

THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO TIMOTHY

(09/08/19)

Scripture Lesson: 2 Timothy 1.1-14; 2;1-7; 3.1-9; 4.1-5, 22

“Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” (2 Timothy 1:6)

Last week, we noted that the two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus, commonly called the Pastoral Letters, are similar in character and in the problems that they raise concerning authorship. Most present-day biblical scholars believe they cannot be ascribed in their present form to the apostle Paul. The vocabulary and style of the letters differ too widely from what we know to be authentic letters written by Paul.

It has been noted that some of Paul’s distinctive theological themes are entirely absent from these letters: e.g., the union of the believer with Christ, the power and witness of the Holy Spirit, and how faith frees us from the burden of the law. Some of the words that appear in these letters also carry a different meaning from Paul’s customary usage: e.g., the Pastoral Letters use the expression “the faith” as a synonym for the Christian religion rather than how Paul usually uses it--as a description of the believer’s relationship to Christ.

Not everyone agrees with the findings or the conclusions of modern-day biblical criticism. A few scholars, attempting to defend Paul’s authorship of these letters, account for the differences by assuming that Paul was older when he wrote these letters, and that the differences in vocabulary, style, and thought were simply changes that occurred over time. This seems to me to be a stretch. In view of the widespread custom of people writing under assumed names in antiquity, especially with regard to religious writing, it is more reasonable to assume that a loyal disciple of Paul used several previously unpublished messages of the apostle and expanded them to deal with conditions confronting the church a generation after Paul’s death. It is also possible that Paul’s disciple just made these letters up entirely.

It was originally thought that not only were these letters written by Paul, they were written to the Timothy who was a fellow missionary with Paul. From the Book of Acts (16.1), we learn that Timothy was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother who had become a Christian. Because of the training Timothy had received from his mother and his grandmother, Timothy was already a Christian when Paul came to his hometown in Asia Minor. Paul later took Timothy with him as a helper in his missions. It does not seem that this is that Timothy.

The Second Letter to Timothy is a pastoral letter from a veteran missionary to a younger colleague, reminding the young missionary of the importance of endurance for preachers of the gospel. Timothy is urged to rekindle the gift of God within him (1.3-7). He is not to be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord (1.8-18). He is to take his share of suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2.1-13). As he encounters false teachers, he must endeavor to be a sound workman, handling the Word rightly (2.14-19). He must purify himself that he might be a vessel fit for the Lord's use (2.20-26). In this he can be helped by the example of Paul (3.10-17), who is now at the end of his career and "awaits the crown of righteousness." The farewell words (4.6-8) are a moving testimony of Christian fortitude and hope in the face of certain martyrdom.

As we reflect on this letter, I invite us to set aside what we know from biblical studies and read the letter as if it were actually written by the apostle Paul to his younger colleague in ministry. I believe the anonymous writer of the letter intended that it be received this way. I find it is easier to relate to this letter when I think of Paul and Timothy than if I try to imagine an anonymous church leader in the generation following Paul writing an encouraging letter to a younger colleague. Biblical scholarship and biblical criticism are important correctives to biblical literalism, but it is also important to be able to relate to scripture on a feeling level, to have scripture touch and move us.

Actually, a guideline that I would like to recommend for our reading of scripture is included in the first verse of the communion hymn, "Break Thou the Bread of Life," which was written by Mary Lathbury in the late eighteen-hundreds. The second half of the first verse reads:

*Beyond the sacred page
I seek thee, Lord;
My spirit pants for thee,
O living Word.*

The goal of our religion, as I believe Jesus presents it, is to deepen our relationship with God, and in so doing, experience or enter the kingdom or realm of God. As Christians, we do this through Christ. Scripture is one among many possible bridges connecting us to God. It is a lens through which we glimpse a small part of the vast mystery of God. We need to "see through" scripture, see through the cultural and historical aspects e.g., in the directives regarding the treatment of women and slaves, to discern the mind, the heart, and the presence of Christ.

In the words of the hymn, we need to see “beyond the sacred page.” We need to see and experience the Spirit of God as God was experienced by the people who wrote and received this letter, whether it was the historical Paul and Timothy or not. Only if we see through scripture, see “beyond the sacred page,” will we experience what Mary Lathbury calls “the living Word.” This is what we try to do in our Sunday morning Bible study, which will resume next week.

This morning, I would like us to direct our focus to a passage from 2 Timothy:

I thank God whom I serve with a clear conscience, as did my fathers, when I remember you constantly in my prayers. As I remember your tears, I long night and day to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. Hence, 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 timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.

Note how Paul reminds Timothy that he received his faith from his grandmother and mother.

Paul remembered what he owed to the faith and witness of the original twelve disciples, those who walked with Jesus, those who instructed Paul following his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. For we must remember that Paul never met Jesus. His life was changed through his experience of the risen Christ, but he was not one of the original followers, those who received their faith firsthand from Jesus.

Paul, who is a second-generation Christian, reminds Timothy that he stands in the third generation. Timothy, who was called into ministry by Paul, was prepared by his family for this great vision. His grandmother and his mother planted the seeds of faith deep within him. He owed his faith not to his father as one might assume in a patriarchal society, but to his mother.

We all come to faith through what we receive from past generations. And it is often from our mothers that we receive the gift, the living example of faith. Even if we go on to understand what we received in new ways, we owe a debt of gratitude to the generations of people within the church who have kept the faith alive, kept the vision alive, that we might come to know it and pass it on to our children, to the next generation.

In *Pilgrim's Way*, the Scotsman John Buchan (Lord Tweedsmuir) writes of his boyhood home in Scotland and of his father, who was a minister:

My father was a man of wide culture, to whom, in the words of the Psalms, all things were full of the goodness of the Lord. . . . He was conscious of living in a world ruled by unalterable law under the direct eye of the Almighty. He was a miserable atom as

compared with Omnipotence, but an atom, nevertheless, in which Omnipotence took an acute interest. The words of the Bible, from daily family prayers and long Sabbath sessions, were as familiar to him as the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. A child has a natural love of rhetoric, and the noble Scriptural cadences had their own meaning for me, quite apart from their proper interpretation. The consequence was that I built up a Bible world of my own and placed it in the woods. (pp. 5-6)

John Buchan caught his love of scripture from his minister father. Timothy caught it from his mother and grandmother. Think for a minute about where you caught your love of scripture, your love for Jesus, your vision of the Kingdom of God. As Paul reminds Timothy, remember what you owe to the people of past generations, of what you owe to the church. Then think about what you have passed on to others, either within your family or within our church.

As we heard last week, in 1 Timothy 4:14 Paul urges Timothy not to neglect the gift that is in him. In 2 Timothy he repeats the exhortation. He tells Timothy to “rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” What a beautiful piece of advice! What a beautiful wish for someone. What a beautiful prayer for anyone who is struggling to remain faithful and hopeful in the midst of difficulties. *Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.*

This is my prayer for us this morning, that we rekindle the gift of God that is within us. This scriptural passage, which mentions the laying on of hands, seems to refer to the gift of the Spirit which is received at ordination. Paul’s letter, then, becomes a directive to the ordained clergy. Even after a man or woman has received the spark, the quickening of the Spirit through the call to ordained ministry, he/she has the responsibility of keeping the flame burning. Too many of us in the ministry, through neglect of our spiritual life, allow the flame to die down or go out. If the flame of our own faith does not burn brightly, how will we bring light to those in our charge?

The passage also applies to all of us as Christians. From time to time, we all become discouraged at our lack of faith, our neglect of scripture, the shallowness and inconsistency of our prayer, and our less than Christian response to the needs of others. In the words of the old spiritual, we want to be a Christian “in our hearts.” But it is difficult. Our lives are not guided by the wonderful Words of Life. We do not carry on a daily conversation with Jesus. We become lethargic in our faith, not making the effort to attend Bible study or worship on Sunday morning. The flame of faith needs to be rekindled lest it die down and eventually go out.

How do we rekindle our faith? We rekindle our faith through worship as a Christian community. It is important for us to be here this morning, to be touched in some way by this worship service. We rekindle our faith through prayer. We need to set aside time for prayer, and we need to pray more often in our daily life. We rekindle our faith through the sacraments. We rekindle our faith through service. We need to invest deeply in mission outreach and our work for social justice as individuals and as a church.

Faith is like a latent power that is implanted deep within our soul. However, we may not fully realize its power. We have latent gifts to incarnate, to share with each other and with our church, gifts of which we may be only partially aware. Just as we have an intellectual potential within our brains which we only partially utilize, Paul tells us that we have a spiritual power within us waiting to be called forth and integrated into our lives. We should not neglect it. We should rekindle it when the flame burns low. Then we will be moved to actualize this latent gift of faith in our daily life.

In the precious moments of worship in the coming year, let us reflect on Paul's prayer and blessing on Timothy, that Timothy might rekindle the gift of God that is already within him. He tells Timothy, "The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you." May the Lord be with our spirit and may the grace of God be with us. May our worship together, our sharing together as a Christian community, a community that believes in the power of prayer and believes that our faith should give rise to action, to good deeds, rekindle our faith and strengthen us as individuals and as a church in the year to come.

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