

A FAITH FOR THE FAITHLESS

2 Timothy 2:1-13

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

October 13, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The first thing I want to do is polish up a couple things from last week. We talked a lot about passing down a legacy of faith to our children. If you missed it, you can always find it on our website. I don't have any retractions. As far as I know, everything was true, and no one suggested otherwise. But occasionally, even during the middle of a sermon, I realize there is more that should be said. And instead of just rambling on and on, hoping I could figure out what to say as I'm saying it, I thought it best to save it for today.

I emphasized the importance of teaching the faith to our children. We do this both at church and at home. At church we do this by setting an example of being involved ourselves, and also by deciding for our children that they will be involved too. I extolled the value of our children being in church with us, even if they're searching for candy during the hymns and singing their own hymns during the sermon. It can look like they're getting nothing out of it, but they absorb more than we realize. In addition to the random bits they pick up, they memorize the creeds and the prayers at a very young age, which means they have the basics of the Christian faith written on the wrinkles of their brains for their entire lives. They also learn, when you insist that they be here with you, that this is valuable. And that will pay dividends in a few years when they develop the ability to comprehend the deeper mysteries of the faith. So it is valuable to have them here, even if they don't *seem* to get anything out of it.

So the first thing I want to clean up is this: as I told you all this, I hope I didn't give you the impression that you shouldn't use the nursery. You don't *have* to use it, but it's open to you whenever you want it. Between Sunday mornings and special services, here or somewhere else, I figure I preach about seventy times a year. Then I have about four times a year when I sit in a pew with a kid. I've determined that sitting in a pew with a kid is harder than preaching. So you do what you have to. And if anyone gives you the stink eye because your kids are making too much noise, you tell me, and I'll take care of it. So use the nursery whenever you have to, and know this: you are doing a great thing bringing your children here, even when it seems like a disaster.

The second thing is this: in addition to parents of young children, we also have parents of grown children. And every parent, whether we've been parents for a few months or a few decades, we have regrets. We see things we did wrong, and we realize things we should have done, but didn't. As Christians we classify these things as "sins."

If your kids have grown up and moved out, you might feel like you've lost your chance to pass down a legacy of faith to them. And I'm not going to say everything is okay, because, honestly, it might not be okay.

The Christian response is to classify these things as sins, not merely mistakes. A mistake is just something that needs to be corrected, if it can be corrected. And if it can't be corrected, you just try to forget about it. But a sin is something more. A sin is a transgression against God. Our children belong to God more than they belong to us. He is their true Father, so Christian parents are more like stewards, entrusted with the responsibility of raising God's children. So when we neglect this task, or we fail at it, it's not merely a mistake; it's a sin against God. And part of the reason we want to classify it as a sin is so that it can be forgiven. As long as we refuse to admit

something is a sin, it is not forgiven. But when we confess a sin—that is, when we agree with God’s judgment—God graciously forgives for Christ’s sake.

So if you feel like you’ve failed your children, the first thing you should do is confess your sins and receive God’s gracious forgiveness. God is always gracious and merciful. He will not reject your plea for forgiveness.

And then consider how you might still be able to encourage your children in the faith. As long as you and your children are still living, your job as a parent is not over. There are three basic things you can still do for them.

First, you can pray for them. Remember that God is their true Father, and he will not forget them.

Second, you can set a Christian example. Even if they’re not around to see it, your example still matters. What we do when they’re not watching can be a greater example than when they are, because they always figure us out. It might be slowly over time, or it might happen in one unexpected moment, but our kids always figure us out.

And third, you might still have moments where you can speak with them about the Christian faith. In order to do this, of course, you have to know, and you have to know it well, so that when the opportunity arises you can be ready for it.

You don’t cease being a parent when they leave the house.

So that’s the cleanup from last week. Now for this week ...

The epistle lesson for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 13. Please stand as you are able for God’s Holy Word. From 2 Timothy 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus’ name.

¹ You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, ² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. ³ Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. ⁴ No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. ⁵ An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. ⁶ It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. ⁷ Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. ¹¹ The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

Faith. Suffering. The Word of God. And the faithfulness of Jesus.

Sometimes it's hard to have faith. Do you know what I mean? Sometimes we just feel like our faith is so weak, and we would like it to be stronger.

I don't know if you would remember this from last week, but in the gospel lesson last week—it was from Luke 17, just before the reading for today—the apostles said to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5). They spent every day with Jesus. They learned directly from the mouth of the Lord. They witnessed his miracles. And, yet, they felt their faith was not strong enough. “Increase our faith!”

And Jesus said to them, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (Luke 17:6). Elsewhere Jesus says a similar thing about a mountain (Matt. 17:20; 21:21).

And it's kind of funny, not in a funny, “Ha-ha,” kind of way, but in a weird way. It doesn't seem like Jesus' words would have helped much. “Increase our faith!” And Jesus tells them that if they had just a tiny bit of faith, they could do this impossible thing. But they can't, of course, and they know they can't. So what's the conclusion? They must not have much faith, if they have any at all.

And I'm going to leave you hanging there for now, because Jesus left his disciples hanging there.

Sometimes we have this same experience. I don't know what brings it on. It could be any number of things. Maybe you read the Scriptures, and you read about some hero of the faith, like Abraham, or Joseph, or Elijah, or Paul. And your faith just seems so weak compared to theirs. Maybe life just seems so mundane, and you think that faith should be more exciting. Maybe you're going through some kind of suffering or uncertainty, and you don't know how it will come out on the other end. You can't seem to understand where God is or what he's doing. Or maybe you have no idea why, but it just seems hard to have faith sometimes. You want to have faith; you want to be strong, but you're not.

Paul writes from prison to his dear friend, the young pastor, Timothy, “My child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2:1). Paul pronounces this blessing on his friend, and we would like it for ourselves as well.

Then Paul instructs Timothy to take the things Paul had taught him, and entrust them to other faithful men, so that they might also teach (2:2). Paul is near the end of his life. He doesn't expect that he will go out again to plant churches and train pastors. He is in prison, and expects to soon be executed.

And as Paul is suffering, he does not warn Timothy to avoid the same fate. Instead, he invites Timothy to join him. “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2:3). This is really kind of strange. When you care deeply for someone, you generally want them to avoid suffering. If possible, you try to spare them from it. But not so here. Paul invites Timothy to join in his suffering. Paul is suffering for the sake of the Gospel, and he experiences great joy in the midst of it. He considers it all to be worth it, and he knows Timothy will think the same way.

He tells him three short parables, one about a soldier, one about an athlete, and one about a farmer (2:4-6). The basic point is that each of these three people devotes himself completely to the task in front of him. They all go through some sort of suffering, but they find it to be worth it in the end. They consider the prize at the end, and they have joy through the suffering, because they know why they are suffering.

No one likes to suffer. But what's worse than suffering is not knowing why we are suffering. That's the kind of suffering we find hard to endure. That's the kind of suffering where, if you can find some kind of escape, you take it. But if there is a purpose to your suffering—if you know why you are suffering, and you deem the cause to be worth it—then you can really put up with quite a lot. Every bit of pain reminds you of the payoff, and it actually gives you joy thinking about it.

For Paul, he's suffering for the sake of the Gospel. This is what he invites Timothy to join him in. He doesn't mean for Timothy to come and volunteer to have his head chopped off with him. But he does mean for Timothy to willingly endure whatever suffering or persecution might come his way, even if that means death.

And then he tells him what is necessary in order to endure suffering: "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David" (2:8). If Timothy is going to suffer for the sake of Christ, he's going to need to keep Jesus front and center in his mind.

And the same goes for us, too. If we end up facing persecution for the sake of Christ, we will only endure if we remember the one we are suffering for. And when we have those crises of faith, too, "Remember Jesus Christ." Sometimes we just spend too much time thinking about ourselves. And it never helps. If you're in the midst of suffering, it doesn't help to think about yourself, because then you just dwell on your pain. You think about all the reasons this isn't fair. And when your faith seems weak, stop thinking about yourself and your lack of faith. Thinking about your faith will not make it stronger. Faith does not really look to itself. Faith looks to Christ. So "remember Jesus Christ."

This is what Paul has learned to do, and this is how he endures his chains. He remembers Jesus Christ. He remembers the gospel he has preached. This is where he has placed his hope. Paul sits in prison with chains, and he expects his life will soon come to an end, but this is his joy: "But the Word of God is not bound!" (2:9). He has learned to place his hope in something outside of himself. And, not only that, but he has placed his hope in something that is backed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

When you place your hope in something outside of yourself, you can have joy, even when your own circumstances are quite bad. It's kind of like what we do with sports teams. You just pick some team, and you identify with them. You don't actually have any influence on how well they do. They're going to win or lose regardless of your fandom. But you mourn when they lose, and you rejoice when they win, as if you are personally involved somehow. Now imagine two different fans. And they're on opposite sides of a championship game. One fan is a billionaire, sitting in a luxury box at the stadium. The other is some broke guy, listening on a fuzzy sounding radio in his apartment. But the broke guy's team beats the rich guy's team. Who rejoices that night? The broke guy, right? The rich guy rides home in shame in his limousine, while the broke guy dances around his tiny living room. At least for that brief moment in time, the broke guy has the better life. They both placed their hope in something outside of themselves, and the broke guy picked the right team.

Paul, the man in chains, placed his hope in something outside of himself—the Word of God, which proclaims the gracious gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul knew there would be other preachers. Timothy was one of them. The Holy Spirit would not allow the Word of God to be stopped.

Paul's singular desire in life was for people to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, believe it, and live. For this reason he was willing to suffer any consequence for preaching the Gospel. For the sake of the elect, he would endure everything (2:10). And if someone arrested him for it, so be it.

Let them try to stop the Word of God. There will always be another preacher. The Holy Spirit will not permit the Word to be stopped.

Paul looked forward to the life to come. So he includes this short little hymn, which, I think, is one of the most beautiful parts of Scripture. “If we have died with him, we will also live with him” (2:11). This recalls our Baptism. It’s almost identical to what he says in Romans 6. Baptism is death with Christ. Through the waters of Baptism we were buried with Christ. We were united with him in his crucifixion. And here’s the promise of Baptism: “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:5).

Then there is a promise for those who remain in the faith: “If we endure, we will also reign with him” (2:12). It’s not simply a matter of being a citizen in heaven. Jesus promises his believing saints that we will *reign* with him. To return to our sports analogy, it’s not like being a fan on the sidewalk during the victory parade. This is like riding on the float with Jesus. Every bit of glory Jesus has earned for himself is yours through faith.

Then there is a warning in the hymn: “If we deny him, he also will deny us” (2:12). These are not those who struggle through the Christian life. These are not those who find it hard to have faith. These are those who give it up. And there are some who do this. Some will lose sight of Christ. They will walk away. They will give up the struggle. They will not endure. They will deny Christ. And on the Judgment Day, Jesus will deny them. That’s the warning.

But there’s one more line of the hymn. It expresses the love of Christ in a beautiful and comforting way: “If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2:13). Sometimes it’s hard to have faith. Here’s your promise to cling to: “If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.”

Picture your faith as a tiny little flame on a candle. The flame is down to a quarter-inch, and it’s starting to flicker. What does Jesus do with that little flicker? Does he blow it out and throw away the candle? *Oh, that one’s defective.* That’s not what Jesus does with it. “A faintly burning wick he will not quench” (Is. 42:3). Patiently and carefully, he protects and strengthens that faint flame.

How does Jesus respond to his beloved saints who waver and stagger and trip and fall in weakness and doubt? Does he deny us? “If we are faithless, he remains faithful.” It’s a matter of his nature. He has made certain promises, and to be unfaithful to those promises would be to deny his very nature. Jesus’ nature is to be faithful, even unto death.

Here’s the picture I want you to have in your mind. This is what I want you to think about whenever you feel weak in the faith. Picture the Garden of Gethsemane on the night in which he was betrayed. One of the apostles betrayed Jesus. The other eleven abandoned him. “They all left him and fled” (Mark 14:50). They were all faithless, but Jesus remained faithful. So picture that moment when Jesus sees the eleven flee, but he does not. He went to his trial; he went to his death, not because he was overpowered, but because he is faithful. He remained faithful.

So sometimes you feel faithless. So what? We all do. It’s not good, but it happens. “If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.