

SERMON It's Not How Much We Have, It's How We Live
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Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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SCRIPTURE

2 Timothy 1: 1-14

Salutation

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanksgiving and Encouragement

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.

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Luke 17: 1-10 (Common English Bible)

said to his disciples, “Things that cause people to trip and fall into sin must happen, but how terrible it is for the person through whom they happen. ² It would be better for them to be thrown into a lake with a large stone hung around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to trip and fall into sin. ³ Watch yourselves! If your brother or sister sins, warn them to stop. If they change their hearts and lives, forgive them. ⁴ Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, ‘I am changing my ways,’ you must forgive that person.”

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

⁶ The Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.

⁷ “Would any of you say to your servant, who had just come in from the field after plowing or tending sheep, ‘Come! Sit down for dinner’? ⁸ Wouldn’t you say instead, ‘Fix my dinner. Put on the clothes of a table servant and wait on me while I eat and drink. After that, you can eat and drink’? ⁹ You won’t thank the servant because the servant did what you asked, will you? ¹⁰ In the same way, when you have done everything required of you, you should say, ‘We servants deserve no special praise. We have only done our duty.’”

SERMON It’s Not How Much We Have, It’s How We Live

Have you ever been humbled by another person’s faith. I have. It’s not that I have seen them uproot a mulberry tree and toss it into the sea. But I have been privileged to have cared for hospice patients who have had great faith. And they shared it with me, not by doing anything extraordinary, but by being who they were. I don’t know that they would have thought that their faith was great. They were too humble for that. But I was moved by their faith.

There was the middle aged man who had a bible with a cover that was tattered and pages that were worn. It was not from disrespect but from being read so much. This gentleman was concerned that he might suffer at the end of his life. He was not worried about his personal suffering. He simply did not want his family to watch him suffer as he did not want to cause them pain. He had no anger at his disease or his approaching death. And he had no fear of dying. And my memory of my last visit to him, he was comfortable, asleep in his bed, his family sitting around him, sacred music playing quietly and his bible at his side. It gave me great peace.

There was the elderly woman from Ghana who lived with her daughter and teenage granddaughter. On the days that she was feeling good, she made dinner for her family, even though she could not eat solid foods. And while she did not boast about her faith, but she had this joy and peace about her. The thing I remember most was that she glowed whenever she

said good bye to one of her visitors. That was when she said, “God Bless You.” Those words, that abiding sentiment came from her whole being. And she was radiant. She brought me joy.

And then there was this frail looking, elderly gentleman who was quiet and unassuming, but whose faith was very strong. He never complained even though he was won oxygen, was short of breath when moving very little, and had a very weak heart. His family informed me that he was a Deacon in his Baptist church. His son and his daughter were both pastors. His family would hold hands and pray together at the end of my visits with him. There were lots of “Alleluias, Praise God, and Amens” during those prayers. And one day they invited me to pray with them. Then, they invited me to take a turn and lead the prayer. I was nervous and humbled, but must admit that I was pretty happy when there were Amens, Alleluias, and Praise God as I led our prayer. And the day my patient died, his bible was at his bedside and open to Psalm 23. It was so fitting because Jesus, his Lord, was his Shepherd. My patient had lived his life on this earth following Jesus would continue his life after death with his Shepherd for eternity. I felt sad, blessed and honored to be present with his family when he died.

I don’t know if my patients would have asked for more faith. I don’t believe that they would have expected praise or reward for having faith or for how they lived their faith. I do know that their faith was an essential part of who they were. Their faith contributed to their selflessness, to their joy, to prayer being an essential part of their lives, and to their acceptance of their upcoming death. And they shared their faith with others by how they lived their lives.

In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, he speaks of his faith, for love for Timothy, and for Timothy’s faith. While theologians have doubt as to whether Paul actually wrote this letter, they do believe that whoever penned it would have believed the sentiments would reflect Paul’s thoughts and teachings.

Paul was in jail and approaching his death at the time of this letter. This letter reflects Paul’s love for his faith and for Timothy as he is passing the baton for leadership onto Timothy. He reminds Timothy of the faith he has received from his mother and grandmother – crediting the women in Timothy’s life with providing him with a strong foundation in faith. And Paul acknowledges his own joy in contributing to Timothy’s faith, to his laying his hands upon Timothy.

He also encourages Timothy to be strong, trusting in Jesus and the Spirit. Paul knows that the early Christians were seen by some as worshipping a criminal – that Jesus was seen an enemy of the state and crucified for that by non-Christians. And Paul himself was in jail for preaching and holding firm to his faith. So to be a Christian had its struggles and challenges.

But Paul, as he was in jail and preparing for his death, did not believe that Jesus and the Spirit failed him. Paul felt supported by his faith. His faith had given him courage to persevere in his teaching and preaching despite adversity. He believed that he was able to hold onto his faith as it was a gift of God’s grace, based in the love of Jesus, and made firm by Holy Spirit dwelling within him.

Paul had confidence in Timothy and his faith, a faith that began with his grandmother and his mother and was strengthened by laying his own hands on Timothy. But Paul also knew that Timothy, like all of us, would face challenges in the living of our faith. So Paul was offering him encouragement as to how to hold fast to faith, that God's grace, Jesus' love and the Spirit living in him would enable him to persevere.

Now, Paul's same encouragement applies to all believers. We all can trust that we receive God's grace, the love of Jesus, and the Spirit living within us to guide us. And we are all called to live our faith. But sometimes we are not sure how to best do that.

In her book, The Preaching Life, Barbara Brown Taylor, a Christian author, south after speaker, and Episcopal priest, shares her journey toward her ordination. She had struggled with her decision as to whether or not to seek ordination for five years. She states,

If lasting preoccupation with the church constitutes a call, then I was called, but called to what? To be a priest, or to be a Christian? One midnight I asked God to tell me as plainly as possible what I was supposed to do.

"Anything that pleases you." That is the answer that came into my sleepy head.

"What?" I said, waking up. "What kind of answer is that?"

"Do anything that pleases you," the voice in my head said again, "and belong to me."

That simplified things considerably. I could pump gas in Idaho or dig latrines in Pago Pago, as far as God was concerned, as long as I remembered whose I was."¹

Barbara Brown Taylor went on to say that she decided that it would please her to become a priest. She also said that when we become Christians – either through baptism or a personal faith decision – we "join ranks with God. That is when we become the flesh and blood of God in the world." Ordination is one way to live that call. But there are countless others and we may receive different calls throughout our lives. She states, "Together we can hear our calls, and together we can answer them, if only we listen to the still, small voice that continues to speak to us in the living of our lives."²

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" Jesus replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." Then he went on, telling the apostles that a servant should not expect to be rewarded for doing the job that the servant is called to do. So regardless of the amount of faith one has, faith is not meant to be something for which we are rewarded.

I wonder what Jesus would have said if the disciples had asked him, "How do we live our faith." Perhaps Jesus would have said something like Barbara Brown Taylor – to do whatever pleases

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. The Preaching Life. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publishing, 1993). P 23

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. The Preaching Life. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publishing, 1993). P. 24

us as long as we remember whose we are and listen to that voice that speaks to us. Perhaps Jesus would have said something like what Martin Luther said, which she quotes as she explains that we are called to serve God through our own vocations.

“Only look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your articles of trade, your scales, your measures, and you will find this saying written on them. You will not be able to look anywhere where it does not strike your eyes. None of the things with which you deal daily are too trifling to tell you this instantly, if you are but willing to hear it; and there is not lack of such preaching, for you have as many preachers as there are transactions, commodities, tools and other implements in your house and estate, and they shout this to your face: “My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his.”³

We are all children of a loving God, made in the image and likeness of God with talents and gifts given to us by God. As Christians, we believe that we are the body of Christ on earth. We are called to emulate Jesus, to live in such a way that our lives reflect his love for God and for all people and his radical forgiveness. We are called to use the unique gifts and talents we have received from our God, not in expectation of some eternal reward, but to enable us to live in God’s love and return God’s love by serving God and others.

We may live our faith in different ways at different times in our lives. We may question how we are to do that. So I invite you to also consider these words of Reverend Dr. Howard Thurman, minister, theologian, and activist.

“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Sometimes we make a conscious choice in how we live our faith. Other times, like when we are struggling with a loss, an illness or even homelessness, we call on our faith to see us through that struggle. In the midst of that struggle or situation, we can still share that faith with others. God can use us no matter what our station in life. I again learned that lesson again recently as we were putting the food for our Walk-Up Food Pantry outside on the church steps.

There was a woman sitting on the steps. I offered her some macaroni and cheese, cereal, or canned veggies or soup. She told me she was homeless so had no way to cook any food. But she would take the cereal. She told me she became homeless about 3 months ago. She preferred living in the woods than in a shelter right now. She told me that she was happy, and she appeared happy. She told me that people would ask her how she could be happy while she was homeless. She told me she was happy because she was blessed. She explained that she has God’s love. She told me that Jesus said we could ask for anything and he would give it to us. So she did not ask for money or a home. She asked Jesus for a heart like his. So she shares what little she has with people who have less than she does. She does not beg but will accept offers of food or cigarettes from others.

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown. The Preaching Life. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publishing, 1993). P.29

And she sang three sacred songs for me as she told me about how she has seen the Spirit in her life. She sang acapella. She had an amazing voice. That woman shared her story, her song and her faith with me. I felt humbled and blessed. I am still processing what the Spirit wants me learn or do as a result of our encounter. But I thanked God for the blessing of that woman that morning.

I am grateful for that homeless woman, just as I am grateful for my patients, my parents, and countless others who have shared their faith with me. They have been a blessing, enriched my life, influenced my faith, and challenged me in living my faith.

Our faith is a blessing. May we be grateful for it and those who have encouraged our faith and challenged us in living it. May we trust that God's grace, the Love and Jesus and the Holy Spirit living in us will enable us to live our faith and be the body of Christ on earth, whatever our situation in life. May we do so in love.