

## 19 Pentecost C

“For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” 2 Tim.1:6

### Keeping Alive the Fire of Faith

The image we are given in Paul’s letter to Timothy is a campfire. It has been burning for days and days as log after log goes up in flames. In time usually in the morning, the flames die out, the ashes are smoldering but underneath if we fan the fire it comes back to life. That is what Paul encourages Timothy to do. Keep the fires burning!

We can assume that the year that the apostle Paul wrote this letter was an unhealthy time for the church. The fact that he was in prison might suggest the unpopularity of Christians. We could compare that status to the unpopularity of a strike by the UAW in Janesville and Beloit. We wish it would just go away!

Paul tells Timothy to “Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in you.” Even in that day the church was resting on its laurels. It depended on its history and the acceptance of the Christian faith as evidenced by increasing numbers. Complacency was a risk Timothy could not afford despite his own heritage of faith passed down by his mother and grandmother.

Think how tough it was for a young apostle and evangelist to honor a faith that was based on a prophet from an uncivilized country who was brutally and shamefully convicted and executed. And now to be under the apprenticeship of a man of Roman citizenship thrown in jail for preaching about this prophet! Paul understands. He may have got word that Timothy was praying, “Paul increase my faith!”

The gospel of Luke seventeenth chapter addresses similar hindrances to being a disciple of Christ: being a hindrance to weak Christians, the failure to rebuke those who sin and forgive those who ask you for forgiveness, thinking of faith as a deli item that needs to be weighed, and after making a good confession of faith assuming that we have done our duty.

Most would rather not take this gospel at face value. It makes God out to be a slave driver. Our modern culture has beat into us that when you do your job you deserve a reward. We all know this works to motivate and curb behavior. It works when I give biscuits to my

dogs. And one is never enough! Unfortunately like people too much of a reward does not change behavior. I don't like the metaphor Luke uses anymore than you do. I would rather see God as a trainer trying to modify my behavior without tricks or treats. The Russian scientist Pavlov gave us experiments proving he could get animal's to respond a certain way. Yet God appeals to our hunger for righteousness with a free gift called grace.

God owes us nothing for living good. He appeals to us on the basis of a relationship with him that can not be earned. Expecting to deal with God based on what he owes us is a mistake. That would base a relationship of love rather on merit and our own worth. In our cry for more faith God asks us what we have done with the measure he has already given us through our baptism.

Are we helping or hindering the Christian life of those around us? Are we too timid or ashamed to rebuke what we know is wrong? I make my public confession on that one. I'm too nice of a guy and I want people to like me as well. I realize that affects how honest and truthful I should be.

Are we waiting for a promise of reward before we get moving for God? Is it that we think faith has to be piled high and deep like a pound of cold cuts before we are strong enough to teach, to lead, to witness, to speak?

I know I'm preaching to most of the choir here. And yet have you noticed? There is still more room in the choir!

Fan the flames of your faith. You'll be glad you did and you'll be amazed at what God can do. One man was never ordained and knew nothing about canon law yet Charles Hadden Spurgeon preached to thousands every week when the Church of England sorely needed revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Dwight L Moody was never ordained. He was a shoe salesman from New England, who found the love of God in Sunday school at Mt Vernon Congregational Church in 1855. He took his shoe business to Chicago and started a Sunday school on its streets fillings classrooms with 650 children and teaching them with sixty volunteers from several denominations. Dwight L. Moody's legacy is the Moody Bible Institute that has produced more pastors and missionaries than many Christian churches today. He is well known for his words: "It remains to be seen what God will do with a man who gives himself up wholly unto Him. Well, I will be that man."

Suffering abuse as a child and the pain of an emotionally abusive first marriage, Joyce Meyer discovered the freedom to live victoriously by applying God's Word to her life and has dedicated her life to helping others do the same. From her battle with breast cancer to the struggles of everyday life, she speaks openly and practically about her experiences so others can apply what she has learned to their lives.

Her ministries have had worldwide impact, starting 41 orphanages, a hospital and trade centers in India, and 9,000 medical and dental treatments in Cambodia in 2006 to name some of those ministries. Despite her gifts and calling she says that the Lutheran church "kicked her out."

I realize that these stories are outside of our church but there are well known stories of mission work going on in over 100 dioceses in the Episcopal Church: to name some - Haiti, Honduras, the Sudan, Alaska, the Diocese of Albany created a Center for Healing where people are being healed both in body, soul and spirit, in Military and Prison chaplaincies, and right here in the diocese of Milwaukee where the Churches Center for Land and People, located in Ortmyer Hall is reaching out to small farmers.

We must fan the flames of faith! God would have us fan the embers of faith that are covered with ash so Trinity can go from being a maintenance church caring only for its own members to a missionary church where people can be transformed into the image of Christ! May the Spirit's wind blow mightily over the embers of our faith! May those embers burn brightly and burst into fervent faith so we might become a church that knows Christ and makes him known! May we make him known to all that have ears to hear. Amen!