

Sermon Timothy and Faith. Oct 2022

When I drive up to Lancaster County through Amish country to get bargains of out of date groceries at BB's Discount Store, I marvel at the Amish farmers plowing their fields in the straightest of furrows, with a team of horses and heavy plowshares to till the ground for planting. Toiling away at it and getting marvelous results and harvests, in this age of genetically modified crops and high tech equipment. And as I watch the Amish, I am reminded of the story of the farmer with a team of horses in which one horse consistently worked harder than any of the others. The farmer said, *"They're all willin' horses. But the one's willin' to pull and the rest are willin' to let him."*

It occurs to me, that sadly, that often sums up local churches these days, with typically a few stalwarts doing all the work. And God never intended it to be this way. He intended that all whom He saved would serve His cause - pulling together.

There are various reasons why Christians do not put themselves out to serve the Lord. Some because their commitment to Christ and His church is halfhearted. They come to church occasionally, but their real interests lie outside, and serving in the church would get in the way. I've preached on this lately, because Luke's gospel keeps reminding us about this. Serving two masters and love of money taking over. Others dabble a bit in church stuff but don't stick at it, others get offended and quit, or have some motive for doing it and forget God's meant to be in there actually. But for whatever reason, some give up serving the Lord and retreat to - well, wherever it is they prefer to go and take their selves, their souls and bodies.

From today's epistle, it seems that Timothy had a tendency to retreat from the front lines of serving Christ. He was rather shy and timid, and apparently not in the best of health. He's young-ish, which means he's a bit unsure of himself when difficult issues require confident leadership. Once Paul had to write to the Corinthians, "Now if Timothy comes to you, see that he is with you without cause to be afraid." Paul knew that the rowdy Corinthians might run roughshod over this insecure young man.

But as Paul sat chained in a Roman dungeon, awaiting execution, he knew his best bet was to make Timothy his successor. So he wrote this final letter to encourage him to keep at it, despite difficulties and opposition. His words should encourage any of us too who may be tempted to retreat from serving the Lord - to persevere. And listen as he exhorts all who know Christ, but are not serving, to get ourselves into the race.

In today's epistle Paul is doing his best to keep going, saying to his protegee: *"Because you are saved, you must serve, but in doing so, also be prepared to suffer, but then, remember your salvation and God's call to preach the gospel."* Then he reminds Timothy of his own example, and others too, and the message is: even if you suffer for serving Christ, do not be ashamed of living out the gospel, and others who do so too.

Paul also gives credit where its due. He thanks Timothy for his friendship, and his delight that he acquired his faith from his Grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. We don't know any details, about how they lived out their worship and faith in their community, only that it was nurtured in his family and that it was inbred into living within Timothy.

How was your faith nurtured in you? In your family? In your school? In a retreat, or recovering from something, or as some people say: something happened and they found God?

I had such a mixed and Ecumenical upbringing I think maybe I was bound to be nurtured in faith somewhere along the line. A Presbyterian father whose uncle was a Cardinal in the Vatican and became the Pope's envoy to Bolivia, an Anglo Catholic Mother, my brother a cathedral chorister in Llandaff cathedral, then sent to a Methodist Boarding school, me to a Convent school, with family attendance at the Anglican Church and Sunday School to learn all the bible stories. At 21 I became a Buddhist because my boyfriend was one – that lasted a year, then back to Jesus, ever since. Off to seminary 15 years ago to be taught by Rowan Williams and lots of others.

How was it for you? I bet many of you had similar stories of inheriting, being taught, exploring and coming to faith. And as I look out today I know I see some of you who are here today after exploring your faith with brethren on the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox, Baptist, Presbyterian and possibly even The Church of Welsh paths. So who do we think makes up our families of faith now? Are they people we serve when we volunteer in various agencies and charities, or familiar faces we see across the pews in services. Or writers or someone whose words have inspired you to new insights when you read or hear them, or the friend you call first when you need need encouragement. Possibly the family of faith is made up of many members who may be way different from you, and that makes for a very rich faith family life indeed, with huge potential to strengthen and grow on the journey.

“How can our faith be increased?” asked the apostles of Jesus in today's gospel. And Jesus, in one of his dramatic exaggerated illustrations replies it only needs to be as small as a tiny mustard seed and faith will grow to be huge and strong like a Mulberry tree rocking the foundations it gets so big. And if we trust *our* faith is a gift from God, it surely grows like a seed when it gets shaped and flourishes by the family of faith we are nurtured in. For Timothy, his mother and grandmother, and then sometimes it became strong enough for him to go and spread the news as Paul's delegate and now in a leader in waiting, passing the word on bravely in those dangerous times in thought word and deed. As Paul writes in his encouragement to Timothy, “*for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and self discipline*”.

Paul is needing to encourage Timothy, because somewhere along the line he's become discouraged. He's waivering, ashamed and unsure in his faith, and it needs rekindling. We know about that happening too don't we, now and again in our lives and times? When someone dies who shouldn't have, when everything is going wrong, with so much hate spewed out on social media causing teenagers to commit suicide, when the world has wars in Ukraine and 32 other countries right now, when nature wrecks Puerto Rico and Florida again with hurricanes, and puts 2million people under flood water in Pakistan – how can our faith not be shaken or sometimes even lost?

We heard the prophet Habakkuk in the OT reading today mired in a deep crisis of his faith. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?” How often do we hear people saying this these days? But Habakkuk decides to watch and wait in hope in hope. And God tells him: *if you are righteous you will live by your faith*. And so he goes on to do.

If we believe God has saved us and sustained us by His grace, so we are called to serve, we also know that faith doesn't mean we feel good all the time. And in times of challenge it is our family of faith which will hold us and see us through. And in that family we too hope for grandmothers and mothers of every gender and hue who will hold fast with us. Actual family members and friends, longtime members of our church, new members, visitors who aren't sure if they want to become members, but we hope they will, those who come, whose lives are a trial to them, those grieving and lonely or ill, or beside themselves about some crisis. We all have faith to shore up in others along the way.

Be Not Afraid, as the hymn goes, to have faith, keep faith, falter and regain faith, hope for faith, and keep at it. In a world full of troubles and divisions let us remember that faith -however strong or shaky yours feels today - has been entrusted to us to bring it to the Lord's Table with all these other family members here this morning, and the millions more out there, and those in our hearts, to affirm the message and love of Jesus Christ through the succour we receive in sharing in the one Body that is the Blessed sacrament, which sustains and nourishes all who partake of it.

You shall cross the barren desert
But you shall not die of thirst
You shall wander far in safety
Though you do not know the way
Be not afraid
I go before you always
Come, follow me and I will give you rest.

AMEN