

“Strengthened by Faith”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 15, 2013**

**Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 1:1-3
New Testament Lesson – 1 Timothy 1:12-17**

In the 13th Century, St. Francis of Assisi wrote these words in his “Letters to Rulers of People:” “Keep a clear eye toward life’s end. Do not forget your purpose and destiny as God’s creature. What you are in his sight is what you are and nothing more. Remember, that when you leave this earth, you can take nothing that you have received – fading symbols of honor, trappings of power – but only what you have given: a full heart enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice and courage.” If more of our world leaders today – our “rulers of people” – focused on service, love, sacrifice and courage, we’d be in a lot better shape.

But you know what? That’s true for us, too. If we were to focus more on service, love, sacrifice and courage, we – as individuals and families, as neighborhoods and churches – we would be in a lot better shape.

Take the Apostle Paul as an example of what this might mean and where it might lead us. It took a strong sense of service, love, sacrifice and courage for Paul to give up being a wealthy, powerful Pharisee in order to become a simple tent-maker and follower of Jesus, one of various individuals committed to building up the faith – reaching out to people who hadn’t yet seen or heard what it means to develop and maintain a solid faith life.

As we see in Paul’s letter to Timothy, which we heard read this morning, Paul didn’t start out on a fast-track to faithfulness. Far from it. He was a self-described “blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” Paul had turned his back on God. As a Pharisee, he spent a lot more time doing things that ended up tearing down the faith, while ignoring those things that might build up his faith and thus, the faith of others.

Turns out, the purpose Paul originally came to embrace in life was not the purpose God had in mind for him. And often, that’s true for us, as well. We go through life thinking we’re doing the right thing, and getting pretty good at it. We make friends, we go to school, graduate, get jobs, maybe get married, set up our households. And then we go to work doing whatever we can to sustain all this.

And here we are. We’re at church today. Some of us may be here with a sense of expectation. Others, reluctantly. Some with a desire for direction: where can I best serve? Others longing truly to be served. Some are joyful being in worship, others can’t remember what joy feels like anymore. Some have a full heart, others, a heart longing to be filled.

However we come, here we are, O God, to worship you. Let us open our hearts and our minds to all that is possible, through Christ our Lord.

What would it mean to move beyond merely sustaining what we have and to open our hearts and minds to all that is possible through Jesus Christ? Well for Paul, it meant rethinking his past actions and choices and taking a good look at where he was in life. Of course Paul had a little motivation; remember? The risen Lord appeared right in front him – Jesus in the flesh to redirect his life.

Today, we don't have Jesus in the flesh – unless you count the church, the community of faith, which Paul does say is the body of Christ. But even then, sometimes it's hard to look at the church and see Jesus; for a lot of people, the church is not a reflection of Jesus Christ.

And we only have ourselves to blame. Let's admit it. The church over the years and down through the centuries has done a lot of things that are not very Christlike.

Just a few hundred years after Jesus' earthly ministry, the early church was distancing itself from the Jewish faithful, in an attempt to save itself from Roman persecution.¹ During the Crusades, the church raised up an army that went around killing in the name of Christ.

Around the year 1300, those judged as heretics were tortured by the church in the Inquisitions. And we've got the Salem witch hunts of the 1600s, and the sex-scandals of today involving Catholic priests and other clergy. Not to mention the way we've made others feel judged and marginalized and unwelcome based on their race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, you know, the way they dress, as if that matters. A lot of people get turned off by our system of church politics and governance.

As much as we try to live all this down, the world remembers. How do we move from our transgressions and failures to become who God truly calls us to be? How do we tell people we're sorry for anything we've done as the church that has made them feel judged, marginalized, and unwelcome?

Well I guess that would be a good place to start, simply telling the people in our lives that we're sorry. I'm sorry for anything I've done or anything the church has done that has made you feel judged, marginalized, and unwelcome.

Now, can you imagine saying that to someone in your life, saying I'm sorry? Go ahead; think of something you might need to clean up with someone in your life – an apology that needs made, a wrong that needs confessed, a promise that needs followed through on. These aren't easy things to think about, let alone do – it's not easy to apologize, or confess, or to keep our promises.

But sometimes, it is the only way we can move forward, the only way we can be true to who God calls us to be, despite the risk, despite the fear, despite how much courage it might take.

We don't always know how it will turn out when we step out in faith and do the right thing. Doing the right thing can be scary and hard, even when it's what God would have you do, often, especially when it's what God is calling us to do.

¹ <http://www.jewishvoice.org/assets/pdfs/jewish-persecution-in-history.pdf>

A man arrives at the gates of heaven, and St. Peter looks up his record and says, "Well, you didn't do anything particularly good, but neither did you do anything particularly bad. I'll tell you what: If you can tell me one really good deed you've done, I'll let you stay." "Well," says the man, "once I saw some bikers menacing a young woman, and I stopped my car, I took out my tire iron, and walked up to their leader – a huge, hairy, ugly man, full of tattoos – ... and I said, 'You leave this girl alone, you hear?' I stared at all of them, and I said, 'Now get out of here, or you'll have to answer to me.'" Impressed, St. Peter turned to the man and asked, "When did this happen?" To which the man said, "It was about two minutes ago."²

There are few assurances when it comes to life's circumstances and the choices we make. But one assurance we do have is, that for those who act on their faith, God will see us through any difficulty or struggle that we have in doing the right thing. And not only that, God will reveal to us our life's purpose.

Paul, after coming clean about his role in a system that did more to crush the spirit of Jesus Christ than to build up the faith, Paul receives unimaginable clarity about his life's purpose, and he receives the unflinching strength to carry it out. After turning his life around, Paul says, "I received mercy ... and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." When Paul says that the faith and love of Jesus Christ overflowed for him, he's not just giving lip service, here. In that sense of faith, in that love and acceptance, Paul mustered the courage to actually change his life.

For Paul, faithfulness is about doing the right thing, regardless of the cost. And love, that's about God's mercy. It's about receiving and accepting forgiveness for our past, and moving out into a new, uncertain future, a future brimming with the possibility of the Lord.

Once Paul left his past behind and came to embrace the path God laid before him, that's when God's blessings began to flow freely throughout Paul's life. Now these weren't the blessings of money and power and status, per se. And yet, Paul had all of that by God's standards if not by worldly standards. Because when Paul really took on the task of developing and leading a life of faithfulness, that's when he began to experience the true, everlasting blessings of God, blessings that nothing on earth can take away or diminish.

And in the assurance of those blessings, Paul had the courage to step into the future. Strengthened by his faith and upheld by the church he served, Paul found his true purpose in life. Paul says, "...I received mercy so that in me, ... Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life." Leading others to faith in Jesus Christ – that's what Paul's life was all about. And that's what the church is all about – helping others to grow and develop their faith in Jesus, even as we seek to do the same for ourselves.

² Todd Rudy, in Tony Kornheiser's column "Happy Hilarious New Year," The Washington Post, January 3, 1999, F1.

Strengthened by faith. Having faith in Jesus Christ means living life beyond the constraints of this world. It means having a sense of peace even amid heartache and disappointment. It means feeling accepted even when the world rejects you. It means living into the promise of our ultimate success amid our biggest failures.

Through our faith in Jesus Christ, we come to experience divine mysteries amid the mundane, miracles within the ordinary. This is what Jesus offers us. This is what we come to church to learn about and experience, and this is what we are sent into the world to share with – one another: the miracles and the blessings that come from a life of faith.

“I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord,” says Paul, “because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service,” – appointed us to his service. And in that service, says Paul, it is Jesus who strengthens us to be more than we know ourselves to be.

When you go from this place of worship today, go knowing that you have been appointed by God for a special role in life – a special purpose – and that Jesus is even now strengthening you for a life of faith, in service to the Lord. And then return next Sunday, as we explore the ways in which God guides and directs us ever closer to knowing and embracing our life’s purpose.

Pastor Prayer

Creator God:

We live within reach of glorious lakes and lush plains, and yet we are distracted by worry: Monday’s bills, Tuesday’s meetings, Wednesday’s doctor’s appointment, Thursday’s carpool, Friday’s trip to the cleaners, a Saturday haircut, today’s supper.

Instead of searching for the beauty and the blessings all around us, too often we are blinded by the little, routine things of life; they seem so big, Lord! We need your help to see beyond our agendas and worries, to see with spiritual eyes that can glimpse the bigger picture and draw us into your larger purpose.

We pray that all people would be guided to follow your way, Lord, particularly those who have responsibilities for larger, more global matters. We pray for the people in Colorado who are struggling amid flood waters. We pray for those in New Jersey facing yet another rebuild of their businesses following a devastating fire. Given them and us the assurance of your presence, and the strength to come together for the renewal of both body and soul.

For we know what it is that we truly need in life, how easy it is to be blessed as one of your Children, and to be a blessing in turn to others. So we ask you to teach us the simple ways of faith, love, hope, and peace, a simple way of living that you pointed us to through the words of the Lord’s Prayer, which you taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.