

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 2 October 2022**  
**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 27**

**1st Reading: *Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4***

**Psalm: *37:1-9***

**2nd Reading: *II Timothy 1:1-14***

**Gospel: *Luke 17:5-10***

**Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø***

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'd like you to imagine for a moment that you are in a situation where you know you only have a little time left to live, but you have a chance to write a letter to your best friend, or maybe your favourite relative. You will never see this person again, so what would you want to say to them?

I think if I were in that situation, I would want first of all to tell them how much I love them, and how much they mean to me. I would say how I wish I *could* see them once more, even though this is now impossible, and how I remember the good times we shared together. I would want to encourage them to go on and be the best they can possibly be when I am gone. I might look back on my own life and wonder if I had made mistakes along the way, but I would hope that they would not forget the things that I thought were most important, and would continue to remember them.

Well, this morning we have read the beginning of just such a letter, Paul's second letter to Timothy. Paul is in prison, in the middle of his trial before the emperor, Nero. He is on trial for being a Christian, for not worshipping Nero as a god, and he is well aware of what the outcome of this trial will be. He will be condemned to death, and will be beheaded.

Timothy had been Paul's closest companion through the years. They had travelled together, preached the Gospel together, and written letters together. Indeed, Timothy had helped Paul write five of his thirteen letters we have in the New Testament [even though we never think of him as being a New Testament author]. So Paul and Timothy were very close friends, and it is no surprise that when Paul was sitting alone in prison, awaiting the verdict he knew was coming, that it was to Timothy that he chose to write his final thoughts.

We will be reading excerpts from this letter over the next few weeks, but it is clear from the outset what Paul wants to say in this last letter to Timothy more than anything else: Keep the faith!

He begins with a touching expression of how much he misses Timothy: "I am grateful to God 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." But then he wastes no time in getting to the heart of the matter, since he goes on immediately to say: "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."

And, of course, Paul isn't just writing to Timothy himself, he is also writing, guided by the Holy Spirit, to us. Most of us have learned our faith from the wonderful people who went before us: our own parents and grandparents, pastors, teachers, all those who cared about us, encouraged us, and inspired us. It is good for us to remember them, and to know that they still speak to us, just as Paul still speaks through these words we have heard this morning.

So Paul encourages us, along with Timothy, to "rekindle the gift of God that is within you... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." Faith, our gift from the Holy Spirit, is indeed very powerful, but it is God's power, not our own. It isn't the case that if we believe hard enough in whatever we want, such as the healing of someone we love, that this will come about depending on how strong our faith is. Jesus talks about this in our Gospel, but let's continue with Paul for a bit longer.

It isn't just any old faith that Paul is talking about - faith in ourselves, faith in the future, or faith in the universe - but faith in Jesus. As Paul goes on to say, we are "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." It is this gospel - that we are saved not according to our works, but according to God's grace through our Savior Christ Jesus - that we put our faith in.

Another word for this kind of faith is "trust". To say that we put our faith in Jesus means that we trust him, and trust him fully, with our very lives and souls, that no matter what happens, we belong to him and he will take care of us, whether in this world or in the next. And this is why Paul can say near the end of this last letter that "the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."

But do we have enough faith, do we trust Jesus enough? This seems to be the concern of the disciples in our Gospel reading today when they come to Jesus and ask him to “Increase our faith!” And Jesus’ response may at first appear disconcerting, for he tells the disciples, and us, that “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.” I expect that some of you may be more familiar with mustard seeds than I am. They aren’t microscopic, but are apparently about 1/8 of an inch in diameter, still quite small.

Yet do any of us have enough faith to tell a mulberry tree to go plant itself in the sea? Did any of the disciples have that much faith? I don’t recall any stories about the disciples actually moving mulberry trees by their faith. Yet they did heal the sick, and even raise the dead, by their faith in Jesus. So maybe what Jesus is really telling us here is that perhaps the disciples were asking the wrong question. It isn’t about how *much* faith we have, but *who* we have faith in. Again, as Paul wrote this morning, we are “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.”

So let us join together with Paul and Timothy, with Lois and Eunice, and with the disciples, rejoicing that we, too, have kept the faith in Jesus, the faith of our mothers and grandmothers, the faith of our fathers.

Amen!

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