

Leaves Are Falling, Dogs Ears Are Itching, But It Will Be Winter Soon

2 Timothy 1:5-6; 3:14-4:5

October 24, 2011 Revival at Cedar Grove United Methodist Church

{1:5} 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. {6} For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands;

{3:14} But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, {15} and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. {16} All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, {17} so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

{4:1} In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: {2} proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. {3} For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, {4} and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. {5} As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

2 Timothy 1:5-6; 3:14-4:5

“ONCE UPON A TIME” begins a story of remembering.

When I read of Paul remembering to Timothy his grandmother, Lois, I sometimes remember my grandfather. He was a tall, good looking, strong and quiet coal miner.

I’ve remembered the times when he allowed me to “help” him in his basement working of various projects, with tools that he liked to make himself, “because they were better than the store bought ones.”

And to help with the grass cutting,

and to help in the garden.

And I remember those wonderful nights sitting out on the front porch at my grandparents’ house. We’d play a game called “counting cars” – my sister would count how many were going westward and I would count the ones going in an easterly direction – or vice versa. (My! But we were easily amused in those days.) And sometimes, just sometimes, my grandfather would tell me stories.

One thing everyone always noticed about my grandfather was how he dressed. No one past the shower house at the coal mine ever saw him without his impeccably pressed white dress shirt and his always freshly polished black wingtip shoes.

He always dressed nicely – as though he did not want anyone to remember (and, perhaps most of all, he did not want to remind himself) that he provided the food, clothing and shelter for his family by working in the black bowels of the earth – breathing the black dusty air that would later prevent him from breathing regular air very well, and would prevent him from breathing at all for very long after his retirement.

I remember seeing pictures of him from his younger day. Pictures from those days, such as during WWI while he was in Paris, were – often as not – on a picture postcard. In all of these pictures, he was always dressed very, very sharply – white pressed dress shirt and (when you could see them in the picture) highly polished shoes. He cut quite the dashing figure.

He was not a very well educated man. His family situation led him to drop out of school when he was about twelve years old, and to go work in the mines. But this lack of education did not prevent him from being wise.

Wisdom, you see, **comes from God**, and **stays with those who take the time during life to let their wisdom grow – nurtured by attention being given to the splendid, simple miracles of life, that erupt each day all around us.**

I did not realize at first -- nor for quite some time -- what a great and wise man my grandfather was. Oh, he always seemed great to me – but don't all people think their grandfather is great and wise.

However, early into my third decade of life – indeed it was in the funeral home at the visitation for my grandfather – I came to realize – from the comments of a large number of people – that my grandfather had been a very special man to many more people than just his grandson.

Several people came up to me and told me how when they had a problem in their life and did not know the right thing to do, they would seek out my grandfather for his wise counsel. But the comment that really set me back on my heels was the fellow who quoted my grandfather saying: **“YEP, THE LEAVES ARE FALLING, DOGS EARS ARE ITCHING, BUT IT WILL BE WINTER SOON.”**

I'd heard that expression ever since I could remember as a small boy. It's one of those things that you grow accustomed to, but assume that there must be some sort of family basis for the saying, because I'd never heard anyone else say it. And my grandfather would say, "**LEAVES ARE FALLING, DOGS EARS ARE ITCHING, BUT IT WILL BE WINTER SOON**" at all kinds of time other than during the season of autumn.

When I read this scripture from Paul to Timothy it got me to remembering some of the special times I heard my grandfather say: **LEAVES ARE FALLING, DOGS EARS ARE ITCHING, BUT IT WILL BE WINTER SOON.**

One time was when we found out that my father had lost his job. My sister and I were fairly young. I was probably too young to fully appreciate just how frightening that must have been to the parents of two needy – or, at least, certainly very "wanting" children.

I can remember being at my grandparents' house during this family crisis. My parents and grandparents were out in the kitchen talking in low tones. My sister and I were in the living room pretending to be watching television. But we were really trying to hear what it was that they were trying to keep secret from us. It was sort of mysterious, since it was far too early for the secret discussion of the upcoming Christmas gifts. They kept their voices low most of the time; we couldn't hear more than an occasional word or two. Then, out of the hush of the muffled voices, I heard my grandfather's voice penetrate through the silence: **LEAVES ARE FALLING, DOGS EARS ARE ITCHING, BUT IT WILL BE WINTER SOON.**

I have also remembered those times when my sister was going through "one of those stages" – you know during the late teenage years, when it seemed like she was always setting my parents a little bit crazy. I remember the loud "discussions" – they sounded like arguments to me. Doors would slam and voices would raise. And then no one would talk to anyone for awhile.

Being the sweet angelic child that I was – I'm sure you can easily imagine that – I would go about from person to person, like some kind of Rodney King: "Why can't we all just get along" kind of thing. And mostly, as I remember it, everyone would just look at me like I had two heads or something, and just mutter.

Once, when my grandparents were visiting from Fairmont, my sister somehow started another of these "discussion." I was embarrassed that she would do this while my grandparents were visiting, so I went out on the carport, where my grandfather had

retreated when the “discussion” began. I struck up a conversation, as though nothing was going on inside the house.

I remember that it WAS during the season of autumn – just about the same time of year as now. I don’t remember what we talked about, but I DO remember that my grandfather just rubbed his chin and said quietly: **LEAVES ARE FALLING, DOGS EARS ARE ITCHING, BUT IT WILL BE WINTER SOON.**

Well, it WAS true: the leaves WERE falling. And it WAS the time of year when the fleas made the dog scratch his ears an awful lot. But, somehow, I knew that he was talking about something more than that.

I DIDN’T KNOW WHAT. So I just said, “Uh-huh.” – pretending to know exactly what he was talking about. My sister did finally grow up enough that these “discussions” didn’t happen anymore. I think it had a lot to do with the fact that she got married and moved away.

But I wasn’t paying all that much attention to HER relationship with my parents, since I was KEENLY AWARE of MY OWN turbulent relationship with the folks at home. I was away at the first year of college, and the Vietnam War was at the forefront of my thoughts of many people, particularly people of my age.

I forget what the occasion was, but I was at my grandparents’ home in Fairmont on a weekend break from college. My parents were also there. And, like most times when my father and I got together, we got into a “discussion” – yes, much like the “discussions” my sister used to have with my parents – a “discussion” about the Vietnam War. It was as heated as these “discussions” tended to be. And it ended in the usual way: my father and I both stormed off in opposite directions.

I ended up out on the front porch with my grandfather. I continued my talking – talking, talking, talking to expression the justification of why I was right and my father was wrong. I JUST KNEW that my grandfather would agree with me.

And, by now, I suppose you have already guessed how he responded: **LEAVES ARE FALLING, DOGS EARS ARE ITCHING, BUT IT WILL BE WINTER SOON.**

A part of me wanted to say that he was not being responsive to my arguments – but I couldn’t say that. I still didn’t really know what he meant when he said that, but I knew that somehow, whatever it meant, he WAS right. I thought about asking him to explain himself to me, but I didn’t. I just nodded my head and said, “Yeah, I suppose so.”

Sure enough, winter did come THAT YEAR; and it was the last one that my grandfather ever saw.

So, when I heard the fellow at the funeral home tell me about going to my grandfather for the wisdom of his counsel, and how my grandfather had told him, **LEAVES ARE FALLING, DOGS EARS ARE ITCHING, BUT IT WILL BE WINTER SOON**, I knew then that his wisdom had affected others besides just me.

Once again, I was tempted, but too embarrassed, to ask this man just what my grandfather meant by **LEAVES ARE FALLING, DOGS EARS ARE ITCHING, BUT IT WILL BE WINTER SOON**.

I've not heard that expression again since that day in the funeral home. It was like a childhood friend was buried in the ground along with my grandfather's body. And I suppose that some of you may be wondering what made me think of it today.

Well, it came back to me – and I could hear my grandfather saying it as clearly as if he were standing right here beside me – when I read Paul's letter to the young Christian pastor Timothy – right there in verses 2 and 3, of chapter 4:

PREACH THE WORD ... IN AND OUT OF SEASON ... BE UNFAILING IN PATIENCE AND TEACHING. FOR THE TIME IS COMING WHEN PEOPLE WILL NOT ENDURE SOUND TEACHING BUT [WILL HAVE] ITCHING EARS....

And so may it be for thee and for me. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.