

Pentecost 17, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

6th October, 2019

2 Timothy 1:1-14 NRSV / Luke 17:5-10 NIV

When you hear the word “faith,” what comes to mind?

Is it a list of rules and regulations to follow?

Maybe it's words of repentance and commitment you uttered long ago.

For some it may be more of a charismatic or spiritual state of being
you constantly seek to deepen.

For many, it's also something we inherit from our family.

In our reading from Paul this morning,

he reminds Timothy

of the noteworthy faith tradition of his ancestors,

how he is descended from two women of great faith.

I too, when thinking of faith,

always remember my paternal grandmother

who made sure I was at church every possible Sunday

in the first twelve years or so of my life.

Regardless of whether we see faith as trying to walk the straight and narrow,

or some other definition of what our spirituality means to us,

underlying most definitions is a conception of commitment.

We commit ourselves in some fashion

to adhering to a certain perspective in our lives.

In the Christian faith, that is influenced in some fashion

by the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Both of our scripture lessons this morning are about faith,

specifically our own personal faith journeys.

Paul encourages Timothy

to remain true to his evangelical calling by the Spirit

through the laying on of hands,

and following in the footsteps of his mother and grandmother,

who also were great people of faith.

Paul knows the hardships that could befall him,

sharing the gospel in the Roman world of his day,

sensing his trepidation in the tears he shed when they last parted.

Yet he encourages him to be true to his calling,

to live the life he's been led to.

It's not about success or accomplishment, but undeserved grace,

that is not merit-based.

Likewise Jesus encourages his disciples to keep their faith, which on the surface,

seems a bit more convoluted and troublesome.

In effect, he compares them to

“unworthy servants who have only done their duty;”

and that is the more generous translation.

The NRSV translation, which I usually prefer

as it tends to better capture the nuances of ancient Greek,
uses the terminology of slaves.

Now the argument could be made not to take this out of historical context,

that slavery in first century Palestine
was a central part of that culture
and Jesus was using a familiar analogy
that his hearer would understand.

However, to our ears in the 21st century,

that terminology carries much more baggage and meaning,
with the history of chattel slavery in this country,
the after effects of which are still felt.

But I would argue

that Jesus isn't meaning this to be demeaning or belittling to begin with.

In the verses preceding today's gospel reading,

Jesus warns the disciples about the temptations that come in a life of faith,
and that they might stumble,
but to take care not to cause others to stumble
which is infinitely worse.

In response, they respond to have their faith increased

to which he replies
with the mustard seed and servant analogies to make his point.

But what is that point?

Is it that they are worthless servants
who are expected to do great things in humility
because of their low status?

One could certainly read the passage that way on the surface,
and this passage has been misused
to keep others down and subdued over the centuries,
whether slaves or the lower servant classes,
or even women in the household.

Yet there is another perspective from which to view this lesson.

I would think it would make more sense for Jesus
to be encouraging his disciples,
who know all too well the challenges they are likely to be facing,
than to be chastising them as lowly and without worth.

What if these are actually meant to be words of comfort and encouragement?

Jesus tells them that the smallest faith, that of a mustard seed,
can do great things.

In other words, their faith is sufficient.

One thing the apostles understood, as Paul verbalized in his letter to Timothy,
was that the strength of our faith is not entirely dependent on us.

When we enter into a life of faith,
we walk in relationship with a God who understands the struggle.

A God who strengthens us with God's own purpose, power, and grace.

The disciples knew the faith of Jesus, who came as a servant to all.

So when we think of this lesson in Luke,

we need to keep that perspective in mind.

It wasn't herculean efforts of faith that was required of the disciples.

Like Timothy, all that was required was to do what was expected of you,

with humility, always with the other in mind.

Living a life exemplifying the gospel is all that was required.

A life in contrast to the life of the world of empire around them.

At a conference I attended yesterday

on a faithful response to the plight of the Palestinians,

one of the speakers made an interesting point.

He reminded us how Jesus taught of the kin-dom of heaven drawing near,

but that concept may be a poor translation.

The Greek word *kosmos*

is often translated as "heaven" in the New Testament,

but it is most often used in Greek culture

to mean "order" or "arrangement."

Greeks saw the world and the heavens as arranged in a certain order,

so their word for those concepts

reflected this sense of rules and arrangement.

So from that perspective,

the kin-dom of heaven is a different arrangement,
a different way of being.

Our walks of faith should set us apart,

as followers of a gospel that makes us servants to all,
following the example of Christ.

I'd like to wrap up today with an illustration from Canadian pastor Steven Davis.

He shares that "It's very bright in the middle of the day,
but no matter how bright the day is,
night eventually comes and the light fades away.

However, it is possible - in theory at least -

to live our entire lives in the light of the sun,
if we were simply to keep journeying westward fast enough
to keep up with the sun.

But because we don't make that journey west, the day fades into night;
light changes to darkness.

The journey would be too difficult, it would cost too much, it would be too tiring.

It's easier just to be satisfied with where we are.

That's not a bad analogy for faith.

Walking in the light of Christ - continually - is a difficult journey.

It carries with it certain costs.

It can at times be tiring and discouraging.

But it has one great reward:

it is a journey that we take with Jesus constantly at our sides,
urging us on, lifting us and carrying us when we weary,
providing for us when we think we just can't give any more.

There is a great source of strength to see us through this difficult journey of faith -
the source of strength is the light of Christ, and it never fades,
as long as we continue in faith and continue to trust,
and continue to act on what we believe.

If we do those things,

the light of Christ will continue to shine within us and through us."

So what does your journey look like?

Do you live a faithful life, one that illustrates gospel living day in and day out?

There's an old story of a Brethren man who was asked if he was a Christian.

He responded by saying, "Don't ask me, ask my neighbor."

What would your neighbor say?

Is your faith evident in what you say, how you act,
or in what you choose not to say or do?

In today's church we talk a lot about numbers:

numbers in the pews on Sunday,

numbers of members,

numbers on balance sheets.

Often those numbers don't look so good.

Probably the biggest reason they don't

is it's not so clear that we're not seen or perceived
meeting our share of the bargain,
doing what's expected of us as followers of the living Christ.

Would anybody who met us know we are Christians?

Would anybody who walks through those doors, or walks their dog past our building,
feel the gospel in how we walk and talk,
or see the gospel clearly at work in this building?

If not, how do we change that?

I wish there was a clear, specific, obvious answer to that question,
but if we're willing to walk together in faith,
we will find that answer, that calling,
and humbly do the work we are called to.

While we have our own individual callings and faiths to live out,
we also walk with each other, in relationship, as a community.
Our faith is relational: to God and with each other.

As God through the Spirit supports our individual efforts,
we support each other, in those times of darkness and discouragement.

Individually we share the light of Christ
but together we create a beacon for the world to see, or we should.

I pray this morning, as we join together with Christ as a community of believers
through the ancient rite of communion,
we think about how we can ignite that light to our community

and draw others to join in the work we are called to. Amen.