



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## *Relaying the Faith*

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SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ MAY 6, 2018

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It was August 18, 2016. Our family had just moved from Northern Illinois to Florida, and for the first time in literally years—since before our daughter Lucy was born—we had cable television and we were excited about it. The timing was perfect because there were two critical sporting events under way that we were able to catch. Not in chronological order, but in terms of importance for our family, the two sporting events were, first, the MLB playoffs which resulted in the Cubs winning the World Series; and, second, the 2016 summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

On that evening after work, family dinner, and putting the children to bed, my wife and I did what we had not done for many, many years: we sat on the couch and turned on the television. We caught the replay of the prelims of the women's 4 x 100 relay race. I do not know how much you remember of the summer Olympic Games in Rio, but the track and field events were riddled with controversy and the women's 4 x 100 event was no exception. In fact, it was an event that had bizarre twists and turns along the way. Here is what happened. In the qualifying round for the finals the U.S. women's team, gold medalists in world record time in the 2012 London Olympics, were by far the favored team to win the gold medal.

As the gun went off, the U.S. team led off with Tianna Bartoletta, who ran fast and fearlessly. She seamlessly handed the baton to the very capable Alyson Felix, a 7-time Olympic medalist. As Alyson got to the exchange zone where she was to pass the baton to English

Gardner, something unexpected happened. As the third runner on the Brazilian team was taking off in preparation to receive the hand-off, the second Brazilian accidentally stepped outside her lane, bumping the arm of Alyson Felix. This threw Felix off stride as she attempted to pass the baton. The baton for the U.S. team ended up on the ground.

You could see the emotions of these Olympic athletes unfold. At first there was distress on Alyson Felix's face, then momentary confusion, as the athletes stood with their hands on their hips, and, finally, firm resolve. Team captain Alyson Felix encouraged Gardner to pick up the baton and the women finished the qualifying round. With firm resolve, they finished the race alone and in last place, failing to qualify for the finals and a chance for Olympic gold. What an unfortunate series of events.

This scene flashed back into my mind several weeks ago as I was reading through a commentary on 2 Timothy for my doctoral studies. As I thought about it, I realized that there is something vital that we can learn from that botched relay. The greatest point of vulnerability in a relay race is when the baton is being passed in the exchange zone. It is where all the tension exists, where Olympic heroes are made or dreams are dashed, where someone either makes it into the Olympic record book or fails. What is literally true in an Olympic relay race is also metaphorically true in many other areas in our lives.

Think about the exchange of information, which we sometimes call "relaying" a message. In relaying information, the greatest vulnerability is the point when the information is being communicated from one person to the next. For the most part, information is stored in our minds, but when that information needs to be translated from one mind to another, just as the baton needs to be passed, the information is at its most vulnerable point. Think about the game "telephone," which perfectly epitomizes the reality that the most vulnerable point of communication is when it is being passed from one person to the next. That is when the message is in danger of being garbled or dropped.

This is true in the organizational world with a new hire. It is of critical importance that the exchange of information enables the person to get up to speed in the new position. Within an organization, this might be the transition from one leader to another. The information that needs to be passed must include the culture and the values of the organization as well as the critical relationships, so that the new leader can successfully, with baton in hand, run the organization.

The same is true of our families. There are 936 weeks in the exchange zone for a parent to hand off everything a child needs to know before the age of 18. During that 936-week exchange, a parent must teach the child everything they possibly can so that the child will be prepared and equipped to carry the baton into his own life. The most vulnerable places in life are when that baton is being handed from one person to another. This vulnerability exists in exchange zones in all different environments.

There is one exchange zone in particular that I want to focus on in our time together today; it is where we pass the baton of faith. This is illustrated in the New Testament in Hebrews 12:1, where it says: “Run the race marked out for you!” Christians are like runners in a centuries old relay race; we bear the baton of faith!

Today we know that holding the baton of faith and passing it on to the next generation is incredibly challenging, but it has been happening for generation upon generation upon generation, which is why we find ourselves holding our faith today. It appears that the world today is in danger of dropping the baton of faith; it has become increasingly difficult for us to pass that baton.

Countless groups have done research on this. One, the Barna Group, did a study that found one in three young adults self-identifies as religiously unaffiliated; that is, one in three has not received the baton of faith! That is up from just a few decades ago. I suspect that you have seen this in your own family. Are there members of your family—your children or grandchildren—who are the subject of

countless prayers; for whom you long to hand the baton of faith? They have not yet grasped the hope that faith in Jesus Christ brings to you and me. The subject of my most constant prayer is for my children: that the Spirit of God will continually open their hearts to receive faith, that I can hand the baton to them, that they might know the incredible love of Jesus Christ, and that it might transform their lives. I pray that prayer every single night and every single morning.

As Christians who have carried this baton of faith, we do not want to drop it; we long to see it successfully exchanged and the next generations running with it. These thoughts came to mind as I was reading the commentary on 2 Timothy. Paul, the author of the letter, is writing from prison to his young protégé, Timothy. Years earlier Paul had proclaimed the gospel to the city of Ephesus. Now Paul is nearing the end of his life. He is in prison, probably in Rome, and he longs for the gospel message to continue; he is handing the leadership baton to Timothy so that he can then pass it to subsequent generations. Listen now to 2 Timothy 1:5-14.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

Paul starts by reminding Timothy that the baton of faith has been handed down from his grandmother Lois to his mother Eunice, and is now in Timothy's own hands. It must be passed to the next generation to be carried into the future. Now that Timothy is carrying the baton, Paul encourages him to pass it on, saying:

<sup>6</sup>For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. <sup>7</sup>For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. <sup>8</sup>So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.

Remember, Paul is writing to Timothy from prison, so when he says, “do not be ashamed” he is likely referring to the shame associated with being imprisoned. He says that the gift of God that you have received (the Spirit), fans it into flame. The Spirit of God gives us the power of love and self-discipline. Paul goes on to share with us what amounts to a summary of faith.

<sup>9</sup>Jesus has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, <sup>10</sup>but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Paul summarizes what it is that he longs to pass on. He says that Jesus has saved us and called us to a holy life, not because of anything we have done, but because of what He has been done for us. This is the very thing that separates our faith from any other religious worldview. Every other worldview tells you, “Do this and God will love you. Do this and you will be saved. Do this and God will be happy with you. Do this and God will be pleased with you.”

Our Christian faith proclaims, “It’s not about what you do, but about what’s been done for you!” The Christian gospel says that while you were yet a sinner, before you even thought about turning to God, Jesus chose the nails out of His great love for you—as if you were the only person on earth. God loved you so much that He gave His life that you might be saved! Other world religions say, “Do, do, do!” Christianity says, “Done!” Jesus purchased our forgiveness on the cross when He said, “It is finished.”

In 1 Timothy 2:3-4, Paul encourages the church to live holy lives of prayer and peace, and to trust in what God has done on our behalf. He says, “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” This

is what it means to witness. If we proclaim one thing and then do another, those who learned the message from us begin to wonder if the message is true. Living a holy life confirms the validity of our message.

<sup>11</sup>And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. <sup>12</sup>That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.

<sup>13</sup>What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.

<sup>14</sup>Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you— guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

It only takes a spark to get a fire going. Living here in Southwest Florida, particularly at this time of year in the midst of this dry season, we are acutely aware that this is true. It just takes a spark on a parched pile of mulch that has been baking in the Florida sun to ignite a powerful, nearly uncontainable flame. Perhaps the last few weeks you have awakened in the morning, stepped outside your door, and smelled the evidence of the fires burning around us. People have reported that their cars, parked in their driveways, have been covered with a film of ashes.

About a month ago, the *Naples Daily News* reported on the Greenway Brush Fire burning in south Collier County. One little spark in some brush started the blaze which was then picked up by the wind. The March 21 article reads: “With strong winds fanning the flames of a large brush fire in rural Collier County, firefighters continued to battle the blaze...”

Sound familiar? Very similar words were used by the apostle Paul in the passage that we just read. In the flame, the gift of God, see what happened about 2,000 years ago? A spark landed on dry souls

and caused a fire to burn within the hearts of those in the First century world. As the disciples who traveled the road to Emmaus with the risen Christ recounted: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32)

A spark 2,000 years ago started a fire that has been spreading ever since the time of Jesus Christ. At times, that fire has been burning with a wonderful, glorious blaze; at other times it has been beneath the surface of the culture like a glowing ember. Paul says to fan into flame the spark that has been handed down for generations, the one which we now find in our possession. The Spirit of God came powerfully on the people. They described that experience as being like "tongues of fire" and the Spirit as being like a "rush of violence."

When Paul says to fan into flame the gift of God which is in our lives, he is talking about the Spirit of God which lives within us. It is in our hearts because we have received Christ as our Lord and Savior. The wind that fans the flame is also the Spirit of God. Both the fire and the wind are activities of the Spirit in our lives. Paul is asking that we let the Spirit's Life blaze within us and fan into flame the gift of God. It is as if Paul were encouraging us to let the Spirit have His way in our lives. He goes on to tell us that when the Spirit of God is powerfully and demonstratively at work within our lives, God gives us the power of love and self-discipline. Fanning the flame as intended conveys a sense of power, passion and purity.

In Romans 8:11, Paul talks about the Spirit's work in our lives and the power that we have in these words:

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

The Spirit which lives within you provides untold eternal, life-giving power for God's purposes. In the context of relaying the faith, it is the Spirit that empowers us to speak the words of life that may help to change someone's eternity. How would you change the way you think and pray for those people in your life who you long to have pick up the baton of faith? If you knew that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead was at work within you, giving you not only the words to speak to those people, but even orchestrating the situations and the opportunities for you to share the gospel message with them, knowing that the power resides within you to give words that would not only change that person's life but possibly their life to come, how would it change your life? That is the power that is at work within you! Paul says to fan into flame the gift of God and the Spirit of God will give you the power to proclaim this message with confidence.

A byproduct of the flame, this gift of God, will be the passion and love with which we convey those words of hope to the world around us. We will begin to love as Christ loved the world, and to see people through the eyes of Christ.

The Old Testament prophets were God-loving people who longed to see their nation conform to God's Spirit. The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed the gospel fearlessly when he wrote these words: "... his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (Jeremiah 20:9).

The Spirit of God fans the flame in our lives, giving us the power and passion to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is too good to hold just for ourselves; we must share the good news with those around us. That passion was modeled by Jesus when He went to the cross for us. It is the same message that Paul proclaimed with such passion that he was imprisoned. It is with that same passion that Paul is encouraging Timothy not to be ashamed, but to proclaim the gospel.

The final way in which the Spirit is at work in our lives is in purity. The Spirit makes us holy. Paul says that God saved us and called us to a holy life. That summary of the Gospel reminds us that there is nothing that we can do to make ourselves holy. Rather, what God has done for us through Christ on the cross makes us holy. Nonetheless, on the other side of the cross we are given, by means of the Holy Spirit, self-discipline. We are able to think rightly about sin in the world. We are given the strength to overcome the desires of our flesh.

I have two friends, both of whom were raised by fathers who were very successful pastors. I am sure that these pastors prayed for their sons the same prayers I pray for my family; that their sons might come to know the hope to which they had been called, and that they might pass on the baton of faith. Unfortunately, both of these fathers made very public blunders and were defrocked. This is devastating for a church for many reasons, but even more devastating for the families. It caused both of my friends to question the legitimacy of the faith that was proclaimed. They both wandered for years before ultimately finding their way back to faith. That is why the Spirit of God gives us self-discipline, a sound mind in which we are to live holy and pure lives. Paul says to “fan into flame” the Spirit’s work in your life, that you might be equipped with power, passion and purity for sharing the gospel.

Let’s go back to August 18, 2016 and the Rio Olympics for a moment. My wife and I had just caught a re-play of the women’s 4 x 100 relay qualifying race, where the U.S. women had dropped the baton in the exchange from the second to the third leg. Alyson Felix had encouraged English Gardner to pick up the baton and finish the race. They thought there was no hope—no opportunity for them to advance to the finals and be in gold medal contention—yet they persevered and finished the race.

Because they had finished the race, they were qualified to appeal the results. They submitted an appeal to the Olympic Committee who reviewed the footage and discovered that, through no fault of their

own, the baton had been dropped. Therefore, the women were given the opportunity to run a qualifying relay alone to see if they could make it to the finals, something unprecedented in Olympic history. It was that race my wife and I saw on August 18. And on August 19, they ran in the finals, and the U.S. women's team brought home the gold medal ... all because they persevered.

The power, passion, and purity that we are given to proclaim the gospel message in today's world also requires perseverance. There are times when it seems that proclaiming the message to the next generation is hopeless. It seems that the baton has been dropped and that we have no hope of picking it up, but we are reminded by the Olympic team that if we just persevere, God continues to work.

Pastor Pratt and I were just talking about a church member with whom he was recently playing golf. This member told him that he had just read a book recommended by the church and that it had changed his life. At age 70, he had given his life to Christ. Think about the generations that had gone before; of his mother and his grandmother whose prayers must have been surrounding him. They probably never got to see the results of those prayers, at least on this side of eternity, but I suspect they are cheering him on as we speak.

You may never know the impact of your prayers on the lives of those about whom you were thinking just a few minutes ago. The Spirit of God within our lives gives us the power, the passion, the purity, and the perseverance to pass on the baton of faith. We will be empowered to preach the gospel and surrender the outcome to God's control. Let us allow the flame of the Spirit to purify our lives so that when we preach, the integrity of our lives preaches with us. May the Lord work on the hearts of those for whom we pray, that they might receive the baton so that it will continue to spread like wildfire!

