or third generation person of faith, but a first-generation believer, a first-generation Christian. Perhaps God has given you faith directly, unmediated by a Lois or Eunice. But whether faith “lives in” you because it first “lived in” someone else, or whether it “lives in” you because God implanted it within you, you *can* be a Lois who passes faith on to those who come after you. There is *blessing* in *receiving* faith from the Lois’ who precede us and there is *blessing* in *passing faith on* to the Eunice’s and Timothys who follow us.

Receiving faith from another or passing faith on to someone in our lives: there is blessing either way, either direction.

Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Epilogue” to *Crime and Punishment*, published in 1866, available at <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/crime/full-text/part-vi-chapter-viii/>.