

Pentecost 17th Sunday “His Own Purpose and Grace” 2 Tim. 1

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our redeemer. Amen!

I am consistently in awe of the poetic beauty, the intimacy, the sincerity of Paul’s second letter to Timothy. The eloquence of the letter makes it easy for me to envision Paul, imprisoned in his last days, writing this farewell letter to his disciple, his companion, his “beloved child,” with the weather of arduous journeys worn on his face, the shimmer of a tear in his eye, the grace of a powerful apostolic ministry treasured in the memory of his heart. Indeed, this letter bears the tenderhearted nostalgia and wakefulness of a last testament of faith.

The setting is poignant. It has all come down to this. On a late June day, probably in the year 63, Paul was led out of his prison cell to the place of execution in the city of Rome. We know where this is; it was a common enough occurrence in ancient Rome. His hands were shackled around a pillar and his head chopped off by a sharp sword. “The flash of a blade and then the glory,” wrote one historian.

In that vein, Paul’s opening to the letter reflects on the various ways the teaching of faith is passed from one person to another, from one generation to the next, “a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you” (v. 5). It is certainly true that our mothers in faith, as well as our fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers shape and form us into the people we become. I know mine did, and I give thanks every day for the blessing of Christian parents and grandparents.

I suspect we don’t talk often enough about mentorship in our congregations and ministries. More often than not, the kind of mentorship that Timothy received from Lois, Eunice, and Paul is “caught” rather than “taught.” How do we intentionally cultivate mentorship in the community of faith? It is a question worth pondering. There are ways. But I think so often it is modeled for us by people within our communities in ways almost beyond words.

Paul also reminds us that this faith that was passed from one hand to another, didn't start with any of them either. "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" (vv. 9–10). None of us can stand in faith without standing on the shoulders of giants, brought to light in the ageless grace of the living Christ, resurrected from the dead.

This letter, this last letter, was written shortly before these events. He wrote to his friend and co-worker who now is bishop of the important city of Ephesus, his young protégé, Timothy. Paul wants his friend to come, but this letter admits that he may not make it in time. In case he does not, Paul wants him to know some important things. He has fought the good fight; he is not ashamed. Now, Timothy will not be able to send a letter or an emissary to the Apostle anymore. The days of those answers are ending. Now he must rely on what he has learned and the good gifts that God gave him in his baptism, and so must we all. Most of all, Timothy will have to rely on the gift of the Holy Spirit. Timothy, by the indwelling of the Spirit, will guard the good deposit which was entrusted to him. Paul will surely perish, but the Holy Spirit, given Timothy and to each of us, that Spirit continues.

I sometimes fear I do not have enough faith for that. I am right. I do not. But if we stop looking at faith and look to Jesus, we will find that our hearts overflow with all that we need. From Him flows the power to uproot the tree and cast it into the sea. Faith is nothing other than looking at Him, only Him, and trusting Him, only Him.

So, are we truly as weak and helpless as we seem? Yes, and it is worse. We are not even our own to govern. Humility is the call of the day. We can confront no other sinner from a place of spiritual pride for our Lord has forgiven us. We have no strength but what He has given us. We have no authority but what He works in us. We have no right but what He has created in us. We are wholly His. This is really not a bad place to be.

In fact, it is a very good place to be. For being wholly His means, we are the sheep for whom He cares, the branch He feeds, the little child whom He loves and fiercely protects (vs 2).

In today's Old Testament reading, the Lord's answer to Habakkuk is "The righteous will live by faith." It is not an entirely satisfying answer to many people. Effectively God says, "Trust me." The righteous man or woman will see all the things that Habakkuk sees and still faith that God is God and has this situation in His hands. God will be faithful to the covenant promise which He has made to us. As the writer to the Hebrews enjoins us: keep your eyes fixed on Him.

This generation likes to talk about faith a great deal, rather imaging that it is some potent virtue which God rewards. But this idea is not faith, in fact such a thing is the opposite of faith. We can liken faith to a radio's antenna. It is necessary for the radio to make its music, but it makes none of the music. It only hangs out there, receiving the radio waves from the transmitter. A coat hanger will do in a pinch if you break your antenna. The Bible says faith saves because without it, we are unable to receive the love and forgiveness of God.

We are alive through faith – Jesus raises us from death to life – faith is the relationship by which He does that. We live by faith. Through faith, God has worked a great work in us, yes even a miracle. The dead flesh of the old man has been restored, the heart that could not love him has been made anew in the waters of baptism. We truly live in Christ. That faith trusts in God. God's answers do not satisfy the skeptic, it is true, but they satisfy the believer, the child of God whose sins have been forgiven, whose life has been owned by God. We no longer need those answers, God has them. When God has forgiven us freely, it allows us to see our past and present in a wholly different light. Yes, we have failed, but God has not. The shame of our own sin is overwhelmed by the greater goodness of God.

One of two things can prevent unashamed testimony: fear of a world hostile to Christ, or failure to see Christ as one's "Priceless Treasure." Fear of Jesus' enemies made Peter ashamed to testify and caused him to deny his Lord.

On the other hand, as long as Saul did not recognize Jesus as the Son of God and the promised Savior; he not only failed to testify but even persecuted Jesus' disciples.

God's own purpose and grace is illustrated in that He has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, sanctified and kept us in the true faith, in order that we might live under him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. And this is not because of anything we have done, for we cannot by our own wisdom or strength believe in Him or come to Him. All this has come about "because of His purpose and grace."

Terry Crawford was a musician from the glory days of western New York city's version of the Harlem Renaissance. He lived to be a ninety-year-old, only to have his proud life snuffed out by a cowardly mugger. First, the young man robbed Terry's apartment. Then he mercilessly threw the ailing and frail man down the back flight of stairs, killing him, before fleeing with a few dollars and trinkets.

We see this type of violence playing out in our cities all too often. What does all this senseless brutality mean? Clearly this is out-of-sync with God's plan. Martin Franzmann, noted pastor, theologian, and hymn-writer, clearly expressed the transformative power of God's Word in "O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth":

O God, O Lord of heaven and earth
Your living finger never wrote
That life should be an aimless mote,
A deathward drift from futile birth.
Your Word meant life triumphant hurled
In splendor through your broken world,
Since light awoke and life began
You made for us a Holy plan.

God provides a triumphant answer for the Terrys of this world. The sacred Scriptures promise much more than defeat and doom as our final destiny. The violent reality around us is a perversion of the divine design.

God's Word means life. That word transforms and gives meaning to lives. It is incarnate in Christ, recorded in the Bible, visible in the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper and in the water of Holy Baptism.

We talk about the dual nature of Christ, that is His humanity and His divinity. We also have dual metaphors to describe Him: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), and the Lion of Judah. We remember that He dies on the cross, but we often forget that He is this lion-like Messiah who is victorious as He mauls, mangles, and massacres the enemies of God. In the end, this conquering Lion rules triumphant in glory. We can identify with, indeed our identity is in, the Savior who is aggressive in love, who rescues and redeems. This is no weak, wimpy, New Age ghost of a man! He is Judah's Lion who "wins the strife and conquers death to give us life" (TLH 211, Lo Judah's Lion). No one compels Him to go to the execution, instead He voluntarily surrenders and willingly sacrifices His life for us, the ones He loves (John 10:18).

This love impels us to try, in our own feeble ways, to love the Lord and to love our neighbor. He who confesses with his lips that Jesus is Lord and believes in his heart that God raised Him from the dead shall be saved (Romans 10:9). Come, taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8)!

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!

*People's Bible Commentary, CPH, 1993, Pg. 115-116.

*Voices from the City, John Nunes, CPH, 1999, Pg. 91, 100.

* [New Sermon Notes - Sunday Sermon A Resource for Preachers \(sunday-sermon.com\)](http://sunday-sermon.com)

* [Lectionary at Lunch+ \(concordiatheology.org\)](http://concordiatheology.org)