

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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## 2 Timothy 1:1-14 (NRSV)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

[2] To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

[3] 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.

[4] Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. [5]

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.

[6] For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; [7] for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

[8] Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, [9] who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, [10] 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. [11] For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, [12] and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. [13] Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. [14] Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

## A BAD RETIREMENT

When I retire from ministry, I hope to look back and give thanks for the friends I've made and the opportunities I've had. And I also hope that the churches I've served will flourish and grow. I hope that my golden years will be a pleasant time to take it easy and play golf every day.

It may work out that way for me, but it certainly didn't work out that way for the great Apostle Paul. If it weren't for bad luck he'd have no luck at all.

He was rejected by his own people, the Jews. He was stoned and imprisoned on many occasions. There were leaders in the church who lied about him and tried to build their own reputations by tearing down Paul's reputation.

Paul had physical problems, what he called a "thorn in the flesh" that gave him constant pain. He prayed fervently that God would heal him, but it never happened.

And now toward the end of his ministry, Paul's future and the future of the church looked very bleak. Many of Paul's closest friends had betrayed him and left the church. Timothy, the one who would be charged with leading this faltering, persecuted church was uncertain, fearful and timid.

And Paul did not spend his golden years on the golf course or at the beach ... far from it. He was confined to a cold, dark cell with an execution looming. Many who had taken care of his needs in the past had abandoned him, ashamed to be associated with a jail bird, troublemaker like Paul.

One commentator suggested that he was incarcerated in the infamous Mamertine prison ... a dungeon with a hole in the ceiling for light and air. Wherever he was, he was hard to find. The Scripture tells us that his good friend Onesiphorus had to search for several days before he was able to locate his cell.

These are the grim circumstances that are mentioned in Paul's second letter to Timothy. But, the amazing thing about this letter is that Paul refuses to focus on the negative. In a situation that would make most of us give up completely; this letter exudes a spirit of thanksgiving and hope for the future.

## THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Paul challenges young Timothy to take up the mantle of leadership. He tells him to draw strength from his faith history. He had been faithfully taught God's word by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice.

Now it was time to rekindle that fire. Now it was time to put that faith into action. Someone once said that “tradition is the living faith of the dead and traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

Timothy had to choose between those two. Timothy had to choose between tradition and traditionalism and so do we. The question that faced Timothy faces us as well. Are we going to have a living faith based upon the faith of our fathers and mothers or are we going to have a “religion club” based upon a pale reflection of what used to be a living faith?

It is the responsibility of each generation to rekindle the gift of God. It is the responsibility of each generation to make faith a vital part of their lives. Our grandparents and parents have laid the foundation, but it is our responsibility to fan that spark into a flame of hope and action.

In a verse of Scripture that has challenged Christians down through the years Paul wrote, “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self discipline.”

#### JOIN ME IN SUFFERING

And then Paul asks Timothy to do a remarkable thing. Paul asks Timothy to join in his suffering. Paul wrote, “Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God.” 2 Timothy 1:8

Join with me in suffering for the gospel.

Can you imagine saying something like that to what one preacher called the “heavily therapeutic, self-absorbed North American church”? We don’t want to join anyone in their suffering. We want Jesus to take away our suffering.

And indeed there are passages that suggest that sometimes Jesus does just that. Jesus healed people as a sign of a coming kingdom in which there would be no more suffering and pain. And sometimes our prayers for healing are answered, and we praise God when that happens.

But, Paul suggests that there are other times when we are called to forget about our own comfort and suffer for the gospel.

I guess we could say that this doesn't apply to us. We don't need to worry about suffering for the gospel because we live in a society that allows us to worship as we please. We're like Timothy. We're not in prison for our faith. We're free.

But, maybe we are called to give up some of that freedom for the sake of those who are captive. I wonder what that would look like. What would it mean to give up freedom in service to the gospel? What would it mean to join those who are suffering as a way of being faithful to the gospel?

Or, in other words, what would it mean to "take up a cross" and follow Jesus?

#### TAKING UP A CROSS TODAY

Is it possible to have a fellowship based upon suffering, a suffering club so to speak? And who in his right mind would join such a club? Why would we possibly want to join Paul in that dank, dark prison when now we are free to do what we want when we want to do it?

The Apostle Peter raised that same objection when Jesus first told his disciples that they were to take up a cross and follow him. Peter said, "Are you crazy Jesus. Haven't you heard of the power of positive thinking?"

And Jesus said, "That's the devil talking Peter. God's kingdom is a lot different from the kingdoms of this world. Sometimes when you seek the good things of life too directly you miss out on what's really important. If you try too hard to save your life, you lose it."

I'm not sure how Jesus wants you and me to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him today, but I do know that we are all called to do it. We are all called to join a fellowship of suffering in some way. According to the Bible each day all of us are called to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Perhaps we are being called to pray for and aid brothers and sisters all over the world who even now are being persecuted for their Christian faith. Perhaps we are being called to just be with someone who is suffering in some profound way. It takes courage to truly be present with someone who is undergoing great suffering.

I remember visiting a man who was dying. He said, “Pastor, my friends just don’t come to visit me any more. I guess they don’t know what to say. But, it’s very lonely. We don’t have to talk about my illness. I just need someone to be with me.”

He needed fellowship in his suffering. He needed someone who believed in the power of God so much that he or she would have the courage to be with him in that dark time of despair. And yet no one had the courage to make that journey with him.

Some of us think that we can solve every problem. But, in the face of some problems we feel quite helpless and alone. And that’s when we learn in a practical way what we really believe.

The truth of the gospel is not proven in neat theological arguments or pronouncements by church authorities. The truth of the gospel is proven in the visit to the nursing home or the couple that is struggling to keep their marriage together or the widow who overwhelmed with grief. The truth of the gospel is proven when we serve a meal to the homeless or carry a word of forgiveness and hope to those who are in prison.

These are not places that we like to go. They are lonely places of suffering and despair. We have nothing to offer in places like this except the gospel ... except the hope that (as the hymn puts it) though the wrong seems “oft so strong” this is still our Father’s world. In places like this we learn if we really believe that the power of the resurrection is greater than any power that seeks to hurt or divide us.

## GOD’S POWER AND OUR WEAKNESS

When Timothy visited Paul in prison, I’m sure he was overwhelmed by the suffering and the seemingly overwhelming odds that they faced. Perhaps

that's why Paul mentioned Timothy's tears that marked their last parting. But, Paul knew that we can only learn about the power of the gospel when we willingly place ourselves into situations of hopelessness and despair.

Paul believed that when we're at our weakest, God's power is at its greatest. Indeed, God often chooses the weak and foolish and powerless to bring his message so that it is obvious that the results are not due to our talents but to God's grace. (See for example, 1 Corinthians 1:27-30)

Paul wrote in our lesson for today, "For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But, I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him." 2 Timothy 1:11-12.

Are we like Paul? Are we putting our trust in God until that day when heaven and earth will be renewed by the power of God's salvation? Are we counting upon God to one day lead people like us back home from exile?

Or are we trying to build our own kingdom and calling it God's kingdom? Are we ignoring the pain around us because we only want to tackle those problems that we can fix? Do we want to make life as comfortable as possible because we don't want to face the wolf named despair that lurks at the door of every household?

Strangely enough, faith does not come from ignoring the world's pain. Faith comes from embracing the world's pain. Faith comes when we join the suffering club.

One preacher imagined a revised altar call based upon this vision of the gospel. He wrote that we should stand in front of the congregation and say something like,  
"If any of you are visiting with us today, I would like you to join with us ... join our fellowship of suffering!"

Come accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior, and expose yourself to a great deal of pain that you might not have had, had you not been trying to follow Jesus!

Please come down to the front as the organist softly plays our last hymn.”

The preacher mused that we might not have many takers if we approached evangelism in that way! He said that too often in an attempt to get people to join the church we say in effect, “Come to Jesus and get everything fixed in your life. Come to Jesus and he will cure all your aches and heal all of your pain.”

## CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

That might be more appealing to those of us who prefer comfort over suffering, but that is not the gospel. In fact that approach can even be detrimental to your health. Sometimes people have psychological and even physical problems because they refuse to acknowledge the pain and suffering in their own lives and the lives of others. They run from even the thought of loss, and they manage to keep away from anyone who is struggling.

But, if we do not face our fears and pains, we will find that those fears will eat us up from the inside. I’m convinced that one of the reasons many in our society are such conspicuous consumers ... buying too much and eating too much ... “living large” as one professional football player put it ... is that we are trying our best to ignore and escape the pain and fear in our world.

Paul suggested that we quit running away. Paul suggested that we join the suffering. Paul suggested that we do what goes against our natural instincts and embrace a suffering world for the sake of the gospel.

Now it’s important to notice that this does not mean elevating our own troubles as the topic of conversation. Some people love to go over a litany of physical and personal woes and then say with a resigned sigh, “I guess this is just the cross I’ve got to bear.”

That’s not true. People who focus on their own problems in an unhealthy way give us a cross to bear ... and we soon avoid them so they we don’t have to hear their whining any more!

Cross bearing is not complaining about our pain and suffering. Cross bearing is about voluntarily allowing the pain and suffering of another person to come into our lives. We do it not because we are masochists. We do it for the sake of the gospel.

The model of course is Jesus. Jesus the Son of God “emptied himself.” He “humbled himself” and took up a cross. (Philippians 2:5-11) He died for our sins. His body was broken and his blood was shed for us.

That’s why we take the Lord’s Supper each month. It is to remind us that salvation comes with a cost. Salvation is a fellowship of suffering made possible by Jesus. And Paul in his letter to the Philippians tells us that this has practical implications for us.

We may not be crucified, but our attitude should be informed by the crucifixion. (Philippians 2:5) As Jesus sacrificed himself for the world so we should give ourselves away to others in the name of Christ.

Instead of running from suffering we are called to embrace it. And it is when we embrace a suffering world that the true power of the gospel is revealed. Just as the power of God was revealed on the cross so the power of God is revealed when followers of Jesus have the courage to give themselves away for the gospel.

## HARD NOSED LOVE

Paul told Timothy that God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but a spirit of power, love and self-discipline or self-control. I’m not sure Christianity is associated with any of those characteristics in the minds of some people. Christianity is often portrayed as a self-indulgent, self-serving fantasy for those who want to escape the troubles of this world by dreaming of the world to come.

But, this passage suggests that the true spirit of Christianity is a hard nosed love that is not afraid to take on the bullies of the world for the sake of those who are persecuted. Christianity is not about leaving this world but embracing this world with arms wide open. Christianity is about having the courage to love your neighbor even though love often does hurt.

Clarence Jordan founded the Koinonia Community in South Georgia, an interracial farming cooperative. One day a truck driver who had been delivering butane to the community told Jordan he was quitting: he'd been receiving racist threats from some outside of the cooperative. The man knew that if he delivered to Koinonia, he would lose other customers.

Jordan did not waver. He confronted the man, and was not ashamed to ask him to suffer for the gospel. "It looks to me like you're in a spot. You're either going to lose some money or lose your soul," Jordan answered.

After a further exchange concerning the physical danger of anyone caught cooperating with Jordan, the man promised to find someone else who would deliver the butane. Jordan did not move. "You mean you'd ask a friend to take a chance you're not willing to take yourself."

I wonder. Are we willing to take a chance for the gospel? We all believe that Jesus came to save us from sin, but where did we get the idea that he came to save us from suffering? Jesus came to inspire us to be courageous in the face of opposition and suffering. Jesus came to inspire us to take up our cross and follow him.

This may not be the message we want to hear, but it's the message of the gospel. It's that treasure, that standard of sound teaching that has passed from Jesus to Paul to Timothy and now finally to you and me.

Now, according to the Bible it's our responsibility to guard the gospel. Now, according to the Bible it's our responsibility to keep the message of salvation from being watered down by those who would prefer an easier way.

By the power of God's Spirit it will be possible to remain true to the faith. The message of the gospel is not for wimps. It is a message of power and of love and of self-discipline.

God fill us with that Spirit.

Amen.