

## SERMON

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 27

October 7, 2007

### **READINGS:**

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Psalm 37:1-9

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

I remember when I was growing up, I would always open up the refrigerator looking for something to eat. Sometimes, I would just stand there and stare into the fridge waiting to see if anything appealed to me. I think that my mom had some sort of internal alarm in her head that told her when the refrigerator door was open.

It wouldn't matter if I had the fridge open for a second or a minute, she would always manage to yell out, "what are you looking for?" And I always answered, "something to eat." She would then say, "Well, hurry up, and find something, you're wasting electricity."

It seems like people are doing the same thing today. We too, are searching for something to eat. However, in our country, it's usually not food to feed the physical body that we seek. Rather we are looking for spiritual food. We are looking to fill that emptiness that exists in our souls.

We are looking for God's approval. We are looking for a sense of peace and hope. But so often, all we find is discouragement and disappointment. There are times when we feel stuck in a situation. We feel paralyzed and helpless.

There are times when we try and try and still are not able to reach our intended goal. There may be times when certain trials in life seem just too difficult to overcome. Perhaps it is the loss of a job, financial difficulties, marriage troubles, loneliness.

Maybe it's dealing with problems of addictions or abuse. Or perhaps it is the intense feeling of emptiness and grief following the loss of a loved one. There can be times when we just want to give up and throw in the towel. We neither believe, nor hope, that life will ever get any better.

Perhaps we hide ourselves in our jobs, our families, or our possessions, clutching to them – like a drowning person clutches onto whatever comes into reach.

During the first century, the infant Christian Church was clinging to hang on. It was on the verge of total destruction. By the year 67 AD, four years after the apostle Paul wrote a letter entitled; 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, Christianity had become a stench in the nostrils of Rome. For Christians had the audacity to refuse to acknowledge the emperor Nero as a god.

To make matters worse, this egotistical ruler convinced the population of Rome that it was the Christians who deliberately set the great fire of 64 AD, which literally destroyed half of Rome.

He accused this small harmless religious sect, who called themselves Christians, of starting the fire, in order get himself off the hook. Therefore Christians were now official enemies of the state, subject to public torture and execution.

So under this swelling wave of persecution, Paul found himself in the courts of Rome, charged with “propagating a forbidden cult.” Oh, he had been in prison before, but this time, it was serious. He was tried and condemned to death. Tradition says that he was eventually beheaded by emperor Nero somewhere around 66 or 67 AD.

But as if this opposition wasn't enough, Paul also faced abandonment from his fellow Christians. Some just gave up their faith, being afraid of what might happen to them if they associated with Paul. False teachers were rising up in many of the churches that he had established.

Fearing for their own lives, the Asian believers failed to support Paul after his arrest, and no one supported him at his first defense before the Imperial Court. Abandoned by almost everyone, Paul found himself in circumstances very different from those of his first Roman imprisonment.

You see, at that time, he was merely under house arrest. People could freely visit him and he had the hope of being released. Now, he was bound in chains in a cold Roman cell, regarded as “an evildoer”. He was without hope of ever seeing the light of day again.

It was under these bleak conditions that Paul wrote once again, and for the last time, to Timothy, his young partner in the faith. He wrote about matters most pressing to his heart. Because of that, 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy is both emotional and urgent in tone. You heard the beginning of this letter read a few minutes ago. It was our second reading.

I would now like to read parts of his letter again now that you have the context from which it was written. Try and imagine that you are Paul. This is your final correspondence. It could be considered your “last will and testament.”

You are cold and weak. You are hungry and naked chained up like some kind of wild animal. And you know that within a few days you will be brutally executed. Imagine what must be going through your mind as your tears fall upon the parchment on which you begin to write.

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus. To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God – whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did – 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.”

Paul goes on to write: “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.

For this reason 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 cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

Paul writes about recalling Timothy’s tears. But he also adds that his heritage can help him to remain faithful. Timothy probably needed this reminder. He might have been wondering if the struggling church could overcome, or even withstand, the storm of heresy raging through Asia Minor, not to mention the persecutions in Rome.

He might have even wondered if the good news of Jesus Christ was worth fighting for. But Paul reminds him of his mother and grandmother whose faith was alive and passed down to Timothy.

One of the most exciting Olympic events is the 4x100 relay. Four men (or women) each race 100 meters, passing the baton as each runner finishes his or her part of the race.

Coaches say that the most critical moment in a relay race is not the beginning or the end – it’s that split second when one runner takes the baton and places it in the hand of the next runner.

If there is a bobble, or if the baton is dropped, the race will be lost. So it is with the Christian message. Each generation has a sacred calling to pass the faith on to the next generation.

Paul continues in his letter: “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” You see, Paul is calling on Timothy to stay the course, to persevere, to not throw in the towel.

One season, the UCLA Bruins football team got off to a horrible start. UCLA alumni and fans began to make coach Pepper Rodgers’s life miserable. Nobody in Southern California would hang out with him. “My dog was my only true friend,” Rodgers said of that year. “I told my wife that every man needs at least two good friends. So she bought me another dog.”

Rodgers was known for his rigidity in the face of adversity. At one point, his players were having difficulty adapting to the wishbone offense he had instituted. The school's alumni demanded that he adopt another system.

But Rodgers didn't budge. "The wishbone," he said, "is like Christianity. If you believe in it only until something goes wrong, you didn't believe in it in the first place."

As Christians, we have been given the gift of faith. And as our Gospel reading reminds us, we don't need a whole lot of it to live out God's calling in our lives.

There is a story that I shared with you several years ago, but I feel that it is worth repeating. It's a story about a town where all of the residents are ducks. Every Sunday the ducks waddle out of their houses and waddle down Main Street to their church. They waddle into the worship space and squat in their proper pews.

The duck choir waddles in and takes their places. Then the duck pastor comes forward and opens the duck bible. He reads to them: "Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles.

No walls can confine you! No fences can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings, and you can fly like birds!" Suddenly, all the ducks shout, "AMEN!" And then they all waddle home.

If you think about it, we're kind of like the ducks in the story, aren't we? Not that we waddle a lot, but that we sometimes struggle with how to live out our faith that God has given us. We don't always put to use our God-given gifts.

As we journey through our Faith Venture here at Atascocita Lutheran Church, I would like us to think about this story. You see, we have the opportunity to do something great. We have the opportunity to build a new worship facility that will be a place of prayer and praise to God. It will be a Sanctuary for those who are afraid and have lost hope.

It will be a place where the sound of beautiful music will rise up to God. It will be a place to gather as the body of Christ to celebrate God's means of grace in the waters of baptism and through the bread and the wine, which indeed is the body and blood of our Lord.

Certainly we can waddle out of here like the ducks in the story, saying, "Well, that sounds good, but we just can't do it. We'll just keep things the way they are, and settle for that."

But it doesn't have to be that way! Where is our faith? Though prayer and discernment, the vast majority of our congregation says that this is where God is leading us at this time. And just like God has given ducks the means to fly, God has given us the means to make this vision a reality.

Brothers and sisters, I have no doubt whatsoever that we can make this happen. I know for certain that together, we have the necessary resources. Indeed, it will require sacrifice. It will require faith, perhaps as much as a mustard seed.

Maybe it is time for us to take flight – to use what we have been entrusted with to live up to the potential that God has in store for us.

I would like to conclude with the following story:

There once was a woman who began experiencing symptoms of depression. She had just been through a tragic event in her life. She began to withdraw away from those around her.

Where once she was an active member of her church, she now remained hidden within her home. Concerned about the change in her mother's mental health, her daughter sought the help of a well-known counselor in the area. She hoped that he might provide insight into her mother's psychological condition.

As the three of them walked around the woman's house, she complained on and on about how no one at her church really cared about her. The daughter was waiting for the counselor to offer some words of encouragement.

She was surprised when he said; "Mam, I know what your problem is. You are not a very good Christian! If you wish to get better, then this is what you must do. As you showed me your home, I noticed that you grow African Violets.

So you must first of all return to your church. Then, whenever there is a baptism or a confirmation or new members that join your congregation, you are to give them, as a gift, one of your African Violets. Do this and you will get better."

And so she did, and her mood began to improve. To those who received this floral gift, she became known as the African Violet woman. A sacred trust passed on, and so it goes, from one generation to the next. All bearing witness to Christ's call upon our lives.

Therefore, since we are all surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, says the writer of Hebrews, let us also lay aside every weight, placing it in the arms of Jesus. Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. We have received as a sacred trust, which has been handed down through the ages – the gift of faith.

For Paul's letter is addressed to us today – to you and to me. It is a message of suffering and sacrifice. But it is also a message of love and hope. It is a message that we cannot let go unheard or unseen. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

## CHILDREN'S SERMON

Do you ever think that it is kind of hard to have faith in God – to believe in God or trust God?

Sometimes it is hard. After all, we can't see God; we can't hear God answering our questions or our prayers. At times we might wonder if we even have any faith at all.

But do you know what; we are not alone. Jesus' disciples sometimes felt the same way. And they could actually see Jesus, touch Jesus, and hear Jesus.

In our Bible story today, the disciples of Jesus said; "Hey Jesus, we need more faith. Tell us how to get it." Jesus didn't give them a direct answer. He didn't say; "Just go over to Walmart, they have some faith in aisle 14."

Instead he said that it isn't the amount of faith you have, it's that you have faith. He said that if you have the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to a giant tree; "Come up out of the ground and throw yourself into the ocean, and it would obey."

Have any of you ever seen a mustard seed before? They are not very big. Let me show you what they look like. That doesn't seem like a whole lot faith, does it?

But what would happen to these seeds if we just left them in the bottle? *Nothing*  
What would happen if we used what they were for and planted them in the ground? *They would grow into a huge tree.*

What Jesus was trying to tell his friends was that it really wasn't their faith that was so powerful, it was what God could do with that faith. God can do amazing things with our lives when we trust him.

Let us pray....Dear God, please help us to put our faith in you no matter how small it may be so that you can make it grow and grow. Amen.